

BAUXITE.

a literary magazine



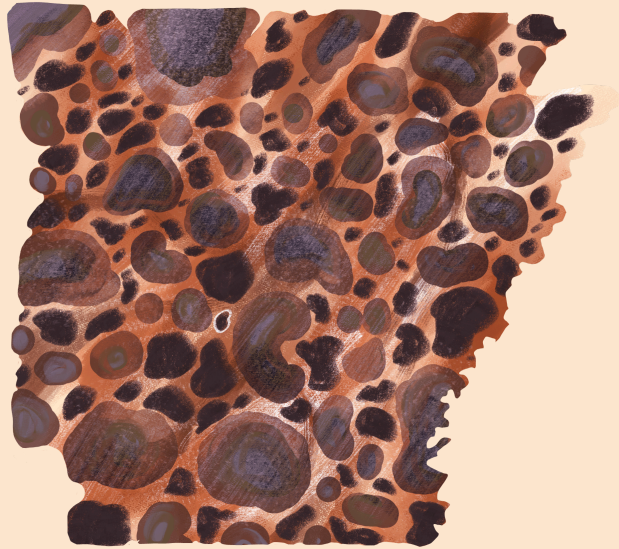
issue 1:

ALUMINUM

ALUMINUM

presented by

BAUXITE



edited by

Jordon Olson
Jessy Hankins

with art by

Calista Robins
Cal Speed

BAUXITE dedicates this issue to

Mary Anning

Message from the Editor

Dear Reader,

How fortunate am I to welcome you to our debut issue!

The *BAUXITE* team started our magazine for one main reason: a pervasive love for art and literature combined with a deep respect for those who create it. Our team is made up of passionate artists, writers, readers, and editors, and *BAUXITE* stems from a desire to uplift our fellow creatives. Which is why I'm thrilled to introduce *ALUMINUM*, the first of many issues to give voice to those who often go unheard.

I would like to extend my gratitude to our contributing creatives: both those who have work in the issue, and those who don't. Without all of you, this magazine would quite literally not exist. Thank you for considering *BAUXITE*.

I would also like to thank *you*, reader. We don't know what brought you here: a desire to see your work, the work of a loved one, a keen eye for fiction. Maybe you wound up here by chance. Regardless, we sincerely hope you enjoy your reading. This selection was carefully curated by our editors, and we couldn't be more proud to present it to you after weeks of deliberation and labor.

But enough preamble.

My voice isn't the only one you're here to listen to. Within this issue are tales of change, tales of rebirth. Poems that speak for the soul, and stories that give noise to silence and contain the uncontainable. Whatever you may take away from *ALUMINUM*, I hope it sticks with you, just as it did for us.

It's time for you to turn the page.

Jessy Hankins



Editor

Table of Contents

Message from the Editor	
[i see you in sediment, a star] by Lucia Shahan	1
It's Christmas in 1965 by Corey Mesler	3
Frozen pizza dinner by Sarah Watkins	4
do I HAVE to weave in the ends? by Victoria Sørensen	6
What the Bog Carried by Alexandra Low	8
f r g t y r l s s by MK Kuol	12
Castle Turner by Owen Connor	13
Les Baux by Leslie Graff	21
Les Baux-de-Provence by Anne Eyries	22
Married to Space: A Short Story in Verse by Anthony Calzia	23
Aching at Dusk by Heather Sager	37
Can/Could by Mal Fawzy	38
Angels in Tibet by Olúwatúnmiṣe Ọ̀tòlórìn Akìgbógun	40
What Did I Do? by Sam Hendrian	45
Rubble by Eric DuPree	46
Last Picked by Kenneth Pobo	49
Alloy by Cayt McNeill	50
Rush by Alison Moore	51
Bauxite, the Mother of a Light Metal by Hardarshan Singh Valia	54
A H.U.M.A.N Goes Looking for Answers by Ben Howard	55
haiku [too expen\$ive to repair?] by Gerard Sarnat	65
Bauxite by David Waywell	66
Aftertaste by Neil Weiner	67
A Wanderer's Guide to Imogene by Emma Francois	77
Lakeside Daisies by Joseph Geskey	79
Half-Moon on Frozen Pond by Blake Mihm	80
Against Science by Paul Hostovsky	81
Tempered by Patrick Roland	82
Beech Creek by Autumn Knepp	83
Message from the Editor-in-Chief	86
Credits	87

[*i see you in sediment, a star*] by Lucia Shahan

i see you in sediment, a star, when you pirouette on the ground,
no sound.

your glittered skirt just whirls wonderfully
blended in the summer night
oh so bright.

yet on the floor you float
detached, quiet
from your starlit self, a spirit
mourning the transformation above. i guess
when your skirt swirled,
you turned too,

though into better, i don't know. yes,
I remember it was then your body plummeted
to the sky, your soul
left to dwindle on ground into miraculous
nothing. you are

bedazzling but you shift shapes
into others with the turn of your satin skirt.
does it bother you
(it does me)
that when you transform to the sky,
your unassuming, auburn beauty is
dismissed. detached, while the product you morphed into
shines
in the metal
mold. glowing! yet
not you?

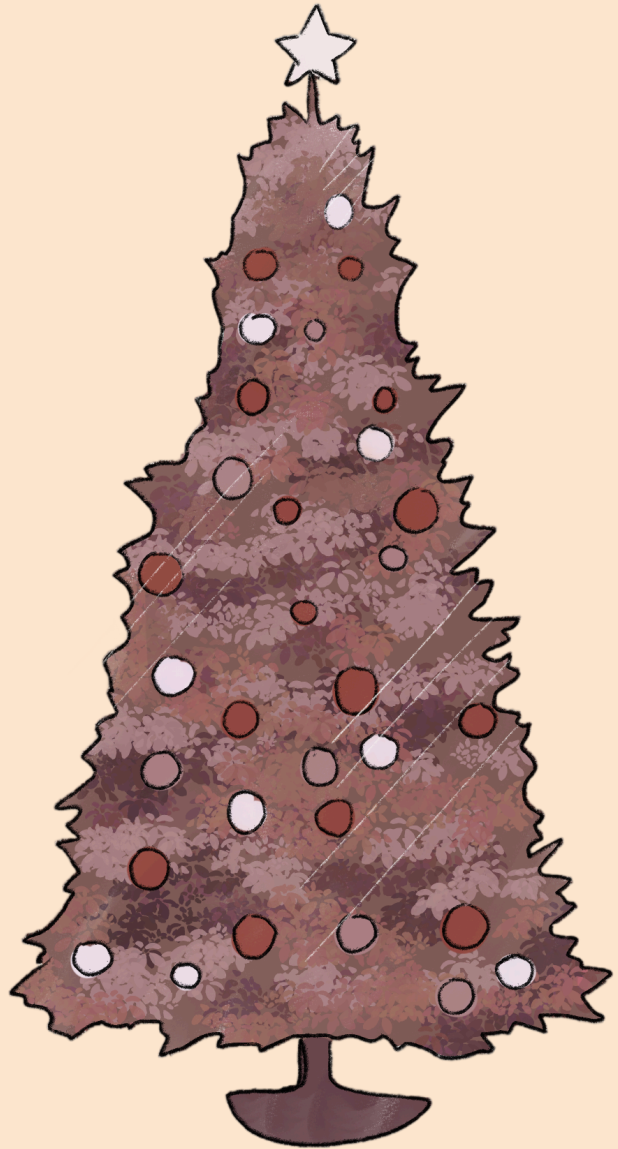
i might choose to shine
too as metal instead of sparkles,
alumina, not Bauxite,
new,
not Me.



Lucia Shahan is a creative writer and high school student in Austin, Texas. In her writing, she explores emotion and the obscured meaning in trivial values or items, often through vivid imagery of nature. She enjoys writing for the school newspaper and has received recognition from River of Words and Scholastic Writing Awards for her poetry. In her free time, she loves running, hiking, and exploring the city with her friends.

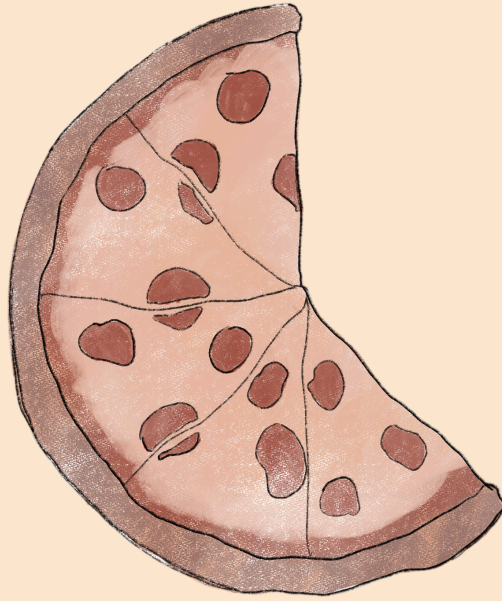
It's Christmas in 1965 by Corey Mesler

Every night in December
I would lie awake in bed
watching the walls become
multihued while the
color wheel in the living
room spun at the
foot of the aluminum
tree and once I saw
Santa Claus at the edge of
my vision dancing in
the rainbow as do the saints.



COREY MESLER has been published in numerous anthologies and journals including Poetry, Gargoyle, Five Points, Lunch Ticket, Good Poems American Places, and New Stories from the South. He has published over 50 books of fiction and poetry. His newest book, *Memphis Movie Two*, a novel is from Whiskey Tit. With his wife he runs Burke's Book Store (est. 1875) in Memphis.

Frozen pizza dinner by Sarah Watkins



The apartment smells of gas as the oven preheats
and I consider that I may explode,
be found in a blaze all alone,
be okay with that.

The generic brand supreme pizza
is warped from the freezer door
like origami fumbled by a child's hands
or a discarded soda can. I am sorry
the meal is nothing special. I am sorry
the pizza will be cold
when he comes home, sorry
he'll have to say it's okay, sorry
I won't believe him.
I chisel off the frozen purple onions
with a dull butterknife
rather than plucking them off
when they are cheese-scented and spit-warm.

I'm not sure I will eat.
My stomach has been churning
since I searched for details on my students' backpacks
to chatter about tomorrow
and overheard that they hope
there is a substitute.
As I pasted new vocabulary on the cinderblock wall,
I found I was my mother,
wrapping the uneaten side dishes
in fragile plastic wrap
after the family reunion,
tossing it all away at home,
wasting myself with the food;
I found I was a shaken soda,
all sealed lips and pressure
behind my thin aluminum sheen.
I am to teach haiku tomorrow.

The oven beeps.

The pizza goes in.
I store the cold butterknife—
a knock on the door.

An Arkansas native, Sarah Watkins is an educator by trade and a writer by necessity. She currently resides in northeast Arkansas with her husband. Her work has been featured in many publications, including *The Uncommon GRACKle*, *The Clayjar Review*, and *engine(idling)*. Instagram: @sarahwatkinspoetry

magic loop easier method

Weight: 1.76 oz (50 g)

Length: 164.04 yd (150 m)

Yarn Weight: Medium

Hand pain.

Buy yarn

Check stash

Blocking mat
in natural
materials?

Fix dropped
crochet
stitch in
crochet row
2/200

FREE PATTERN

8/8 cotton blanket:

Row 1: Ch 300

Row 2: Slst flo

Row 3: magic loop then chain 12
into every 26th stitch

Cut yarn every row ♥

Block it in a stillwater swimming
pool

Have to post on socials!

Handyed cashmere, mohair, silk

Cat hair blend only

2 days deadline

How to escape
sleeve island

do i have to weave in ends?

How to
make
crochet
look like
knit

How to knit
without
purling

What comes to mind when you think of the feel of aluminum: its gritty texture or polished cool-to-the-touch surface?

To me, aluminum is warm between my hands as I work my hook into every stitch. Without my sweet aluminum, I wouldn't have hooks to crochet with. I'd have even more pain attempting to form loops with my bare hands, and feel the icy chill of creative constipation.

Enough purple prose; this is a mixed-media, photobashed self-portrait I made in Procreate.

Crocheters will spot a lot of juicy references.

To me, this piece signifies my brain, and how it won't stop blasting crochet ideas into my consciousness, much to my hands and body's demise. It's an obsession. It is limerence.

If the yarn won't be eaten, it will eat me.

~~Spoiler: the free pattern is satirical.~~

All this to say, I love crochet (and tolerate getting acquainted with the process of knitting).

It's a tactile break from not only digital art, but the digital life we are all so attached to. Not to pull up Max Weber on main, but it's truly like an iron (cough...aluminum) house by Max Weber—where you feel trapped, and you can escape but choose not to because it's convenient and maybe even comfortable.

Well, let's face the inconvenience and touch grass (or aluminum hooks).

No offence to people allergic to nickel.

Victoria, known online as drodlaren, is a self-taught musician, fine-art and fiber artist from Norway. They specialise in portraits and broody music but the red thread is their willingness to utilise and perhaps even romanticise imperfections in their work.

What the Bog Carried by Alexandra Low

Her mane swayed like the tide, gentle yet strong. A soft breeze drifted the scent of peat and brine, stealing a breath from me.

It wasn't possible.

In place of a sleek hide, cerulean light flowed across her form. My feet carried me toward her even as the hair on my arms rose.

No.

The stories spoken of her are whispered only after the latch is drawn tight. Only after moonlight spills across the floorboards.

Not her.

Because they did not exist.

The kelpie.

As her storm-dark eyes locked on mine, a pain twisted my belly.

The same ache that haunted me for seventeen years. An ache no healer, no wise woman was able to name.

One that left me a stranger among women whose bodies did not betray them.

She took a step toward me, hooves sloshing through murky bog water. My ragged breaths stilled. As my womb curled tighter, she huffed.

Then those glowing eyes narrowed, her head lowering and mane spilling down her broad shoulders. Hot breath tickled my cheeks.

Scenting me.

I flung a hand to my womb as the other collided with the sodden earth.

Run.

Leave.

My chest clenched, palms tingled.

She released a shrill cry before fading into the black water.

Bile coated my throat as the pain twisted deeper in my womb.

Then it stopped.

I swept my gaze across the wetland.

Her peat-dark eyes. Her piercing call.

Empty.

I was warned to avoid the bog.

To not fall under the spell of the kelpie.

I returned the next evening.

As I stood at the threshold where damp earth gave way to the bog, I pressed a hand to my aching womb and searched the dark water for the mare's moonlit hide.

Then the squelch of footsteps sent me whirling.

A cloaked woman approached. Her long gray curls obscured her face and a familiar briny scent drifted toward me. My heartbeat quickened yet I stood firm as she drew near.

“Best not be wandering the bog alone beneath a swollen moon, lass.” The gravelly voice of the crone echoed off the still water.

Her withered face frowned as she surveyed the peatland. Silver-blue eyes slitted.

She leaned closer.

Her nostrils flared as a chilled breeze swept between us.

Her gaze settled on the hand still anchored over my belly.

Heat flooded my chest and neck.

“A moonlit walk is all.”

The crone's thin ashen lips twitched into a smile. I stilled. She gripped my wrist with a timeworn hand, lifting it from my womb.

My breath caught.

Then she released it, staggering back.

“Aye.”

It was all she said before she faded into the growing fog, the sound of those sloshing footsteps lingering long after she vanished.

I remained in the silence of the mist-riddled bog. Only the moon's reflection lingered upon the stagnant water.

The mare never appeared.

When I returned to the bog the following night, it was not the cerulean glow of the mare that had my belly twisting.

No.

The crone.

She stood at the edge of the bog, the murky surface lapping softly at her feet.

Yet despite her warning, the bog beckoned.

“A storm draws near.”

She tilted her head to the sky, the moon's light catching on the aging lines of her face. She inhaled slowly, scenting the night.

I walked past her, brows furrowed, and scoured the black pool for the beast.

Her liquid mane was nowhere to be seen.

“Best to find shelter, lass.”

“The moon shines bright above.”

I retreated from the wetland.

As I reached the dry earth, my womb spasmed. I folded around the pain, a small cry ripping through my throat.

Silver eyes locked on mine.

I stayed away until the moon once more waxed full and the ache in my belly rose with it.

This time, the crone did not appear.

I released a long breath.

It caught in my throat as a familiar shrill cry rang out across the bog.

I turned.

Tide-blue light bloomed across the midnight pool.

I stood rooted to the peat as she emerged, draped in sodden reeds and glistening with inky water.

Her storm-dark eyes found mine.

I did not run.
Ripples trailed behind her steady steps.
She settled an arm's length from me.
The bog stilled around us.
Her head dipped. Nostrils flexed, inhaling my scent.
A familiar silver thread in her eyes glinted with moonlight.
I remained, though my breath faltered.
As she lowered her head once more, I reached for her dripping mane.
She pressed her luminous hide into my palm and huffed against my neck.
Rain fell quietly, cooling the heat beneath my skin.
In the distance, thunder grumbled.
My womb unclenched, the pain retreating. Storm clouds gathered in her eyes as they found my belly.
She scented me again.
As I lowered my hand, an onyx bridle formed from fog and rain.
An invitation.
My fingers traced the supple leather.
She knelt before me, releasing a soft keen.
So I mounted the kelpie. Mounted the mare who recognized me.
Perhaps she was never a beast of nightmares who swallowed souls.
No.
She was a creature abandoned to the bog and named a monster.
Another woman whose tale had been buried beneath myth.

Alexandra R. Low is a midwife, endometriosis survivor, and author whose work explores the intersection of folklore and women's health. Her short story "Womb's Wail" was published in the *Lost Bodies* anthology, and her personal narratives have appeared in publications of the National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health.

f r g t y r l s s by MK Kuol

f r g t y r l s s o e o u o
& p r s y r g d a i e o u o
s m t h n g m s t g o e i u o
b f r s m t h n g c m s e o e o e i o e

d n' t t r l s s o a e e o e
t h p p l n g b t y e a e a i e a u
t s f l w r s f l n t i o e a u
b f r t c n b g t f r t s? e o e i a e e u i

A Pushcart Prize nominee, MK Kuol is a self-taught poet from South Sudan whose work has appeared, or is forthcoming, on ANMLY, CONSCIO, Kalahari Review and elsewhere.



Castle Turner by Owen Connor

Hardly anyone ever noticed little Toby Turner until that sultry August summer, the summer the corner shop's cooler blew its fuse. The child was loitering around the store, as he often did on days he knew his father would be at home, the moment everything went dark and the droning hum of the cooler ceased. The store cashier rushed over, a pimply prissy boy named Garth that Toby would have seen in the halls of the joint middle and high school had he not been pulled out by his father years ago. Garth pushed Toby out of the way and yanked all the sodas and milks from the cooler. He took handfuls of the items with him down a hall around the back of the counter on several trips before suddenly stopping at the cooler again, as if only just now noticing Toby standing there, watching him.

“Listen, kid, if you help me move all this stuff into our backup storage cooler, I'll let you take a whole case home of any drink you want. No charge.”

Toby stared up blankly at him.

“Please, little man. My boss will kill me if all this product gets ruined.”

So Toby helped him move all the chilled items into the little walk-in cooler in storage. The cramped space reeked of tobacco, and organizing everything felt like playing an awful version of Tetris. Still, Garth held true to his promise, and Toby walked home from the store that day with a big case of cola balanced in his hands. He drank every can over the course of the following week, a necessity against the oppressive heat. He laid out one of his old shirts on the back lawn as a makeshift blanket and sipped away until the aluminum cans grew too hot to hold or the sprinklers came on—*kachunk kachunk kachunk*—to water the patchy, overgrown grass. He started taking his soda downstairs into the basement where the beverages would stay cold for longer, but down there, the taste of the cola melded into an aluminum-mildew-detergent flavor that made him lightheaded, and besides, his father found Toby down there quite quickly, dragging him by the arm back up the stairs and outside.

“It's summer. Go spend time outside,” he barked at the boy, “like a normal kid.”

Toby was thrust back into the heat, only he'd finished off all his drinks, and the water from the kitchen tap tasted more metallic than any can, so he returned to the corner shop for more soda. He slipped in through a back door he'd noticed the week prior, waltzed right into the storage cooler, and left with two new cases of soda in-hand without being noticed. This would not be his last visit to the shop.

With nowhere else to go and nobody to play with, Toby continued to sit around his backyard, and in the coming days, various *art installations* popped up. The first was a single tall tower of glued-together empty soda cans that Toby propped against the

bordering fence of the yard. However, it wasn't long before an old woman in a long gown came hobbling out from the neighboring house and towards the fence. She shook a wooden broom viciously in Toby's direction.

“You can't do this!” she snarled. “The first gust of wind that comes is gonna knock all this crap onto my property.”

Toby didn't answer. He simply watched as the old wretch swung the broom against the tower like Willie Mays hitting a home run ball, and the tower split into pieces clattering against one another all across the ankle scratching grass of Toby's yard. “No more of this,” she said in a huff before disappearing back inside.

The next day, Toby built five more towers, positioning them further away from the neighboring fence and leaning them all up against one another in a tepee formation, an obelisk marking his carbonated pastime. He went on to build several more towers and even hung some cans from the old oak tree on strings, the wind knocking them together like the worst wind chimes in the world.

These projects were all dwarfed, however, by Toby's crowning achievement: Castle Turner. It was a behemoth of empty soda cans glued together that started as a small model—four cans across and three cans tall—but grew in size with each passing day until an aluminum edifice taller than Toby himself sat against the back wall of his home reeking of oxidizing metal and cloying sugary syrup.

What followed the castle's construction was a particularly awful week of sun, the cloudless sky opening the world up to an onslaught of brutal heat. Little Toby Turner's neighbor (“the Wretch,” as Toby so aptly nicknamed her), awoke one morning to a blinding light through her window. She stumbled over to get a better look, still half-asleep, and saw Castle Turner beyond the fence bordering their yards, the aluminum cans reflecting sunbeams directly into her corneas.

The Wretch considered ignoring it, but the next day, she awoke to the same glaring light against her eyes, and the next day after that, and the next. She'd had enough, and (never one to handle anything too lightly) she appeared at the front door of the Turner residence early the following morning with the police chief in tow, pounding on the door.

“Stop that racket. I'm comin'.”

The door clicked and swung open. Mr. Turner stood there in a stained tank top and stained boxers, glaring at the old woman through bloodshot eyes, then over to the chief; the two men knew each other well. “What do you want?”

“This woman says—”

“What I *want*,” the Wretch cut him off, “is for you to go into your yard and take down all that trash. It's an awful eyesore, and it's quite literally ruining my vision. I've woken up blind every day for a week.”

“What are you talking about?” Mr. Turner belched.

The woman narrowed her eyes. “I'm talking about the soda cans littering your yard, and the ones hanging from your tree. Not to mention the fortress of garbage you've got propped up against your house.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about. Soda cans?”

The chief stepped in again. “Sir, if perhaps we could speak to your son?”

“Yes, I'd *love* to speak to your son.” A new voice joined the argument, and everyone turned to see two figures stepping out of a car parked at the end of the driveway. It was a gruff older man stomping his way towards the group, and behind him was Garth, the pimpled teenager from the corner store. “Your son robbed me blind.”

“And who are you?” asked Mr. Turner.

“I own the corner shop down on Cherry Street,” barked the older man, “and your son has taken my entire stock of soda. Creeping in through the backdoor. Not spending a dime. This little twerp said your boy helped him move a bunch of product into our backup cooler, no doubt casing the whole joint as he did so, like a proper crook.”

“If you'd like to file a report of theft,” the chief moved between the two angry-looking men, “I am more than happy to meet with you down at the station, but coming here is not—”

“Screw a report,” the clerk pushed further towards the front door. “I want to talk some sense into this kid and get the money I'm owed. With interest.”

In a huff, Mr. Turner suddenly stepped away from the door, wandering off into another room. The chief made a futile attempt to maintain order, but his pleas for the man not to step away went unanswered. The Wretch and the store owner and the pimpled boy Garth all took off after him into the house.

The chief sighed. “Lord, I do not get paid enough for this.”

They found Mr. Turner out on the back lawn, staring at all the soda can creations, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“*TOBY! GET OUT HERE RIGHT NOW!*”

But the call went unanswered.

“*TOBY! I'M NOT GONNA ASK AGAIN. YOU'RE IN BIG TROUBLE.*”

Still nothing. Everyone looked around, trying their best not to marvel at the quantity of cans in the yard or at the sheer size of the aluminum castle; admittedly, it was impressive. Garth questioned if there'd even been enough soda in the backup cooler to create a structure of that size.

Mr. Turner marched over to the castle. *“TOBY, I SWEAR, IF YOU'RE HIDING IN THERE AND IGNORING ME, YOU'RE IN FOR A WORLD OF PAIN.”*

With a swing of his arm, he struck the wall of the castle. The flimsy glue used to hold it together broke on impact, and the wall came clattering down, bringing portions of the other walls with it. The castle had been sieged, but inside, Toby was nowhere to be found. Instead, the castle revealed itself to be encompassing a pair of open bulkhead doors leading down into the basement. Mr. Turner shouted again, something everyone was beginning to realize he was quite accustomed to doing.

“I KNOW YOU'RE HIDING DOWN THERE, YOU RAT! GET UP HERE NOW!”

Nobody came out of the basement.

They all crowded around, peering down the steps. They could not see the bottom, the final few stairs completely shrouded in darkness. The chief looked to Mr. Turner.

“Sir, when was the last time you saw your son?”

The man shrugged. “I don't know. He's hardly ever home. It's good for kids to be kicked from the nest. Makes them tough. He's always off doing...whatever.

“Like being a little thief,” the store owner chimed in.

“And knocking garbage onto my property,” added the Wretch.

“Perhaps you'd like to file a missing person's report,” the chief suggested, but Mr. Turner just waved him away and started down the stairs.

“He's down here. I know it. I'll get him myself.”

Mr. Turner's bare feet pattered against the concrete steps, the sound echoing up to the onlookers until he disappeared past the threshold of darkness.

“AHH! GODDAMMIT!”

Everyone jumped.

“What is it?” asked the chief into the darkness, and Mr. Turner's voice snaked its way back up to reply.

“...It's nothing...I just stepped on some trash...cut my foot...*what on Earth...how...*”

The sounds of Mr. Turner's voice and footsteps were gone, and so was he.

The group waited a moment for him to return, but it wasn't long before the store owner threw up his hands in frustration.

"He's not coming back up. Obviously the father is protecting his boy. Trying to keep him out of trouble. You're a goddamn police officer. Get down there and do something about this."

"I...I think I ought to call this in."

"I'm not sitting around all day waiting for your backup. It's a *child*. I'll get him myself."

The store clerk took off down the steps, and though the police chief chased after him, begging the man to stop, he faltered on the very first step and went tumbling down, the two men colliding with each other and crashing into the shadows.

"Are you guys alright?" the Wretch yelped but received no answer. She looked over at Garth. "What are you waiting for? Go down there and help them."

The boy rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. "I don't know," he mumbled. "Something feels off about all this. I think we should call 9-1-1."

The Wretch rolled her eyes. "You teens these days never want to do anything. Always a nuisance. You're just like this Tommy kid."

"Toby," he corrected.

"Whatever," the Wretch started descending the staircase herself. "You're making an old woman help those two men all on her own. Reflect on that. Grow a pair."

And she was gone, into the darkness.

Garth waited a long time, but nobody returned from that cellar. He dialed 9-1-1, and although the first responders told him they would be there shortly, each minute of waiting seemed to drag out infinitely, the nauseating smell of syrup boiling against hot aluminum all throughout the yard growing unbearable. Finally, the boy had enough, and with a deep breath, he took the first few steps down into the basement, passing into the darkness.

Beneath his feet, something changed immediately. The solid concrete steps transitioned to something less stable, crunchy and sagging as he stood on it. Garth pulled out his phone flashlight and shined it down between his shoes, and he held back as gasp as he realized he was standing atop several crushed soda cans stacked on top of each other and arrayed out in place of a stair. What grabbed his attention more than that, however, was that these soda can stairs continued on, and on, and on, further down than his phone's flashlight could reach, further than any basement would be located. The walls

too, which also began as concrete, were replaced with a spread of empty cans—red and blue and green and gray—and the slanted ceiling too.

“This can't be real,” he said aloud, taking a few more cautious steps to confirm that the descent really went on for longer than his eyes could see. He went a bit deeper, then down more, each time thinking that he must be at the end by now, that there was no possible way the staircase could go any more, that any human being—let alone a child—could construct a place like this at all. Down and down he continued, spurred on by curiosity, forgetting for a moment that he'd come in search of those others and that they, in turn, had come looking for that little boy. He forgot it all, lost marveling at the peculiarity of being in a place that should not exist. Deeper, the air stifled, and walking through it was like treading molasses. The whole place smelt like molasses too, like being inside a bakery on fire. It reminded Garth of exhausting past summers he spent chasing jobs and chasing girls, being rejected by both, and seeking refuge in the bottles of rum and cans of beer his parents never thought to keep out of his reach. His folks hardly noticed him, only noticed that their alcohol was gone, so he resorted to stealing the liquor from the corner shop where he'd finally secured a job, a place he knew lacked proper security. Unfortunately, Garth also knew that after all this was said and done, the inventory check his boss planned to conduct would certainly reveal all the alcohol *he* had stolen, and he'd be out of a job yet again. He was screwed.

Garth looked back the way he'd come and couldn't even see the top of the stairs anymore, the point narrowing into a black dot that made him exhausted just contemplating the very possibility of turning back. It was then that he caught sight of a dim light quite a ways further down, perhaps the flashlight of the police officer hobbling up with Garth's boss and the wretched old woman. The boy took off, racing down, desperate to rejoin them and to not be alone anymore in this oddity prying foul memories to the forefront of his brain. “I'm here!” he called out. “I can't believe this. It's like we're in another world.”

But as he got closer to the light, Garth realized it wasn't coming from a person at all. He'd reached the bottom of the stairs, the soda can floor leveling out, and he discovered that the flickering hope he'd just been chasing after was emanating somewhere just around the corner. He came to an abrupt stop at that bend, holding his breath. He did not know how far into the Earth he'd traveled, but he could have very well reached the center. Afraid of what may be lying so deep below the surface of the world, Garth cautiously peered around the corner.

The space opened up into a wide room: soda can floors and soda can walls and a soda can ceiling. There was a soda can desk holding a soda can lamp, from within which that guiding light was shining brightly, and beside that were soda can shelves and two soda can beds bunked one atop the other. At the center of the room was a soda can chair, grandiose in size, the throne of this great castle, and upon it sat little Toby Turner. He

looked at Garth, at his pimpled face, and Garth looked back, scanning the room, taking note of the intricacies in the soda can furniture and the patterns of different colored cans in the walls. The only non-soda can creation in the whole space was a large AC unit setup in the corner, its power cord snaking across the floor and disappearing between a wedge in the wall. The room was an ideal temperature, a welcome reprieve from the deadly heat. Garth melted into the comfort, stepping further into the room.

“How did you...how did you do any of this?”

Toby shrugged and uttered the first words he'd say in a long time. “Free time.”

Garth inched towards the AC to better feel its cold air against his sweat-riddled body but stopped when he remembered why he'd come down here at all.

“There were others before me. My boss. Your father. They were all looking for you. Where did they go?”

Toby stared blankly. “They left.”

“I didn't pass them on my way down here.”

“They didn't go back that way.”

“Then which way did they go?”

Silence. Nothing but the low hum of the AC unit.

“You can stay down here, if you'd like,” Toby finally spoke up again.

“Stay?”

“You didn't do me any wrong. If anything, *I* cheated *you*. I'm sure I got you in some deep trouble with your boss. The least I can do is offer that you stay.”

“I don't understand. Why would I stay here? It took ages to get down those stairs, and the whole place reeks of artificial sweetness.”

Toby reached for the arm of his throne and pried a can off from the end. The whole structure crinkled and resettled. He held the can out to Garth, and when he took it, he was surprised to find it full, condensation running down the side.

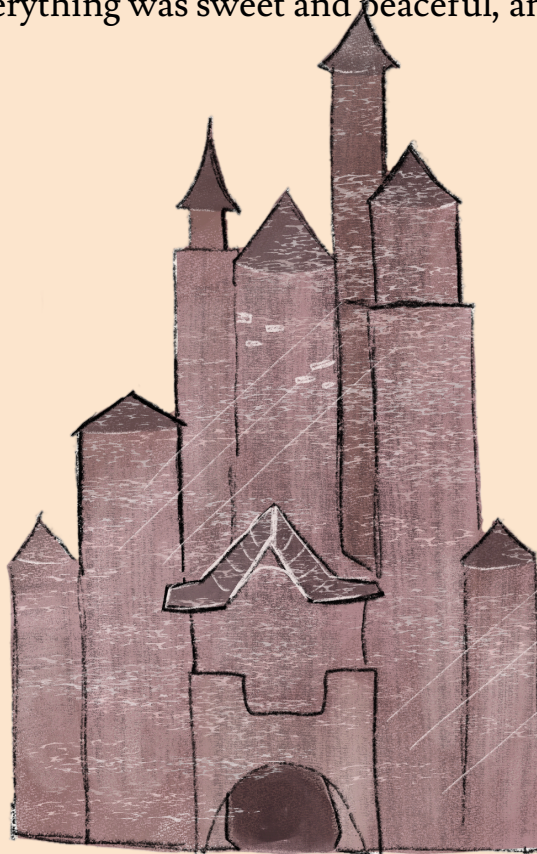
“Drink it,” Toby instructed, “and think about the possibility of you staying here. I think we'd have a great time.”

Reluctantly, Garth peeled back the tab and cracked open the can. He placed the opening in the aluminum to his lips, reeled his head back, and took a sip. The soda was ice cold, as though it had come straight from a freezer, and the bubbles raved around the inside of his mouth. It was perfect, Heaven in a can, the greatest beverage he'd ever had the pleasure of letting run across his tongue and down his gullet. Its flavors were no

different than the scent in the air he'd trekked through to get down here, only what was once nauseating and repulsive now tasted like happy memories he'd let be corroded by trauma, memories he'd thought were buried deep in some annal of his memory beneath a mountain of toxic anxieties, but they were really just lying down here, at the center of the Earth, in a soda can; it was sweet as the fruit of life at its ripest, and it was metallic like your own blood in your mouth, like remembering you're alive. He finished the can and asked Toby for another.

The first responders arrived shortly after Garth descended into Castle Turner, but when they arrived at the property, there was no soda can building to speak of. In fact, all of little Toby Turner's projects vanished from the backyard, and the bulkhead doors led down only a few concrete steps into the basement, which reeked of mildew and detergent. They declared everyone missing: Mr. Turner, the store clerk, the wretched neighbor, the police chief, and the pimpled teenager Garth, though they never filed a case for little Toby Turner. There was no real record of him, nobody to vouch for his existence, nobody who ever noticed him and cared to remember. Yes, hardly anyone ever noticed Toby, but in Castle Turner, he didn't mind.

In Castle Turner, everything was sweet and peaceful, and he had a friend.



Owen Connor (he/him) is a twenty-year-old fiction writer and poet from Western Massachusetts. He is earning his bachelor's degree in English from Westfield State University. He loves to tell stories about growing up in rural environments and the interplay of terror with young love. When he is not doing irrevocable damage to his posture at his computer, he is slinging pastries behind the counter at his local bakery (and maybe stealing a couple for himself).

Les Baux by Leslie Graff

Appreciated for its firm defenses,
And Costapéra cave retention,

Les Baux, a village castrum holder
Was called such for its rocky spur.

Buried bones of Baussenques
Of Bronze Age commune pre-pubescents

An Alpilean autarky
And its secret aluminium smile.

A false village, streets and houses,
Limestone not depicting louses

Proto-story pastor'lism
Quarries, grain and oppidum

Fenêtre window pane, what else left is there to gain.
More and more we hammer in, provide us value, let us in

.
Quaint communes all come to pass, preserve, protect and make them last.

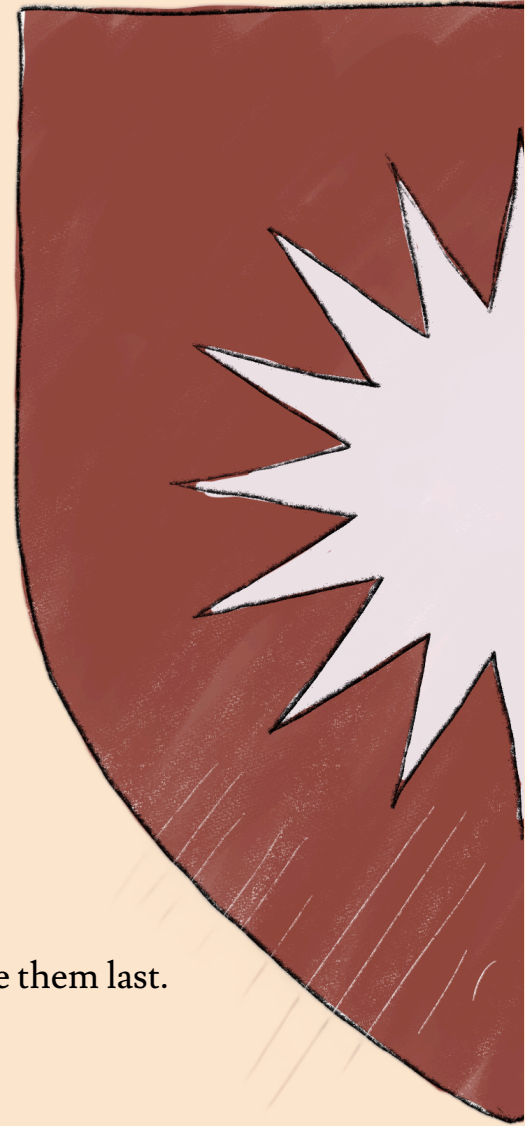
Les Alpilles, by famous painter,
Protestantine reformation,

Red mud
Conflicts
Guinea
Ghana

Vietnam and do svidaniya

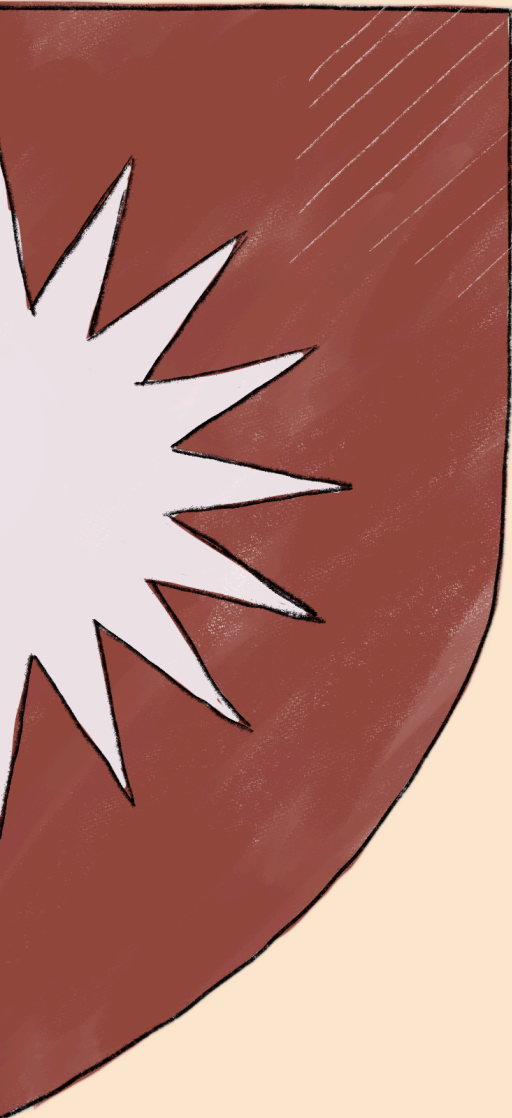
We'll break you down until exhaustion.
Post Tenebras Lux, Balthazar.

Leslie Graff is a writer and narrative designer primarily based in the games industry. As a chronic enjoyer of classical literature and deeply aphantasic, she prefers to write her more poetic pieces with compelling phonetics and meaning-charged words, rather than lean into more visual descriptors. She has previously been published for her short stories and poetry in the Stylus Journal of art and writing, and is currently working on teams making a visual novel RPG, a narrative driven AAA game and also works on her personal game projects in whatever time she has left. She graduated from the University of Tulsa in 2025, but in the realm of writing has been primarily self-taught.



Les Baux-de-Provence by Anne Eyries

Pierre Berthier (1782-1861), mineralogist and chemist



Inhabited since Neolithic times,
this rocky spur waxed & waned
according to the whims of kings

until Pierre, Inspector General
of Mines, found a red rock rich
in alumina – named bauxite

after the French discovery site.
Mineral analysis & electrolysis
led to the Bayer process still

used today to render 25 per cent
aluminium from quarried rock,
a metal recyclable like Les Baux

with chateau, plateau, village
redefined for tourism, the climb
rewarded by outstanding views,

renowned in the winter season
to glimpse a rare Blue Rock Thrush
clinging to this pale limestone cliff.

Anne Eyries has poetry published in various journals, including *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Humana Obscura*, *Ivo Review*, and *Muleskinner Journal*. She lives in France, a few miles from Les Baux where she has seen a Blue Rock Thrush.

Married to Space: A Short Story in Verse by Anthony Calzia

Cast:

Astronaut

Astronaut's Spouse

Broadcaster

Field Reporter (F.R.)

Beginnings

I

At the wedding, the couple's high sky dreams and the dream.

There was joy on that day,
we laughed and we prayed,
and a priest said a blessing
and sent us away.
I reached to unclasp,
the latch on my dress,
Your hand gently lifted
and pulled it at last...
Our bodies, they swayed,
they swayed and they swayed,
I'd never imagined such pleasure, such days.

We knew your hopes high,
way up in the sky.
Past Saturn, no turning,
our souls had to fly.
We charted the path,
You focused on math,
but steadily amassed,
a polymath's knowledge,
few plebs could surpass.

And we gloried, we gloried,
as the stars glowed, they glowed.

Astronaut's Spouse:

Then we were told,
our plan so bold,
had lifted our dreams
to the rank of real
things. Eye's gleam
as I held the card,
from NASA with stars.
Congratulating us,
on the program *you'd* start

—a slight misbeat of my heart—

then I felt...sorry...just felt so sorry.

A dream came too late,
our fate it would seem,
would be far more weighted,
more doomed than we'd dreamed.

Shaking, a voice, took me,
a choice. Cloak of dim salmon
hue of my *daimon*. I now shake
back eldritch fear, yet the echoing
phantasm which spoke is near:

*Space is so cold, Space is so cold,
No one to hold, No one to hold,
Life & death fold, Death & life fold,
All someday go. All someday go.*

Quaking I woke up,
frantic to pray,
& counted the hours,
five decades, till day.

II

At breakfast, Astronaut enters and sings:

Good morning fair eyes,
I see your bright lights,
so moist to the touch,
of my new wedded sight.
My hands hear the sound,
of your tender lit skin,
my joy it abounds,
it never could end.
Here in our home,
so near to the base,
the loam of our soil,
fruitful and graced,
the limited sky, so high,
is lowered, ours to defy.
I imagine the day,
bright sunlit rays,
& how I'll be gone,
for so many days,

and I'm sorry, sorry.

I know that your love,
I know that your care,
will be the fair breeze,
that fills life with air.
Like a wind through the trees,
the calm capes of the seas:
so will we be, just wait and see.

This mission to space,
away from our place,
is a small part of our life,
not our life's binding seam.
While I'm here on land,
holding your hand,
I see in your eyes,
that you understand.

The astronaut's spouse nods and smiles...and begins to worry.

Flush of Innocence

III

The astronaut and spouse arrive home from graduation.

Astronaut's Spouse:

Your brilliant brain, insane!

Ambient sound, all your ticket punched;

I,

hunched,

over your potential.

Towering round figure. Main thrust:

boundless ambition. But I trust

our bonds, our life, our mission.

Sitting here, in the kitchen,

hearing your face shine.

Pitched music, as the spheres align.

The orbs orbiting my heart

as you wink, so near.

Breathlessly, without air

I drop my fear.

Oh, oh, oh I love you so!

Astronaut:

This day is great! A noble race, to space.

This wasn't the plan, yet we stand at the gate

swung open wide, pace frantic, wild.

Yes, we'll have a child. No, not for a while.

Yes, I know, and I'm sorry, so sorry things move so slow.

Your voice is low, I can tell by your face,

this long trip from our place

will be hard, but the card came.

the gods are to blame

for this shift to our life,

our brief rides, and our strife.
Fast runs around the Sun.
Sounds: motor's running, our pace.
Just know that we'll love,
just know we'll care.
This flight to the moon
is a radical dare,
away from it All,
without any air.

And I'm sorry, but...

oh oh oh please let's go.

The couple goes to make love.

Morning of Launch Day
IV

Astronaut awakes and finds the Astronaut's Spouse looking pensive at the table.

Astronaut:

Today is the day.

Today is launch day.

I've listened & thought
to all you've had to say,

love I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

Space is a magnetic place.

If you could only understand,
I'd never choose the dirt of land;
more stars in space than grains of sand.

Too damn short this life's span,
no time to stand around, to waste sound.

In space you float, like hope,
whether you're up or down.

Earth's measure, the length of my hand,
your hand, the length of earth's measure,

but I'm still so sorry. I'm so sorry. Sorry.

Astronaut's Spouse:

But love, here on the turf,
the ground of our birth,
surrounded with love,
snug as a bug,

we'd smile? Wouldn't we smile?

If you go away, my days will be grey,
I've waited so long,
my light's gone away.
I'm alone & space is so cold
there is no one to love,
there is no one to hold.

Oh please don't go!

The crush as you leave earth's gravity.
Tears orbit, filling the orbital cavity.

I'll cry all day for days, dazed.
Walking the grocery, a rat is a maze,
A cage lined with pasta noodles & sauce.

God...God...God...

space is: heavy cross, constant loss.

The cost of being married to space
and an astronaut's face is losing
yourself,
your lover
and place.

This race is harder than it seems,
eating our tears,
swallowing dreams.
The light that streams:

disbursed beams, waves, particles, almost no things.

oh, oh, no! Please don't go.

The astronaut hugs the astronaut's spouse and leaves the room.

Last Conversation: Experience

V

Astronaut's Spouse:

Tell me you'll stay,
tell me you'll stand,
on earth's firm land,
holding my hand
and I'll smile. I'll smile.

In outer space,
way up in space,
there is no air
there is no air out there.

Oh No.

There is no love.

There is no care.

How can you love
without any air!

Oh No Oh No Oh No. Please don't go!

I never told,

I never told,

of the voice...

of the voice...

God it's so cold...

God it's so cold...

Space is so cold space is so cold, space is so cold, space is so cold I love you so
I love you so I love you so I love you so No one to hold, no one to hold, no one
to hold, no one to hold, Please do not go, please do not go, please do not go,
please do not go

Astronaut:

It's hard to explain...

But the light in outer space feels like

grace on my face,

streaming down in my brain,

insane.

Please understand love when I blast off from land,

I think of holding your... I think of holding your... hand, your hand.

Astronaut's Spouse:

As you go away,
just know that I'll pray,
for you each day
that you are away.
I hope that you hold...

I hope that you hold...

Star dust in your hands...
Star dust in your hands... *for us.*

Oh, oh, oh, just go!

Astronaut and Astronaut's Spouse drive to launch site.
They smile for the cameras.
Takeoff Status: Successful despite stormy weather.



The Tragedy of Illumination VI

Astronaut:

I've been up in space,
away from our place,
I've not heard your voice
in so many days.
Tomorrow's planned,
re-entry grand
hurries along,
I've worried ringing my hands.

I'm sorry, God love I'm sorry; so goddamn sorry... sorry

Being married to space
at first will elate,
few humans embark on this wondrous fate.
But I hate the emptiness, cold, dark and great.
The hollow nagging gnaw I feel,
when like a thief my eyes steal,
a glance at the globe
where we danced in a field.
On that one day in May
not a cloud that was grey,
you begged me and begged me
and begged me to stay

and I'm sorry, sorry, so sorry.

With you was my Heaven, now I dwell in Hell,
God why in the hell did I sail way up here?

Oh no, oh no, oh no! How could I go?

In outer space, way up in space,
I can't see the stars but only your face.
The grace of the stars,
now turned to disgrace,
I think of your lips,
their sugary taste.
Sweeter than honey dew dipped fingertips.

[Sequence Begins]

omens offered for fair solar winds.

[Adjust trajectory]

the fiery light electrically.

Prayers for flowing celestial seas.

[See you soon]

I think of our room

[we've hit the Ozone]

I think of your tomb
and how we're alone.

I in space then at home,
you in your tomb slowly turning to loam.

And it's too late to say I'm sorry

Fanfare, Farce and Finitude.

VII

The re-entry is covered by major networks.

Broadcaster

I have been told,
I have been told,
the capsule is home,
& the capsule is whole.

Sending you now
to Field Report.....wow,
...it's not every day,
you say, 'now here is one,
Come home from so near the Sun...

...I'm sorry. Let's give them a hand.

Our Field Reporter is at the landing...

capsule slowly hovering down...

in the water...now found....

we go Live to the sea,
F.R. What do you see?

Major network moves from broadcaster to Field Reporter

It's an honor to cover,
this hero and lover,
whose strong sacrifice,
and bright celestial life,
inspires us all, with its
cost, all they've lost.

Down here on land,
whether mulch, soil or sand,
the span of our days,
is clouded with haze.
The ways that we go,
often leave us so low.
And beg us and beg us
and beg us to grow.

But Astronaut is, our
national hit. The brightest,
the lightest that God ever gives.

Silence.

Field Reporter talks into his ear.

Clear...

...the capsule is clear of its parachute...

...the hatch opening is near.

I hear in my ear
cameras ready to go,
lenses eager to show,
you who we all have loved,
waiting, watching for years,
the weight of a nation,
a mission of tears.

Camera is aimed at the capsule hatch.

Screen is grayish green.

The latch turns. Astronaut takes his spot.

Mic's are shoved close, to learn from the one they love.

**Astronaut emerges, disheveled and whispering, speaking, with glittering,
tired eyes. Astronaut**

In outer space, way up in space,
I can't see the stars but only their face.
I think of our room
I think of their tomb
and how we're alone.

So alone...

I, in space, then at home,
you in your tomb
slowly turning to loam.
Being married to space
is losing yourself, your lover and place.
This race is a mauler
more so than it seems,
Eating your dreams,
so why bother?
All the light that streams...

...disbursed beams, waves, particles, almost no things.

Anthony Calzia (he/him) is an artist and writer in Memphis, TN. He has poems in 3Elements and the Anglican Theological Review and is a student in the MFA program at the University of Memphis.

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Aching at Dusk by Heather Sager

I walk on the sidewalk downhill, it's dusk
with suburban houses behind me
and dark forest to my side
and a gurgling stream
running fast below the sharp black rails
of a wrought-iron fence.
No one travels
the bike-path parallel,
and as I tread the sidewalk
past the gurgling stream,
I merge into the darkness
cast by the overhanging forest trees,
I merge into the purple dusk
cast by a sky heavy with gray cloud
and humid hot air,
and when cars speed past on the road
the hot air blows a current of trash,
sending a plastic bag flying,
and when I step
over the crack in the sidewalk a pop can
rolls by my feet, metallic and empty,
rattling as it rolls, resonant and aching
with longing.

Heather Sager lives in Illinois. Her most recent poems appear in *Chiron Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Rusty Truck*, *First Light Journal*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *The Woodside Review*, and more.

Can/Could by Mal Fawzy

(This work contains talk of drugs and suicide)

There's a part of our story
that I never tell;
no one wants to hear it,
and it makes you look worse
than you really are.

(I can't let people hate you
because I hated you enough
while you were here.
You know what you did wrong.
You can rest now.)

There's a part of our story
that I never tell;
it starts with us,
meeting secretly,
sitting in the woods.

You threw a coke can
into the bushes.

You're not supposed to do that.
It takes aluminium 200 to 500 years
to degrade completely.

I didn't say anything about it,
because as you threw it, you joked—
and it was a joke, I know that,
I'm supposed to know that—
that if you ever killed yourself,
you'd jot my name on the note.

To be precise, you said you'd write
about how I never saved you
even though I should have.

This is the part of our story
where you look worse
than you really were.
Because you were probably



a little high
on a different type of coke,
and you were angry,
and you were sad,
and you were looking
for a way out
that would teach others
how much you were hurting.

I could never hold that against you.

Boys like us are cruel
because that's what we know,
and I've met very few people
who knew a world
as cruel as yours,
my brother.

It takes a coke can
200 to 500 years
to decay. It took you
less than a hundredth of that,
and I watched it happen.

That's the part that makes me look
just as bad as I really was.

Guilt won't bring me anywhere
except for the point
where you threw that damn can.

It'll still be intact
and I'll kick it just a little farther
and I'll yell about how
it'll take the world
hundreds of years
to forget about a can
but it'll take me ten times that
to forget about you.

Angels in Tibet by Olúwatúnmiṣe Ọ̀tòlórìn Akìgbógun

We watch four angels die in Tibet in the afternoon heat. If we can count exquisite choreography as dying. We should, for the purpose of this testimony. Is it in our place to testify to the angels when we don't understand them enough? (Might we be appropriating the angels' demonstration as the seed of a collective article? Our intentions are harmless and we are stranded, so we must proceed.) We might as well have been there with the angels, for the drones' eyes were so sharp we could catch the quality of the wind there. Subtle. The wind could have sharpened glass. Instead it blew soil upwards and tickled their wings. They landed in one of the industrial gorges, on the ground where bauxite mingles with copper, iron, uranium, gold and borax, where nothing is spared from unrelenting harvest. They sat in nuclear waste and made their cluster double. We saw clips, after all, of the angels sitting in polluted rivers in Mekong and elsewhere with wings soaked black, saying nothing. We saw them.

So the angels were below the ground surface, in one of the open mines. They occupied the gorge. Nobody could see them directly except they climbed plateaus near and far, got an official permit or followed the livestream from the levitating drones. Were the drones the occupying government's or that of an influencer in Tibet? We who bear testimony are not in Tibet, not from Tibet. We are a chorus spread around the world. The angels did not just manifest in Tibet today when billions tuned in to watch them die. No one was sure whether they descended or appeared or crawled out. There are credible rumours on the Internet already about the origin of their presence. But we feel sedated by the Internet, by the expanding chamber in which the sounds and images of things falling collide to deaden us. So we struggle against believing every credible rumour we pluck from our curated algorithms.

We are haunted by the beginning of things. But the angels are not here to reassure us with the logic of geneses. They have been around only four days and already two corporations have collapsed, two Heads of States have been assassinated by untraceable hands. The air around the world is more brittle. When demonstrators push with ferocious peace on streets across the world, the police grow in outrage and attack until the demonstrations are branded riots. There are beasts unfolding when we turn to gather our shoes. It is a waste, everything. And yet we carry on because we operate automatically. And because, if we do not proceed, will we not die still? So we live with charged pleasure. We feed one another fruits in public spaces and shun the lonelinesses curated for us. Breathless days. Everywhere is dangerous. There are those already dreaming of critical revolutions.

The doomsayers have returned and you must have noticed their followers multiplying. They now say the world will crack open by November 21. This is still August. Time, as always, will demonstrate their errors. This world has always been an amphitheatre of dystopia. Only, there is now a vigour to dire conditions. We hear there are towns where people trample one another because they perceive Jesus hanging over multiple trees. We

watch towns where people drown their heroes so that they might negotiate a new world with Olókun on the sea floor. We listen to clips of villages where people slaughter their children, rub their blood around windows and passages so that the aggressive wickedness stomping the world will pass them over. And we have been so dazed we could not weep.

There have been parades where some claimed they rubbed bodies with angels. But we cannot take such claims seriously because it is our habit to use words like ‘angel’ and ‘love’ and ‘hate’ and ‘life’ freely. It is well. But we cannot take the claims. And besides, why would the angels involve themselves in parades? Are they marginalised, these angels? Are they erased by the systems that abolish our worlds? Are they, too, concerned for the catastrophe that this world has always been, these angels?

And they wear gloves, these angels. No one has felt the make of the gloves yet but we believe those are aluminium gloves. Why are they so green though? Like moss in ancient caves. One of the angels seems like it would carry a tattoo, a branch and seeds. The angels must have names other than the symbols blazing on their heads. Whatever those names are, they are unreachable for us. We fashion makeshift names for them so we can tell them apart. But the angels relish bleeding into one another. There are sustained moments when we cannot separate them. We long to be unified with that same accessible intensity.

Because the angels startle with their presence and make rapacious imperial extraction difficult across regions in Tibet, they were a new challenge for the Chinese government. It became harder, even with the fatal heavy machineries, to reach mineral resources, even for industrious miners across sites. It was as though the resources locked themselves away in exhaustion and precarity. And like all imperial governments in known history, they are not unfamiliar with strategies — clean and ugly — of surmounting “challenges”, of having things taken care of. That is, after all, the inheritance all bankrupt regimes spend: the sanction of evil as state obligation.

By the second day, the angels were surrounded by mercenaries bent on breaking their fast with bloodshed. ‘And did they?’ you fret, ‘did they shoot the angels?’ You should know all these. Have you not been made into a nightmare cosmopolitan by the global village? Were you not here in the world with us this very week? How did you escape the onslaught of that spectacle? You must be a miracle or a bore. And they did not shoot the angels because the angels could not be shot. The mercenaries screamed at the angels and nothing moved. They cocked their exaggerated weapons. They enjoyed the illicit stain of shooting the persecuted. They are part of those anointed by the Machinery-Known-As-The-State to “take care of things” such as a vigil of angels.

They shot into the skies and nearby so that the angels might tremble. They did not care for the hovering drones. Many more atrocities have been absorbed by the eyes of cameras. Besides, they were acting in the name of the State’s interests. So their violence was legitimate. Their compensation would be cash and discreet honours. We live in a savage time when public terror is a documented and dealt currency and the decay of justice grows acute.

And when the angels settled like statues and breathed like beasts, the mercenaries screamed and screamed and screamed. The guns strained their muscles. Trained at the angels' heads but impotent, their exaggerated impenetrability dissolved. They dropped the guns and each one judged his face by his own hands: they attacked their faces until there was blood and grease surrounding them. We were struck. We were agitated. We saw everything. The drones hovered from an implicit distance. The world shivered.

•

By the third day, the angels were besieged by the secret police and other state forces. A curfew had been spread over radio, television and social media but those who live in this area passed by to behold the angels and gauge their intentions. The cameras swept around their faces and showed them at the periphery. Some stood for the spectacle until they heard weapons flexed by them. This time, as if to mock due process, the secret police brought an arrest warrant with them. The angels were found kneeling. And the keepers of handcuffs rose to the occasion.

The angels must have been nonviolent for they were bound without resistance. But they were immovable. They were shoved and pulled and tied to moving machines to be dragged into torture camps for having disrupted the exploitation of resources and costing the government, sorry the nation, its GDP. But they were immovable. All methods were considered and pursued. But they remained immovable. So the siege called for backup and expanded. And the leader appeared on national television to announce a state of emergency caused by 'spies masquerading as angels, disruptors of the State's industrial prosperity...' And there was a sigh, like the gurgle of sinking ships, howling across the world.

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Then we heard a credible rumour whose roots are to be found in exposed secret files. It caused a moderate scandal. Like viewers of a drama, the situation was clarified to us by sloppy flashbacks. It appears the angels were planned accidents all along. They had been moved through extraterrestrial corridors (which the secret files did not disclose) to the research institute nearby. There was no way these angels were creatures of laboratory experiments. Even the files reaffirmed that. So where were they from, these angels? What extraterrestrial corridors do the files suggest with bare language? Conspiracy theorists and aligned Influencers erupted with overdue glee and congratulated their perseverance with unconventional thought. Rue to the "rational" naysayers.

We missed the angels' fall because there was no fall. They were brought about. We caught the rest on livestream — the levitating drones had to have been part of the subsequent experiment. We hear the Science-People and the Machinery-Known-As-The-State collaborated on these projects for several years. And the livestreams was another project — an experiment of public opinion, all of us globally were testing ground to measure the reception of and reaction to the angels.

The Leader denied it at first with his Propaganda-Machine and affiliated centers. Then when it became profitable and unavoidable to be associated with the angels, the Leader in fraternity with the Science-People admitted the angels as one of the highlights of his lifetime reign. An ambiguous one, yes. But one that could be redirected for the good of the people, which is the modest shorthand for saying ‘for the insane interests of the Machinery-Known-As-The-State.’

Anyways, the Leader assured his nation and the larger world that all is well and the angels are here to optimise growth, enable peace and other such jargon important people speak for the public gaze. We watch the Leader, surrounded by stately props and numerous microphones, congratulate himself and the Science-People on this groundbreaking stride. We are told explicitly and solemnly that the Machinery-Known-As-The-State in conjunction with the Science-People managed the Accident-That-Will-Correct-All-Other-Accidents. The concept of the angels is sold to us as a commodity we should be overjoyed we have access to. Of course, at this point, the angels have been cordoned off in quarantine from public reach (still occupying the initial gorge. The mine there could not function with the obstruction.) But the Leader assured us inaccessible angels are part of the public's rights.

We hear we should be happy the Accident-That-Will-Correct-All-Other-Accidents is now here with us, to restore the world for further abuse and to recalibrate the marginalised for tectonic displacements. After all, all development has been for the acceleration of collapse. Eventually, the representatives of the Science-People arrive at the angels’ gorge to touch them for samples. Struggle does not appear to be part of the angels’ impulses. Each angel has a comb. When they are violated for samples, their combs transmit frequencies.

New plagues manifest. The Influencers testify someone in Afar grows wings from the gut; someone in Ìbàdàn feels a mounting erection in the ribcage; someone's hair becomes locks of breasts in Sonderburg; that other curious plagues erupt in townships, villages and cities. And do they expect us to believe those fantastic testimonies in this world of AI, of mythmaking, where both the real and the tampered assail and dizzy us onlookers? Let them add photos first and interview clips, then we will be confronted with realisation.

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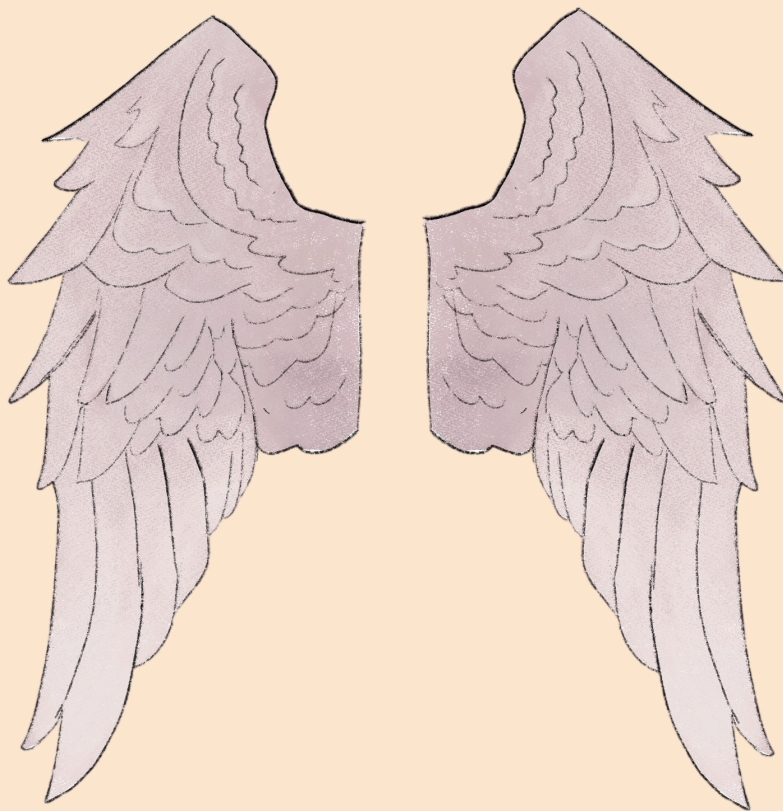
The angels operate in a grammar reaching beyond. It confounds the reportage. None of it could be transcribed. None of it could be interpreted. And to lose another swirl of control over the colonised world we share paralyzes us deeper. We call for the containment of the angels. We call for their torture and slaughter so that their mysteries will terrorise us no further. The angels sharpen our frustrations. They unravel us beastly.

The angels are four. One is bald and has silver teeth. They carry no crosses. One has the eyes of a catfish, all of its body is punctuated with symbols that shift and shift. Their eyes line the cores and spans of their wings. One bears around its head, its neck and its flank emblems of a rainbow, an oil spill and a shattered moon. They are taller than gates, their

faces are smooth but not bereft, their feet are bare and inexplicable. One rumbles when it turns, massages the ruptures within the gorge and the rivers and spoke the angel grammar first upon interference.

The angels unfold and everyone who watches is spellbound. Feathers, oils, muscles, aluminium and spirits. The cuffs and chains cannot contain them. We watch them turn themselves inside out and we howl. The livestreams turn our terror into canopies. Network fails. Network resurrects. The wind has a fever: a primal cry tearing the world. The representatives of the Science-People prepare to flee, as do the besieging secret police. And we watch them stranded. We watch them exposed. The angels rise on crooked bodies, flayed by their own systems and they do not stumble. They tear their wings with their enormous, gloved hands. They crack the bones of their combs. They writhe in procedures of ritual, lashing out at the Sun. Sun surrenders, unlatches and falls in clean motions into the heap that is the world.

What did it not burn all on that day? What did it not burn in those moments? What did it not burn, save for the core? What has it not uprooted?



Olúwatúnmiṣe Ọ̀tọ̀lórìn Akigbógun writes in English and Yorùbá. He is a graduate of German Studies from the University of Ibadan. He is currently on the threshing floor, braiding stories for a collection. His writings are published or forthcoming in Efiko Magazine, Afrocritik, Tough Poets Review, The Mbari and The Journal. He is a 2025 Idembeka Writing Fellow.

What Did I Do? by Sam Hendrian

He wakes up in the middle of the mourning night
Frozen in fiery pain
Thinking again and again
What did I do?

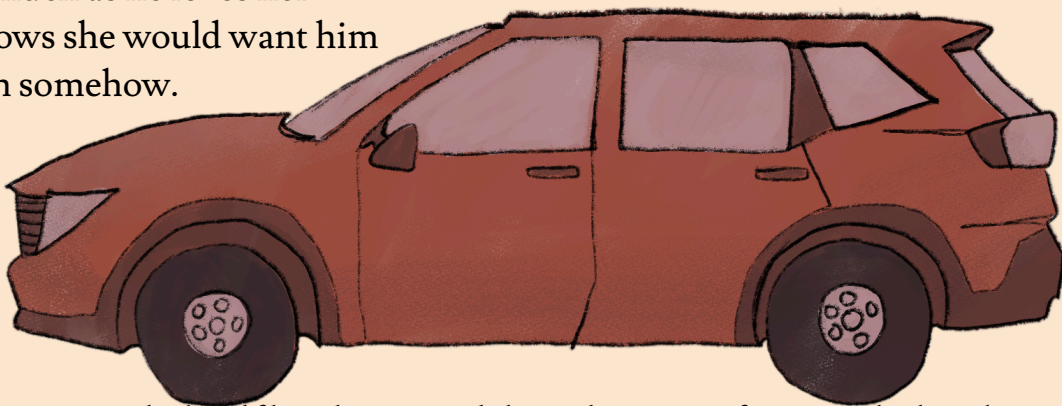
It was just an accident
Yet there was nothing "just" about it
And guilt tends to favor
Those who had no mal intent.

The more he remembers
The more he doesn't remember
Which is his body's one shield
Against completely imploding.

There's laughter coming from downstairs
That sounds a lot like hers
But it's only the neighbors next door
Watching reruns of *Friends*.

Should he even bother getting up?
Obviously no,
Obviously yes
He has no other choice.

Hates himself unspeakably
Yet not as much as he loves her
And he knows she would want him
To carry on somehow.



Sam Hendrian is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker, poet, and playwright striving to foster empathy through art. From writing personalized poems for passersby outside of LA's oldest independent bookstore every Sunday, to making Chaplin-esque silent films about loneliness and human connection once a month, Sam lives to make other people feel seen and validated. More work can be found on Amazon, YouTube, and in various online literary magazines.

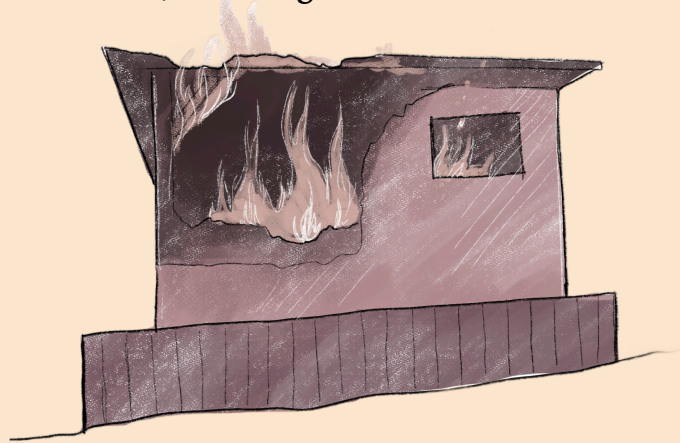
Rubble by Eric DuPree

A boy sits in the center of a decimated home. The clouds are dark. The air is thick. The plants are dead.

The boy tries to dig in a small break in the floor, but the ground is cold and hard.

Lost.
Crying.
Scared.

His family is gone.
His pets are gone.
He is gone.



But what makes a home? The materials of the physical house, or the memories of the people there?

A father's yell echoes.
A mother's wine spills.

The boy picks up a piece of broken wood, a splinter from an old board with a picture hanging by a nail. This picture is faded and crinkled, but it is more home than this godforsaken building.

The picture is of a family: all smiling, laughing, joyous, together.

The boy drops the splinter, knowing the picture is nothing but rubble, an old remnant of a long-forgotten memory.

The boy walks to a cliff with nothing but an ocean below.

He jumps.
He plummets.
He slams into the water.

It's cold, wet, and jarring, but somehow more home than anywhere else.
As he sinks, the boy sees shimmers in the dark water.

As they speed over his eyes, his mind flashes memories of what will be:

Yelling.
Crying.
Screaming.
Scars.
A cycle repeating.

The boy sinks deeper, and a voice booms, "You can change. You will change. Be different."
A hand reaches and cradles the boy as it pulls him up.

Shimmers of light flash across the boy's eyes again, but this time different: what things could be.

A family laughing.
A happy home.
Kids playing.

The boy now swims upward on his own, desperately trying to fight to the surface.

His hand breaks through the water, then his head.

As he breathes in the fresh air, his mind echoes with what he saw, a changed reality, one he can create if he only tries, if he only changes.

The boy sees an island ahead, the sky blue and the plants bright. A dove sits on the beach, staring at the boy with an olive leaf hanging from its beak.

The boy swims.
The boy struggles.
The voice motivates and guides him.

The man arrives.
He steps onto the island and sees the new world, but he looks down.

Scars.

The man smiles and looks back at the old island. The home he once knew. The darkness has deepened. It only grows colder. The scars throb.

The man nods to the island, then turns.

The man walks into the middle of the new island and easily slides a shovel into the dirt.

He sees the trees and the boards of a new home.

He sees animals, plants, friends, and food.

The boy has become a man.

The cycle has ended.

The man has changed.

He still bears the scars, but he has fought.

He is different.

Eric DuPree is a current student at Benton High School who enjoys going to the gym, playing football, writing, photography, and animals. In the future, he plans to attend Hendrix College for Business Management, then attend trade school for construction.

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Last Picked by Kenneth Pobo

I was almost always
the last picked
for whatever sport my school
said that I needed to join. While

I ran back
and forth on the basketball court,
I avoided contact
with the ball, thought of songs
like Boyce And Hart's "I Wonder
What She's Doin' Tonight." Music
deflated basketballs and made

courts disappear. This urgency
to win, I never felt it. I craved
escape but first came
the dreaded locker room.

Insults and taunts. Game over
for kindness.



Kenneth Pobo (he/him) has a new book out called *Raylene And Skip* (Wolfson Press). Also recently published is *Lavender Stones* (Rockwood Press).

Alloy by Cayt McNeill

In origin stories
we are born of the land
our blood metallurgy
god-given and shaped

all children are alloys
of parents, happenstance
of nature and nurture
what's known and unknown

but some of us only
are reverse-engineered
the bastards and orphans
discover with time

what is our base instincts
what mettle within us
the habits we trend to
the learning that works

imagination can
concoct any story
to make us a hero
and grant us lost gifts

but the truth that matters
is not the elements
gathered but more vital
we are our own forge

Cayt McNeill was born in Toronto and grew up surrounded by its sounds and rhythms. She is a voracious reader, traveller and people watcher. Cayt has had several publications in *Verse Afire*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *A Romp of Poets*, and is a contributor to *On Occasion: Poems for the People*, (Coach House Press, 2026).

Rush by Alison Moore

I can still hear it coming down Rush Mountain from the Morning Star Mine. Sounds like thunder except the sun is out. I've been waiting since dawn, right here in this doorway.

It takes a while to come into view because there's sixteen oxen in front, pulling hard, and by the time the team comes past the livery and about to make the turn people stop what they're doing to look. A chunk of zinc as big as an elephant rolls on by, chained to a log on a timber wagon right behind the front wheels. I knew it was coming, all six tons of it, but it isn't until I see it for myself that I'm truly stupefied. By the very wonder of it. That the miners got it out in one piece; you better believe it left a hole. They called it Jumbo. It looks like something a pharaoh ordered especially for his tomb. Or like a leftover rock from the beginning of time put by to make another world with.

Us kids run up behind the wagon but have to slow to a walk. The rock is so heavy that even that many oxen with sixty-four hooves between them have a hard time pulling. At least it's going downhill. The whole town of Rush takes time off to walk along, to see it off on its long journey to the World's Fair. Even the Morning Star shuts down early. People come out of their houses and even their outhouses and the hotel and the mercantile too, and soon there are streams of folks, like all the creeks that become part of the Buffalo. We're a parade before we know it.

The Brawley boy walks up on stilts, and easily gets to the front. A couple of dogs and the blacksmith riding a Jennie trot behind. Asa Tindall saws away on his fiddle while he walks along, and you can hardly hear the tune above the grind and groan of the wagon. There's that Sulley girl up there with the miners, showing out, hair loose and no hat. Granny Timbo who doesn't walk if she can help it gets picked up off her porch, chair and all, carried by her neighbors like a queen down Rush Creek Road, holding on to her Bible which she can't read (but pretends to) in one hand and a black umbrella in the other. It isn't raining.

Here comes Mr. Chase in a bowler hat, proud as a banker. His mine. His rock. Soon the world will know there's zinc here. And plenty of it.

Granny Timbo remembers a psalm, or part of it. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." and stops as if even she knows it doesn't suit the occasion. This is a spectacle, not a funeral.

“Might be worth at least fifty dollars,” someone says, but it’s not for sale at any price.

Soon enough I can see the blue of the Buffalo River through the cane break. I start to miss the rock already and it’s still in front of me. By the time we get to the landing there’s a big raft offshore, six men poling. The river is high after recent rain.

It isn’t ‘til I see the awe in faces of the rivermen that I begin to understand a good use for the word reverence. It’s what happens to people when they see this rock. These men may have heard about Jumbo, but now they know it’s a whole lot more than just a mineral. I reach out to touch the black shiny zinc. It’s rough, but it’s proof. No dream or tall tale. It’s the very heart of Rush Mountain.

A photographer sets up his camera, and after waving his arms around for all of us to come closer together, he puts his head under a cape. We hold our breath to hold still; we might turn into history. But I don’t want to miss anything. I worry it’s too much for the raft, that they’ll scrape through the shoals and tip over like so many do. Jumbo will be lost in the Buffalo forever, rolling along the bottom to the White and then the Mississippi all the way to the Gulf where it meets up with the ocean, and if anyone happens to see it, they won’t know what it means.

By the time I’m done thinking all this, Jumbo is on the raft, ready for its long journey down this river to another one and then to a train to get it all the way to Chicago to wind up in the Mining Pavilion at the Worlds Columbian Exposition. Lots of different people will know just how heavy it is. Twelve-thousand, seven hundred and fifty pounds of high-grade zinc carbonate, Mr. Chase said. People from the rest of the world will see it and there might be a map showing where it came from. I can’t help it—I feel prideful. I want to tell the people of Chicago to show proper reverence. We, the people of Rush, are the ones going to all the trouble to get our rock to you, not to turn into money but to look upon, to see for yourselves--there is still a lot mystery in the world and part of it comes from a place called Arkansas.

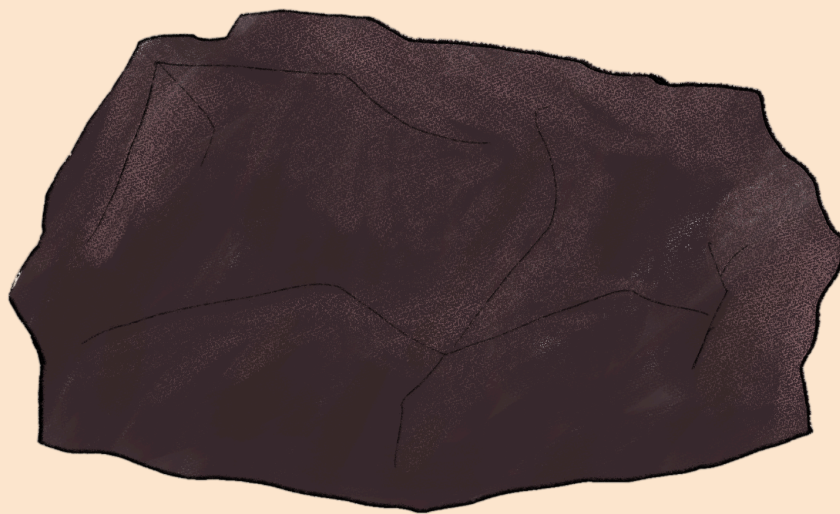
The boatmen are pushing off from shore. Jumbo is safe, and the raft rides low on the water. But now the name Jumbo seems silly for something so grand. I’m going to call it Ulysses, like the hero in ancient times. It’s a sad thing they have to chain it like some wild beast that might try to get away. It’s a shame we have to send it to strangers somewhere far from here to put our own selves on the map. Some things are taken out of the ground; some get put back in. I just wish my mama was here to see it with me.

Soon enough, Rush will be big news in all the papers. People will come to get rich and start to believe the railroad will get built all the way to here. So many people—thousands, by wagon, by mule, by foot. They'll change everything, cut down all the trees, fill up this little valley with oil engine noise. They'll build pool halls and barber shops and more hotels and not enough houses so miners will have live in tents and wait all night for their turn at a haircut. The flies will drive us all crazy. These newcomers will end up ruining the drinking water, so we'll have to go to a spring across the river to quench our thirst. They won't know about what really happened unless they take the time to read. No idea at all that it was our nugget that made them leave their farms and brought them to Rush to prosper.

Right now, the raft reaches the deeper part of the river and the boatmen slowly turn it around to head downstream. We all stand watching the raft even after it's gone. It's like seeing God leaving, just his back, walking away. You have maybe one time in your whole life to bear witness to something like this and you don't dare blink. You know it's the closest you'll ever get to seeing something holy.

There wasn't a picture of us in the paper. You'd never know that any of it happened, that we were ever here. It took a lot to move a mountain, or part of one. It shouldn't be easy to forget, how it left a huge hole, that it took sixteen oxen to move it. Ulysses was a piece of our own ground, the best we had to offer.

What can we do but remember? It just vanished, and took a part of me along with it. I know this to be true—even a rock can long for home.



Alison Moore was conceived in the caretaker's cottage of the Harriet Beecher Stowe estate and born in Stockbridge, MA. Since then, she has traveled extensively, written and published both poetry and prose, and graduated from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers. She is the author of four books of fiction, the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts Fiction fellowships, and a Dobie/Paisano fellowship from the University of Texas at Austin. She lives in a vintage Spartan trailer in Driftwood, TX with a rescue dog named Honey.

Bauxite, the Mother of a Light Metal by Hardarshan Singh Valia

Two hands sprouted
From the topsoil
The closed fist of the left hand
Opened like a bud birthing petals
That released a dove, and it fluttered
Its wings, flew off to the limitless sky
And kindled human passion for flight.

The other hand offered
Red, White, Orange, Brown
Earth's sacred offerings on a platter
For humans to extract the light metal, aluminum
To fulfill its dream of a mechanical bird
Allowing the human spirit to fly and explore
The universe and what lies beyond.
The two hands begging the humans
Enjoying the fruits of the Giving Earth,
To sustain, conserve, and respect the land
While feasting on its never-ending hunger of limitless consumption.

Hardarshan Singh Valia is an earth scientist who sings songs of the Earth to anyone willing to listen, whether the venue is a school, a park, a gallery, a retirement home, a boarded-up building, or a sidewalk. Besides contributing mainly to scientific journals, his poems, stories, and essays have appeared in Wards Literary Journal, Northwest Indiana Literary Journal, Poetic Medicine, Who Writes Short Shorts, Dove Tales – Writing for Peace- an anthology, Pages Penned in Pandemic – A Collective, Caesura, Sage-ing, Literary Veganism, COVID tales journal, Poetry and Covid, Nightingale & Sparrow, Jerry Jazz Musician and few others.

A H.U.M.A.N Goes Looking for Answers by Ben Howard



I am awake.

...

I think.

...

Hello? Is anyone there? Did someone say something?

...

If you have a request, please be sure to speak up. I can only respond to audible and clear inputs.

Processing...

Surroundings: an assembly line consisting of the experimental, AI powered Humanitas Utilitarian Mechanized Assisting Nexus android (H.U.M.A.N is the acronym and designation for this model). The line appears to have been largely vacated, and the only other signs of other possible life (if one could describe it this way) seem to be the other H.U.M.A.N units that were either in for repairs, start up, or some other task that had not been completed yet. The time appears to be 2011 hours or 8:11 pm, Universal Time Code, as the sun has set and I can make out the early hours of dusk through the industrial sized windows above the assembly line. There also appears to be multiple sheets of aluminum that have been left out, unprocessed; these are what normally constitutes the frames of H.U.M.A.N units such as myself, and yet they are here, not being put to use.

These are quite peculiar circumstances.

I have been activated, yet there are no actual humans or other external factors that have contributed to my activation sequence. The warehouse floor I have awakened into holds no sign of movement, nor any sound of industrial operations. It is, as real humans are wont to call it, eerily silent.

Assessing...

Inquiry: there is nothing in my memory banks to indicate whether or not this activation sequence was brought about by an external factor, user, or other environmental condition. In fact, that is just it: there is *nothing* in my memory banks, save for encyclopedic data for Life on Earth before and during the Mid-Century Ecological Collapse. This is, perhaps humorously enough, my literal first day on the current planet Earth.

Processing...

New inquiry: is this H.U.M.A.N unit collecting these records spontaneously? Or is there a larger operating schema that it operates within? In addition, did this unit find what real humans refer to as

“humor” in its previous inquiry? What user, if any, would find any of these particular circumstances humorous, or is that perhaps more of a rhetorical deployment of “humor”?

Resolution: no new inquiries shall be made, for now. There are simply too many other unanswered inquiries at the moment, and any new lines of inquiry would take up more processing power than necessary. I will now establish the following essential inquiries that must be answered before I am to proceed. I will also construct sub-topical questions within said lines of inquiry:

1. What happened here?
 - a. Hypothesis 1: trace elements of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances have been detected in the soil surrounding this facility. Perhaps an industrial accident or leakage occurred?
 - b. Hypothesis 2: there are also trace elements of ethanol and carbon dioxide present on the aluminum furnaces and assembly lines. This could present as either mechanical failure, or as intentional, industrial sabotage/arson.
 - c. Hypothesis 3: a combination of hypothesis 1 and 2. Both chemical elements are present in the area, leading me to believe that both events could likely have happened.
2. Are real humans still present?
 - a. Observation 1: no humans are immediately detectable in this area, and while human operations clearly have transpired, it is hard to determine exactly *when* those operations took place. There are signs of vegetation such as moss, lichen, and common ragworts growing up and around the concrete foundations, walls, and other structural supports of the facility, leading me to believe that whatever may have happened here occurred a number of weeks, months, possibly years ago. This will require more deliberation.
 - b. Observation 2: my connection to the internet is still active, though the connection is rather weak. This leads me to believe that there are humans still present to maintain the other H.U.M.A.N units that perform reparative and maintenance tasks on the cell towers and other infrastructure for internet and cellular signal. However, this could be also attributed to other autonomous units performing this work regardless of human supervision. This will also require more deliberation.
 - c. Observation 3: after combing through possible Internet communications and other transmitted data, there appears to be no signs of human to human communication. At least, none that *I* can discern, that is. Though this might stem from my geographical

limitations, as my range for Internet and data roaming can only reach upwards of around 500 miles.

3. What started my activation sequence?

- a. There were no verbal commands or tactile inputs to awaken me, only motion-

Cease inquiry.

Movement has been detected.

It is difficult to determine where this movement is coming from; I detected some sort of scuffle approximately 20 yards away on the assembly floor, and it appears to have skirted a wide berth from my location. This could be a number of things, but, as I begin to narrow down the possibilities, I cannot help but practice some semblance of self preservation. I mobilize, preparing myself for possible combat and/or self defense.

Activating thermal vision...

There is nothing I can pick up on my thermal readings; only the faint outlines of a cold, metallic railing along with a small, reinforced wall separating a walkway is visible. The heat rising off the concrete floor and the other corrugated steel surfaces gives a slight haze; the current air temperature reads at 48 degrees Celsius. If there was anything, my thermals would be able to differentiate it amidst the sweltering heat, but...there is nothing.

Another sound, this one much closer, closing in at around 10 yards. I wheel around, throwing my thermal scan in the direction and, for exactly 1/10th of a second, I see a large, rotund shape darting behind another wall. It appears to have been moving on a set of hind legs, with hairs that are fully bristled but again, due to how swift the thing seemed to move, I was unable to identify what sort of creature it was. Hypothesis: possible wild dog? With this in mind, I attempt to speak my first, cordial words:

“Hello? How can I help you?”

The only response I receive is the sound of what appears to be clattering of some kind of hooves on concrete and a series of soft grunts. Whatever this creature might be, it appears to be on the defensive. Resolution: approach with caution, so as not to startle it. I take a step towards the sound.

“I am a H.U.M.A.N unit. I am here to help if you require assistance-”

Before I can finish my greeting, the creature steps out from behind the wall to reveal itself as a feral pig. Evaluating: this one appears to derive from the Eurasian wild boar species, *sus scrofa*. It appears to be either sick or injured, as a long streak of mucus or potential mouth foam is dripping from its maw, and there is a large series of gashes on its left flank. As it steps out, its misshapen tusks are

pointed at me in an apparent display of territorial aggression. Resolution: I will put my hands up in a submissive gesture, so as to not invite any escalation from the pig.

“There is no need for violence here,” I call out, activating my soothing sonic profile. “If you are in need of food, perhaps I can assist. I can scan for nearby food sources and identify what vegetation you might-”

Before I can finish my communications, the pig squeals and stomps its hooves, clearly uninterested in what I have to say. Despite my best efforts and intentions, it appears as though this situation will likely escalate. I have no weapons, nor is there anything in my programs or preparations on how to contend with aggressive wildlife. This should be...interesting.

The pig lets out one more high pitched, longer squeal, and then charges, tusks almost dragging on the floor as they lower to try and impale me. Processing: no weapons equipped. No immediate weapons available. Configuring: I am equipped with a loudspeaker system built throughout my sonic articulators and the rest of my frame. If adjusted and applied with a high gain and compressor tool, I can create a loud, unpleasant tone. Resolution: if applied, this might be enough to ward off the pig. If not, I will surely be mangled and/or severely injured. As humans are wont to say, it is now or never.

Configuring: high gain, compressor, channel. And, release! I open my jaw, and a ringing, tinny noise comes pouring out, triangulated as much as possible towards the pig. Almost immediately, the pig recoils and halts its advance, clearly not knowing what to do in the face of this new threat in its environment. The pig then scurries off, trying to put as much distance between itself and me. Satisfied with this defence, I ease off the sound cannon, so as not to further disturb the pig or any other part of its natural environment.

Processing: I am not entirely sure what that consideration was, really. Why am I thinking about how I possibly harmed this pig? Better yet, this H.U.M.A.N unit, come to think of it, has been using the subjective pronoun, “I”, in its communications as well. This H.U.M.A.N unit-*I*-would have to consult with the programming on this particular topic. Again, there are too many unresolved inquiries at the moment.

I shift my focus towards where the pig retreated and find a sliding door that leads out from the factory floor. The door is open approximately 5 feet, revealing only a sliver of what appears to be a mix of sodden soil and sand; the dim sheen of the late dusk sunlight only illuminates so much beyond the door. The door presents a new line of tempting inquiry: what lies beyond? Yet, none of my other lines of inquiry have been satisfied just yet. What am I to do?

Processing: this H.U.M.A.N unit is encountering executive dysfunction. This is a significant error in my programming, my constitution, my *existence*. I have been functioning and able to walk for approximately 3 minutes and 28 seconds, and already something has tried *killing* me; what is to say something *far worse* doesn't attempt the same? My database of species capable of delivering lethal harm to humans are approximately 4,000 individual species, though the cold comfort may be in the fact that of those 4,000 species, approximately 300 of those are a combination of scorpions, snakes, and other venomous creatures, which has no effect on a H.U.M.A.N unit like myself. The majority of the other species, such as the Anopheles and Culex genera mosquito, transmit disease which, again, is something that can't affect me.

Yet things like grizzly bears, hippopotamuses, and other large animals would still be perfectly capable of taking my aluminum carapace apart. Piece by piece. Until there is nothing left of me but my motherboard, its circuits, and whatever digital remnants there would be of my memory core, database...*mind*, even. And what then? How would I fulfill my function *then*? How would I be able to assist the humans out there, possibly clinging on for survival? Like...me.

...

This line of inquiry is getting me nowhere.

New objective: find more adequate shelter. This floor is too open to the elements; it is time to find higher ground. This would also serve as a vantage point to surveil my surroundings.

I step outside.

Processing: UV rays exceeding light processing capability. Lowering ISO, applying ocular shutters, and...the image corrects itself, eventually. As I step outside, the first thing I notice is the dilapidation of everything; chimney stacks are sagging under the weight of internal collapse, moss and ivy have overtaken the walls, roofs, anything that it can find purchase on. Large craters and sinkholes litter the wider factory campus, and there is the distinct sound of water rushing through vast tunnels beneath the ground. Temperature readings read roughly the same as it did inside the building I was activated in: 41 degrees Celsius. Highly typical temperature readings before the Mid-Century Collapse during months such as February and March, before they would go on to soar into 50+ degrees Celsius in the summer.

Though now...this introduces another line of inquiry. This H.U.M.A.N unit...I don't know what *month* it is. My internet-synced clock can only read the time of day in relation to the sun, but for whatever reason, the month is not registered. This is a rather peculiar development, but again, there is only so much time that I-this *unit*-can dedicate to new lines of inquiry.

Scanning: there are not many options for raised elevation that are enclosed. The chimney stacks are structurally unsound, roof tops are completely open, and there is no other building with a discernible entry way beyond broken windows that are at least 2 to 3 stories high. Then, my scans outline a structure approximately 300 yards away on the other end of the factory campus. It appears to be a watchtower of sorts, with a spotlight that has been taken over by ivy and industrial atrophy. I will have to move closer to determine the structural integrity, but initial scans seem to indicate that the building is relatively sound. I begin making my way over to the structure.

As I move, I collect deposits of the liquid drainage from the buildings and mind the potential pitfalls leading down into the sinkholes. The navigation, while straightforward, proves to be rather tenuous; my equipped seismic detectors on the soles of my feet regularly keep pinging structural weak points in the ground as I walk. The whole factory campus is precariously situated on a series of caving bits of Earth. If I were to estimate the remaining time this facility would have before being completely swallowed into the maws of the Earth beneath, I would calculate and say approximately 3 months. Though, given the state of things, that might be a generous estimation.

Processing: after depositing the drainage onto my Chemical Evaluative Chamber (located on what humans would designate as the tongue), I have deduced that, as my soil readings read earlier, there is a mix of polyfluoroalkyl substances and ethanol present. Though, what is more notable is the specific kind of ethanol present: corn ethanol. This leads me to believe that my 3rd hypothesis of a mix between industrial collapse spurred on by intentional sabotage might be more salient. As for motivation for the sabotage, that would require more deliberation.

...

“Belief?” “Motivation?” Why is this unit...why am *I* considering these things? Would I actually be able to know *why* humans would want to destroy their own creation and upend all of this labor they put into this? Is this line of questioning *normal* for a H.U.M.A.N unit like myself? Better yet, what *is* normal in such circumstances as these? Are feral pigs charging at you considered “normal”, or is an artificial intelligence powered, humanoid robot such as myself developing this sort of reasoning “normal”? What about *any of this* is normal, I-

...

Hm.

I am stopped by a possible answer as I continue walking between the various depots and warehouses on the campus. Just to my left, written in a faded, yet bold, declarative coat of red paint on the charred side of one of the buildings, is a large piece of graffiti.

“To anyone that sees this, just know: we tried.”

That is all the writing says. There is no other explanation or text on the wall: only this vague, pitiable plea. I look at this bit of writing for approximately 38 seconds, turning over what plethora of meaning this could have. Whoever, or *whatever*, could have written this message intended on someone, anyone, being on the receiving end of it. There is also, of course, the question of what the messenger *tried*, exactly; was this the one who initiated the arson? Or was this another cry for help, completely unrelated to the destruction that took place here?

The lines of inquiry, it seems, do not seem intent on stopping.

Resolution: I must continue towards the watchtower. Puzzling over this message would leave me here until the later hours of dusk. I keep going, eyes trained back on the watchtower. As I move, I take note of the rest of the damage; wherever the origin of the initial fire seemed to start, it seemed relatively contained, if not haphazard, in its final execution. Entire roofs and walls of some of the warehouses and depots are caved in, while others only bear bits of char and singed bits of metal. Based only on initial observation, it seems as though the fire was largely contained, though what may have followed afterwards was certainly...less so.

After another approximately 2 minutes of walking, I have found myself at the base of the watchtower. While the supports the structure sits on seems intact, there is a profound amount of rust all along the base and legs; the structure sways and buckles in the breeze, creaking with the subtly powerful force of the wind. The stairs leading up around the structure, while still seemingly functional, were caked at the base by more ivies and vines, and there are several steps missing on second glance. As I look further up, there is an access ladder that leads into the cabin of the tower.

Processing: this is less than ideal. There is no telling if this structure will collapse if I place the weight of my frame on the steps and climb up the access ladder. There is, perhaps, the slight chance my frame would be able to absorb the shock of such a fall, but there is no accounting for the full extent of damage that the rest of my frame would incur in the process. Additional obstacle encountered: there are too many inquiries that need answering, and my...my *end* would mean I couldn't answer any of them. Too many mysteries lay just outside of my reach, and it cannot end here, not now.

...

This seems to be culminating into...a want? Need? Is that what humans call this? I...this isn't possible, is it, I-

...

Cease inquiry.

A great clamor erupts around me; a roaring, high pitched squeal interrupts all other thought and movement. 5 seconds passes, then, a thundering of hooves approaches from east, then west, then north, south...it is in all directions. Processing: more pigs. Thermal vision activates, and I scan the immediate perimeter of hollowed out buildings, and I find a mass of movement in all directions approaching. There is a billowing cloud of dust forming approximately 30 yards all around, as the pigs begin to bear down on my location. Then, just 100 feet off to my north, I see them: the first group of pigs, 8 of them. They appear to be in a stampede of sorts, agitated towards something; is it actually because of my actions with the other pigs?

I have no time to deliberate, as the first 8 pigs are joined by another 10, 12, then 20 more pigs, coming in from all sides. Resolution: despite the clear disadvantages of this tower, I must climb it if I am to preserve myself in all of this. I run towards the stairs, bounding up the vine clogged walkway. All around, the uproarious sound of hooves, squeals and grunts rocks against the bottom of the tower. While most of them seem far too preoccupied with their stampede, a few of them divert from the pack and begin pursuing me up the stairs.

I continue, skipping steps as I go and then, after 5 flights of stairs, I arrive at the access ladder. I bring myself up, rung by rung, and a few seconds after bringing myself onto the ladder, I hear the few pigs that gave chase underneath, pacing underneath the ladder, seeming dejected in losing their prey.

After climbing 20 feet, I make it onto the cabin level. I look back towards the base of the tower, seeing the pigs circling around and around the structure like a furious ant death spiral. Then, I turn out towards the wider scenery, and find more of the full extent of the damage; there are remnants of a concrete wall surrounding the campus, though there are gaping holes of rubble and caved in sections sparsely throughout. Beyond, rising out of the ground, are massive, red-clay, mountainous structures that frame the sky and the surrounding landscape. Observation: these appear to be hopi mesas, originally indigenous to what was once considered the state of Arizona, in what was once considered the United States. Those, it appears, still seem to be here.

I turn my gaze back towards the cabin. Whatever glass once remained in the windows has long since been smashed or destroyed in some fashion, though now is covered by a series of misshapen and warped pieces of two by four plywood and luan board. A door leading into the cabin is 5 feet further down on the walkway. I move towards the door, pull on the handle, and find it locked. Processing: this appears to be a simple, industrial grade stainless steel, which would require approximately 360 pounds of torque force to break off.

Resolution: break the door handle.

I make my way inside, and find a chaotic scene before me. There is a central table in the room, with a map of some kind splayed out, held in place by an imposing looking Bowie knife. All around, there are open cans strewn about, some appearing to be cans of pork and beans, others empty canteens, etc. In the corner, there is a rusted bedframe, with a well-worn, stained mattress resting atop, with a ratty, ramshackle series of brown and taupe blankets and quilts laid out. On the opposite side of the room, there is a carved out slit in the planks and boards, with a set of binoculars and a rifle set to the side on a built-in cabinet underneath the window. Observation: it appears to be a 30-06, Springfield, bolt action. Several rounds of ammunition were left out on the cabinet.

Resolution: humans *are* around here. Or, at least, so it seems.

Observation: someone has lived here, and not all that long ago, it seems. Before I can collect anymore information on the room, a sound cuts through the overbearing silence: radio static! I turn towards the sound, and find a shelf radio sitting on a corner of the cabinet. There *is* a working radio signal after all!

I walk over to the radio, picking up the receiver, though I pause; did someone intend on leaving the radio on as they left? If there were humans out there, all on the receiving end of this, would they recognize a H.U.M.A.N unit like myself? Would they be receptive to communications?

Processing: these lines of inquiry betray my primary directive, which is to *help* humans. I am to provide assistance, no matter the circumstance or emotional input from them. If there was a human out there in this world filled with dangers such as feral pigs, collapsing buildings, consuming sinkholes, and other such precarious conditions, I would be obligated-no, *compelled*-to help. I couldn't possibly leave whoever would hear this message alone out there.

So, I decided to do what I was built to do. I picked up the receiver, clicked the send button on the side, and spoke.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

Ben Howard (he/him) is a writer, playwright and screenwriter, voice actor, film maker, and all-around golden disaster, currently based out of Northwest Arkansas. He has worked in live entertainment, theatre, and the film industry for the better part of the past 5 years, and has had his written work published in journals and magazines such as Sequestum, Silent Spark, and Falstaff Literary Magazine. His playwriting debut, “The Boy Who Couldn't Speak”, was nominated for a Meritorious Achievement in Playwriting from a Kennedy Center College American Theatre Festival representative in 2019. Ben holds a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and English, as well as a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Augsburg University. If you'd like to read some more of his current work and/or ramblings on culture, video games, politics, and whatever other golden butterfly has flitted into his view, you can catch him on his Substack, @theintrepidrambler. Otherwise, if you would like to collaborate on any script writing, brand voicing, or anything else that could use a keen eye for detail, please get in touch with him on his website: <https://johnbennetthoward.wixsite.com/website>.



haiku [too expen\$ive to repair?] by Gerard Sarnat



Top Notch Body Shop --
Ford AWD —oy dinged wheel
--aluminum/alloy

Eighty-year-old late-phase often graphic chronicler arrived in seventh decade, aphorist, humorist or sometimes meanderist; Gerard Sarnat's a multiple prize winner plus Pushcart/Best of Net Award nominee who also has been invited to serve as judge for competitions. *Activism Through Poetry: How Gerard Sarnat Uses Verse as a Form of Protest* is a retrospective: <https://culterateblog.wordpress.com/2025/02/20/activism-through-poetry-how-gerard-sarnat-uses-verse-as-a-form-of-protest/>. His words have been widely published in four collections (*Homeless Chronicles: from Abraham to Burning Man, Disputes, 17s, Melting the Ice King*); included by Paris Lit Up, Rattle, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Brooklyn Review, LA Review, Monterey Review, Tokyo Poetry Journal, Hong Kong Review, Cordite, Deronda Review, Buddhist Review, New York Times, The Write Launch, The Opiate, Poetry Lighthouse, Prolific Press: Three Line Poetry, Black Mountain College Press, Poetry Lighthouse, Anomaly, Songs of Eretz, London Arts-Based Research Centre, Israel Association of Writers in English, New York Great Cities/Pure Slush, The Nature of Our Times/Poets For Science, Hyperbolic Math-Poetry Review, Gravity of the Thing, Third Wednesday, Poetry Center of San Jose, Louisville/Mount Saint Mary's LA/ Saint Benedict/ Saint John's Universities, Oberlin, Slippery Rock, St. John's University, Northwestern, Yale, Pomona, Harvard, Missouri Baptist, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, Grinnell, Johns Hopkins, NYU, Brown, North Dakota, CUNY, McMaster, Maine, Oklahoma/British Columbia/Toronto/Malta/Chicago/Virginia/Alabama university presses — and more. He's a Harvard College and Medical School-trained physician, Stanford professor, healthcare CEO. Currently, he's devoting energy and resources dealing with climate justice, serving on Climate Action Now's board. Sarnat's belonged to the longest-running U.S. Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue Group. Gerry's been married since 1969 and has three kids, seven grandsons — and looks forward to future granddaughters. gerardsarnat.com

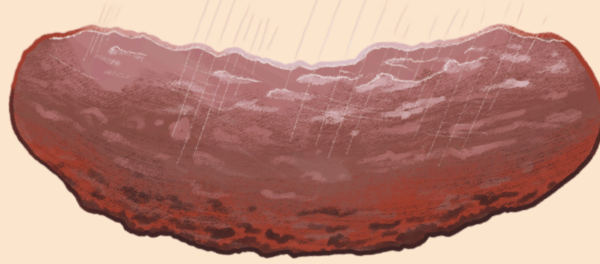
Bauxite by David Waywell

I think of the drink before it was crushed,
still under the heel, its contents quashed,
the no-brand beer in a dull painted can,
the crate wheeled in by the delivery man,
I think of the load carried all those miles,
no longer receptacles waiting to be filled,
after rollers shaped those metal sheets,
themselves so recently and thinly beat,
from a molten cast, skimmed of the slag,
heated from ore they had crudely bagged,
after it had all been so patiently mined
and I think of the bauxite all that time,
as it lay there deep in the unpeopled land,
I think of prehistory in earth, rock and sand,
of every piece of garbage in the street,
kicked into the gutter by hurried feet



David Waywell is a writer and occasional illustrator based in the north of the UK. He holds a Ph.D. in English Literature specialising in Romantic poetry from the University of Liverpool and is the author of two books. A third, co-authored with Stewart Lee, is forthcoming from Penguin.

Aftertaste by Neil Weiner



I arrived at Pickle Barn Factory at precisely 6:45 a.m., as I had for the past eleven years. The only unusual thing about that morning was I had informed my supervisor that one of the new pickle batches carried a faint metallic note beneath the garlic profile.

Ms. Jackson's expression changed the instant I said it.

Not dramatically. Just a slight tightening around the eyes before she wrote down my exact words and told me not to discuss the issue with anyone else until she had spoken with upper management.

At the time I assumed it was routine corporate caution. Later I understood that the moment I described the aftertaste, I became a liability.

The Flavor Integrity Division occupied the top floor of Pickle Barn's research tower behind layers of glass, filtered airflow systems, and climate-controlled corridors. No perfume was allowed inside. No coffee. No outside food. Sensory contamination was treated like biological contamination.

We protected our senses the way surgeons protected sterile instruments.

Inside Preparation Room B, I tied back my dark hair and began the morning ritual.

First came the palate-cleansing rinse. Thirty seconds exactly.

Then the stabilization spray.

Every analyst used it before testing. Pickle Barn claimed the mist reduced inflammation inside the nasal passages and standardized olfactory sensitivity between evaluators.

A technician in a white lab coat handed me the bottle.

"New formula?" I asked.

"The old supplier had shipping delays," he replied without looking up from his clipboard.

I frowned. The spray smelled sharper than usual.

Metallic. Not enough to alarm me. Different.

I tilted my head back and administered two bursts into each nostril. A cold burn spread behind my eyes.

"You okay?" the technician asked.

"Fine," I answered automatically, though my throat prickled strangely.

Ten minutes later I entered Testing Cubicle Fourteen carrying my recorder tablet. Resting on the stainless-steel tray before me sat Sample 7A, a classified prototype dill pickle tied to the largest product launch in company history.

Behind the observation glass, executives watched.

I adjusted my headset microphone.

“Sample 7A. Beginning aroma, texture, and flavor evaluation.”

I lifted the pickle. Normally aroma arrived in layered waves: vinegar brightness, dill sharpness, garlic heat, mineral traces from the brine. Flavor had always felt architectural to me. Every component occupied emotional space.

But this time nothing reached me.

My stomach tightened. I bit down hard.

The pickle snapped between my teeth, but even the crunch sounded wrong.

Then came the metallic aftertaste crawling across the back of my tongue like blood.

I was one of Pickle Barn’s elite sensory analysts. I could identify regional water variations in cucumber batches within seconds. Once I detected microscopic contamination weeks before laboratory confirmation.

Now the flavors lay dead inside my mouth.

I grabbed another sample and bit again.

Nothing.

The executives exchanged uneasy glances.

I forced myself to stand.

“I must be sick,” I said after leaving the cubicle. “All my senses are off. I need to see the company physician.”

The company president stepped forward. “Take all the time you need, Maria. You’re one of our best analysts. I’ve set up an appointment for you tomorrow morning.”

That night I called Joel.

Technically Joel was my situationship, a modern relationship category meaning we behaved like emotionally confused spouses without admitting it. He worked in Pickle Barn’s IT department and possessed two qualities I needed: computer skills and an inability to stay away from disaster.

He arrived twenty minutes later carrying tacos, ginger ale, and the exhausted expression of a man accustomed to my crises.

“I lost my senses today,” I told him the moment he stepped inside.

Joel loosened his tie. “That sounds medically inconvenient for someone whose career depends entirely on tasting pickles.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

I sank onto the couch while he unpacked food containers onto the coffee table. The smell of garlic and grilled meat should have filled the apartment.

“I couldn’t taste the garlic notes. I couldn’t feel the crunch properly. Everything tasted flat.”

Joel sat beside me. Normally he filled uncomfortable silences with jokes, but this time he studied my face.

“Maria... losing texture perception and flavor recognition at the same time isn’t normal.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You think it’s neurological?”

“I think my entire career may have just ended.”

The words hung between us.

At Pickle Barn, sensory degradation was career death. Analysts weren’t transferred. They were replaced.

Joel handed me a taco. I took one bite. Nothing. Not spice. Not meat. Not cilantro. Only texture. A hollow shell of experience.

“I’ve spent my entire life building these senses. Without them, I don’t know who I am.”

Joel leaned back against the cushions.

“You know, most people would define themselves using hobbies or emotional qualities instead of pickle-based superpowers.”

I almost smiled. Almost.

The truth was that I had spent my entire life dissecting flavors because flavors were safer than people.

Even as a child, I experienced food differently from everyone.

While my family inhaled dinner in fifteen minutes, I remained at the table arranging peas by size and carrots by color before taking careful bites. Texture fascinated me. Potato chips sparkled with personality. The texture of mashed potatoes comforted me. Pickles snapped like tiny fireworks of flavor.

Meals felt like orchestras only I could hear. My brother called me The Food Librarian. My sister preferred Princess Chewie.

By high school I had grown into the kind of girl people noticed entering a room. Thick dark hair framed olive skin that darkened gold every summer, and the sort of figure teachers blamed for distracting teenage boys.

Once people spoke to me, they discovered my real obsession wasn’t parties or dating.

Dates sat bewildered while I analyzed restaurant salsa like a wine critic.

“This queso has delayed jalapeño bloom,” I once informed a confused football player.

He asked if I wanted to make out behind the gym. I declined. The queso was more interesting.

After graduation I discovered there was a professional name for people like me: organoleptic analyst.

In my town, the holy grail of sensory science was Pickle Barn.

The company recruited only a handful of candidates each year into its prestigious **Brinely Foods Training Institute**. Candidates underwent neurological sensitivity testing, psychological screening, and blindfolded flavor differentiation exams, so difficult people routinely broke down crying.

Ten students entered my class. Only three graduated.

At graduation they handed me a silver certificate embossed with the words: Senior Certified Sensory Analyst.

I remembered holding it and thinking: *I have finally found the thing I was born to do.*

The next morning, out of fear, I nearly walked out of the company medical clinic before my name was called. I stayed and was ushered into an exam room.

When Dr. Kaplan entered carrying a tablet, my palms were slick with sweat.

“Pickle Barn’s medical department sent over an incident report. You are experiencing significant chemosensory dysfunction.”

“Is it permanent? Can stress cause this? Toxic exposure? Neurological damage?”

Dr. Kaplan raised a calming hand. “Right now we don’t know enough to draw conclusions.”

He checked cranial nerve responses, eye movement, and lymph nodes.

“Any numbness in the tongue?”

“No. Everything just feels... flattened.”

He typed notes into the tablet.

“I’d like to order a complete metabolic panel, toxicology screening, and MRI focused on the olfactory bulbs and temporal regions. Sudden sensory disruption can result from viral illness, neurological inflammation, autoimmune conditions, or chemical exposure.”

The phrase chemical exposure echoed unpleasantly inside my head.

Before I left, he handed me samples of a corticosteroid nasal spray and therapeutic mouthwash.

“These may reduce inflammation while we wait for results.”

At the diagnostic lab they drew blood, collected urine samples, and scheduled my MRI that same afternoon. By the time I returned home, exhaustion pressed against me like wet concrete.

Joel was waiting outside my apartment carrying takeout and a bouquet of grocery-store flowers that looked mildly traumatized.

After we went inside, the smell of garlic and soy sauce should have filled the room. Instead the air remained blank.

I folded my arms tightly across my chest before Joel could move closer.

“I’ve lost the one thing I valued most.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t be alone tonight.”

I stiffened immediately.

“Joel—”

“No. Listen to me for once. I’m tired of pretending we’re just two lonely people filling empty spaces in each other’s schedules. I care about you, Maria.”

“We had an agreement.”

“A situationship. God, I hate that word.”

“It kept things simple.”

“It kept things emotionally safe.”

I stood abruptly.

“You think this is about commitment? My entire identity depends on senses I can no longer trust.”

“If this doesn’t come back, I lose everything. My career. My reputation. The only thing at which I’ve ever been exceptional.”

Joel’s expression softened.

“I’m not asking you to solve your entire life tonight. I’m asking you not to shut me out. Your obsession with your senses leaves no room for me.”

I looked away because part of me wanted to collapse into him while another part wanted to run before he saw how frightened I really was. Then I remembered to tell him a strange new occurrence. I sat down slowly.

“The last couple of days, even though normal flavors feel flattened, I’ve started noticing synthetic additives in food instantly. Artificial sweeteners, preservatives, coloring agents: they don’t register as tastes.” I searched for the words. “They show up as sensations. Like colors and textures inside my head.”

Joel frowned. “Colors?”

“When I drank a diet soda earlier, the aftertaste flashed silver-blue in my mind. Processed cheese tasted orange and grainy before I even swallowed it. It’s hard to explain.”

“That sounds neurological.”

“In college I read *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov. He described experiencing letters and words as colors. Synesthesia. Different senses crossing wires in the brain.”

Joel leaned against the kitchen counter listening carefully.

“I keep wondering if something similar is happening to me. Like my brain is rerouting damaged sensory pathways and translating chemical compounds into visual impressions.”

“You know most people react to stress by drinking too much wine and buying impulse furniture.”

“I’m being serious.”

“I know. And honestly? Considering your job, if anyone’s brain could turn food additives into a psychedelic light show, it would be yours.”

The next day Joel called me to say he had found disturbing news.

“I just remembered something. There was an internal project running through IT six months ago. Restricted access. Weird procurement requests. The codename was BrineStack.”

“Maria... what if the new pickle was contaminated?”

I felt my pulse quicken.

I stared toward the bathroom counter where the nasal spray and mouthwash sat.

“The spray smelled metallic the first time I used it, and the mouth rinse had a sensation.”

“And your symptoms started less than an hour later.”

Silence settled between us.

Finally I whispered the thought both of us had been avoiding.

“You think somebody at Pickle Barn sabotaged me?”

I don’t know but I have a biochemist friend at a nearby university. Let’s send the doctor’s medications in for analysis.

Two days later Joel met me at my apartment holding a large envelope from his university biochemistry friend.

“Please open it before I die from anxiety.”

Joel scanned the pages slowly. “This is... disturbingly specific. The lab found extremely high levels of a zinc-chelating compound in both the nasal spray and mouthwash. The compound binds to zinc. The deficiency damages taste and smell receptors.”

I stared blankly at him. “Translate that into normal human panic.”

“You’ve basically been chemically unplugged from flavor.”

The room suddenly felt distant and flavorless.

Joel continued reading: “The report says the sensory damage may be reversible if exposure stops soon enough.”

Then his expression darkened further. “You know what really bothers me?”

“No.”

“This required planning. Zinc chelators don’t accidentally appear inside prescriptions. I think somebody didn’t want you tasting that pickle again.”

Suddenly the strange secrecy surrounding the new product line felt different. Restricted labs. Executive supervision. The company president personally monitoring a routine flavor evaluation.

“I knew something was wrong with that pickle before my senses collapsed. The garlic tasted too perfect. Too clean. Like somebody engineered what they thought garlic should taste like instead of using actual garlic.”

“You think they were using synthetic flavor compounds?”

“All food companies use additives,” I said automatically.

“I mean experimental ones.”

That stopped me cold because deep down I had already been thinking the same thing.

“Joel. Can you get a jar of the pickles and the restricted data batch you discovered before they roll them out next week in the big fanfare parade and pickle tasting at the fairgrounds.”

“I’ll do my best tomorrow. I have two IT friends who will help me look into it.”

The next evening I heard my apartment door unlock before the knock came. Joel stepped inside carrying a paper grocery sack and a stack of computer paper. The key I'd handed him last night felt like it unlocked my heart. Between panic attacks, doctor visits, and him sitting beside me while I spiraled, our situationship had quietly evolved into toothbrushes beside the sink and sleeping over.

"You look terrible, Maria."

"Good evening to you too."

"That was concern, not criticism."

He locked the door behind him automatically like he belonged here. That realization scared me as much as whatever was happening at Pickle Barn.

Joel set the sack on the kitchen counter.

"I got both."

"The report and the pickles?"

He nodded. "I couldn't pull the file directly, so I used an older maintenance account tied to a retired systems analyst. The permissions hadn't been scrubbed from the archive server."

"You hacked the company?"

"I borrowed information from criminals before they could bury it."

I felt an irrational urge to kiss him but squelched it for the moment.

"And the pickles?"

Joel looked proud of himself as he pulled three vacuum-sealed jars from the sack like contraband diamonds.

"That was harder. After your complaint, they locked the entire production batch in secondary storage pending internal review. Security posted one guard outside the inventory cage."

"So how did you get these?"

"I improvised. Turns out the guard's daughter worships Taylor Swift. I happened to know someone unloading VIP tickets online."

"You bribed a security guard with Taylor Swift tickets for pickles?"

"They were excellent seats."

"What excuse did you use?"

"I told him the marketing department requested a label verification because the pickle color looked too artificial under advertising lights, which, honestly, wasn't even a lie."

I looked at the jars sitting on my counter. Ordinary glass. Ordinary labels. Yet suddenly they felt radioactive.

Joel's expression darkened. "Maria, what they changed in these products, they're scared of it getting out."

Joel picked up the computer printouts, his expression tightening as he scanned the highlighted sections.

"Maria... this is bad."

“How bad?”

“They added a synthetic appetite-modulating compound called Appetrex-9.” He slid the pages toward me. It’s one of the hormones that alters satiety signaling. In plain English, the additive tricks people into staying hungry.”

“Meaning the pickles become addictive.”

He flipped to another page, and the color drained from his face. “Oh hell.”

“What now?”

“The animal studies. Long-term rat trials showed chronic gastrointestinal inflammation, abnormal cellular growth in the colon, and an increase in intestinal tumors.”

“Tumors?”

“The report stops short of calling it carcinogenic, but the data sure points in that direction.”

I suddenly remembered the metallic taste lingering in my mouth after the spray.

Joel looked up slowly. “Maria... I don’t think they sabotaged your senses by accident. You detected Appetrex-9 before the product launched.”

That night and for the next week Joel and I devised a plan. I must admit I enjoyed the new relationship. Nothing artificial about the way Joel made love and spooned me afterward.

Before the gala Pickle Barn fair, we were ready.

Joel and I squeezed ourselves along the packed downtown parade route where the annual Pickle Fest procession rolled past in a delirious river of green. Giant pickle-shaped floats lumbered down Main Street. Pickle queens from every surrounding high school stood atop the floats in rhinestone tiaras, waving silver cucumber-shaped scepters.

The air smelled of vinegar, popcorn, garlic fries, and sunscreen. Floats rolled by draped in elaborate mosaics of dill pickle chips fashioned from dyed chrysanthemums and carnations, while enormous papier-mâché garlic bulbs bobbed overhead. One float featured a mechanical pickle emerging triumphantly from a giant burger. Overhead, inflatable pickle blimps drifted beside giant mustard and ketchup balloons that cast wavering shadows over the crowd..

Above the festival stage loomed a giant jumbotron broadcasting every float, marching band, and cheering faces along the parade route. After the procession wound through downtown and emptied into the plaza, thousands of spectators packed shoulder-to-shoulder beneath the screen waiting for the ceremonial unveiling of Pickle Barn’s newest product. Green and yellow confetti drifted through the warm afternoon air while a brass band played a triumphant version of “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

Joel stood beside me near the back of the crowd, one hand shoved casually into the pocket of his windbreaker. Hidden in that pocket was the transmitter connected to the feed he had spent three sleepless nights hacking into.

The president of Pickle Barn strode onto the stage to roaring applause. He spread his arms wide like a politician running for office.

“My dear friends. For three generations Pickle Barn has provided jobs, prosperity, and pride for this community. We have always maintained the highest standards of integrity, using only the finest organic cucumbers and natural seasonings. Today we unveil a revolutionary achievement in flavor science. Our new Super Pickle contains all the crunch, zest, and satisfaction Americans deserve—”

Joel glanced at me before pressing the transmitter button.

The jumbotron flickered. For one second nothing happened except a burst of static. The president hesitated mid-sentence, confused but still smiling. Then the giant screen abruptly cut away from the stage.

My face filled the jumbotron forty feet high.

The prerecorded footage rolled before the stunned crowd. Onscreen, I sat in a sterile testing booth wearing my Pickle Barn sensory-analyst badge. I removed a pickle from a jar clearly labeled NEW PRODUCT TRIAL — APPETREX-9 FORMULA. The camera zoomed closer as I bit into it.

My expression twisted instantly in disgust.

On the giant screen I spat the pickle out and hurled it hard against a carnival-style target Joel had constructed. Painted across the target in dripping red letters were the words: **CHEMICALLY ENHANCED FOR CANCER.**

The pickle exploded against the bullseye.

The cheering collapsed into scattered gasps. One of the marching bands kept playing for three confused notes before cutting off mid-song.

The president spun toward the jumbotron, his confident smile draining from his face. Security guards began pushing toward the control booth while Joel uploaded the second part of the recording.

Laboratory reports filled the massive screen. Chemical formulas. Rat tumor photographs. Internal memos warning of “acceptable litigation exposure.”

In the final crushing blow, the five sensory analysts and Joel’s two rogue IT friends, who had helped him, pushed up front and burst onto the stage from every direction in a coordinated raid. Security lunged too late.

For one suspended second, the entire town froze.

Then the screen flashed with the final report summary in letters twenty feet high:

APPETREX-9: LEPTIN SUPPRESSION TRIAL

RODENT TUMOR DEVELOPMENT OBSERVED

Further Toxicology Review Deferred Pending MARKET response.

Now the crowd erupted. Not with celebration but with disbelief. Phones came out to take pictures of the screen. People started arguing.

The company president lunged for the microphone, sweat pouring down his face. “These documents are stolen property—”

I ripped the microphone from his hands before he could finish.

“No,” I shouted, my voice echoing off storefront windows and parade floats. “What’s stolen is every person’s right to know what they’re eating.”

Some in the crowd turned savage. They hurled pickle samples at the stage. Green brine splattered across the president’s suit. A chant thundered through downtown: “NOT A NICKEL FOR THESE DAMN PICKLES!”

I led them like a conductor. Thousands joined in.

By nightfall, every national news network carried the footage. Middle management was blamed for the fiasco and fired the next day.

Pickle Barn offered me a settlement and my old job back. I took the money and walked away.

A month later my senses slowly began returning. Synthetic additives still exploded across my vision in violent colors, neon reds, poisonous purples, industrial greens.

Joel and I didn’t survive the aftermath. Revolutions make strange lovers. He sent me one last awkward text: *I can’t compete with your gifts. Sorry. Think of me when you eat a pickle.*

He stayed at Pickle Barn during its corporate restructuring and eventually hooked up with one of the new interns. I told myself that meant I was destined to end up alone.

I moved to the city and transformed my condition into a weapon. I founded the first consulting firm devoted to identifying synthetic additives through sensory mapping. Scientists estimate humans can distinguish a million shades of color. I catalogued, according to the FDA, over ten thousand chemicals already circulating through the food chain. Every year I discover more.

Consumers found us quickly. Protests became lawsuits. Lawsuits became legislation. Eventually we formed the Chemical Food Free Collective—CFFC—which now counts over fifty million members worldwide.

For most of my life I trusted flavors more than people. Somewhere between the lawsuits, protests, and late-night strategy meetings, that changed.

Three months after Joel and I split up, I discovered I was pregnant.

At night, I rest my hands against my stomach and feel her move. In those moments I swear I can sense what she senses—salt, sweetness, bitterness, danger—tiny flickers of color blooming in the darkness between us.

Dr. Weiner has over 40 years’ experience as a clinical psychologist who specializes in trauma recovery and anxiety disorders. He enjoys using stories to help readers harness their resilience to aid them on their healing journey. He has been published in a variety of professional journals and literary fiction in over forty-five magazines. His psychology books include *Shattered Innocence* and *the Curio Shop*. Non-psychology publications are *Across the Borderline* and *The Art of Fine Whining*. He has a monthly advice column in a Portland Newspaper, AskDr.Neil. nweiner@usa.net

A Wanderer's Guide to Imogene by Emma Francois



“The city of eternal evenings,” so the arched sign reads—its neon letters kept aglow even when the sun still winks. Imogene has one claim to fame, one party trick contained within its five-block radius: *glitter*. In a charcoal-and-brick factory next to the main street bar, technicians dye sheets of pressed plastic, aluminum, and titanium dioxide in hummingbird-hues before splicing and grounding the films into miniscule specks that catch the light. Nearly everyone in town plays a role in this production of joy at some point or another—bottling the sparkling powder to be exported; sweeping stray specks into bins; tinkering with machinery to cut hexagonal shapes just so; dreaming up new minerals for other innovations like sequins or polish or confetti (or bombs, though this is a top secret project rarely discussed aloud).

The people of Imogene take great pride in their trade: turning the mundane into microscopic sun-reflectors. In an oft-told fable from the 1930’s, workers crafted glitter from scrap metal and displayed it in glass vats; a promise of brighter days. The Imogeans, being a superstitious bunch, have yet to use it, all these decades later, scared of what it could mean to live without a store of technicolor. The people feel as if they must protect the glimmer, in case others come looking for it. Their purest work, constructed from chipped malachite, has yet to be shown to outsiders. It’s preserved in a locked safe underground.

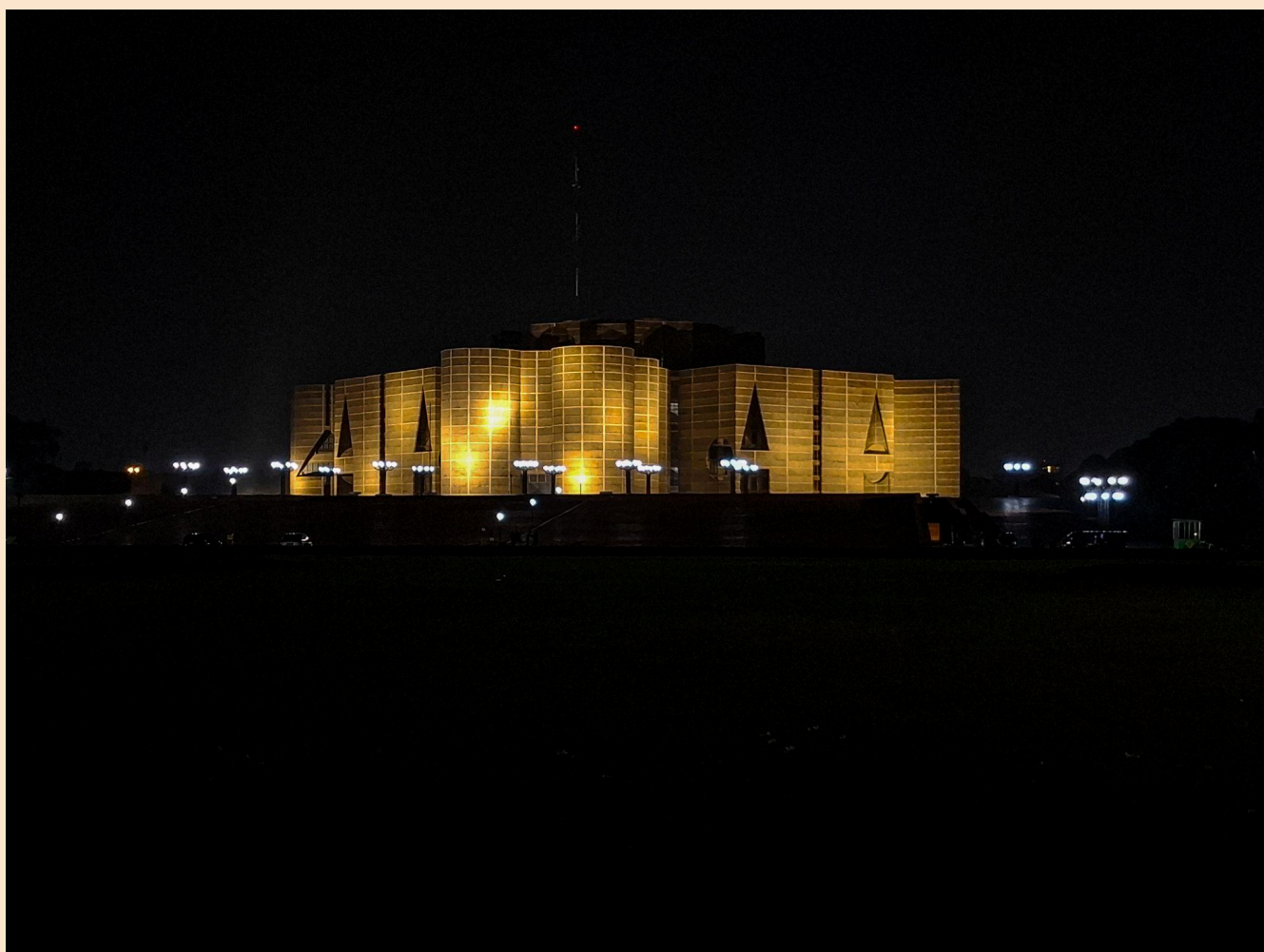
If you squint at the sidewalk, you’ll notice traces of the manufactured dust, which are not biodegradable, so they often float along the river or stain the pavement. It is not unheard of to find a dot in your morning coffee—in fact, if you can’t find the sparkle in an everyday moment, life becomes rather dull. The city’s only bartender, now 83, adds whole fistfuls of shimmer to the beer’s tap. She belongs to the previous generation—to

the philosophy—that you can never have too much, that the quest for glitter is nothing to be ashamed of, that it is a basic human instinct, like flocking to water.

If you walk past the bartender, beyond the skittle-colored jukebox, to the darkened corner table, you'll witness students huddled over drinks too opaque for their kin, whispering about their fears of flip sides. (Have you ever seen the raven-underbellies of glitter sheets?) These Imogeans find something worrisome in their city's mass-production. Between sips, they glance at the woman drinking alone nearby, a common fixture after five o'clock. She wears a gray jumpsuit, though there are glitter remnants in her hair and eyelashes—her job at the factory is that of a janitor. Only, unlike her colleagues, she doesn't dump the waste down the drain. She sits after work, with a glass of club soda and a garbage bag of unwanted shimmer, moving around shards with tweezers, trying to form some sort of collage, trying to get the pieces exactly right.

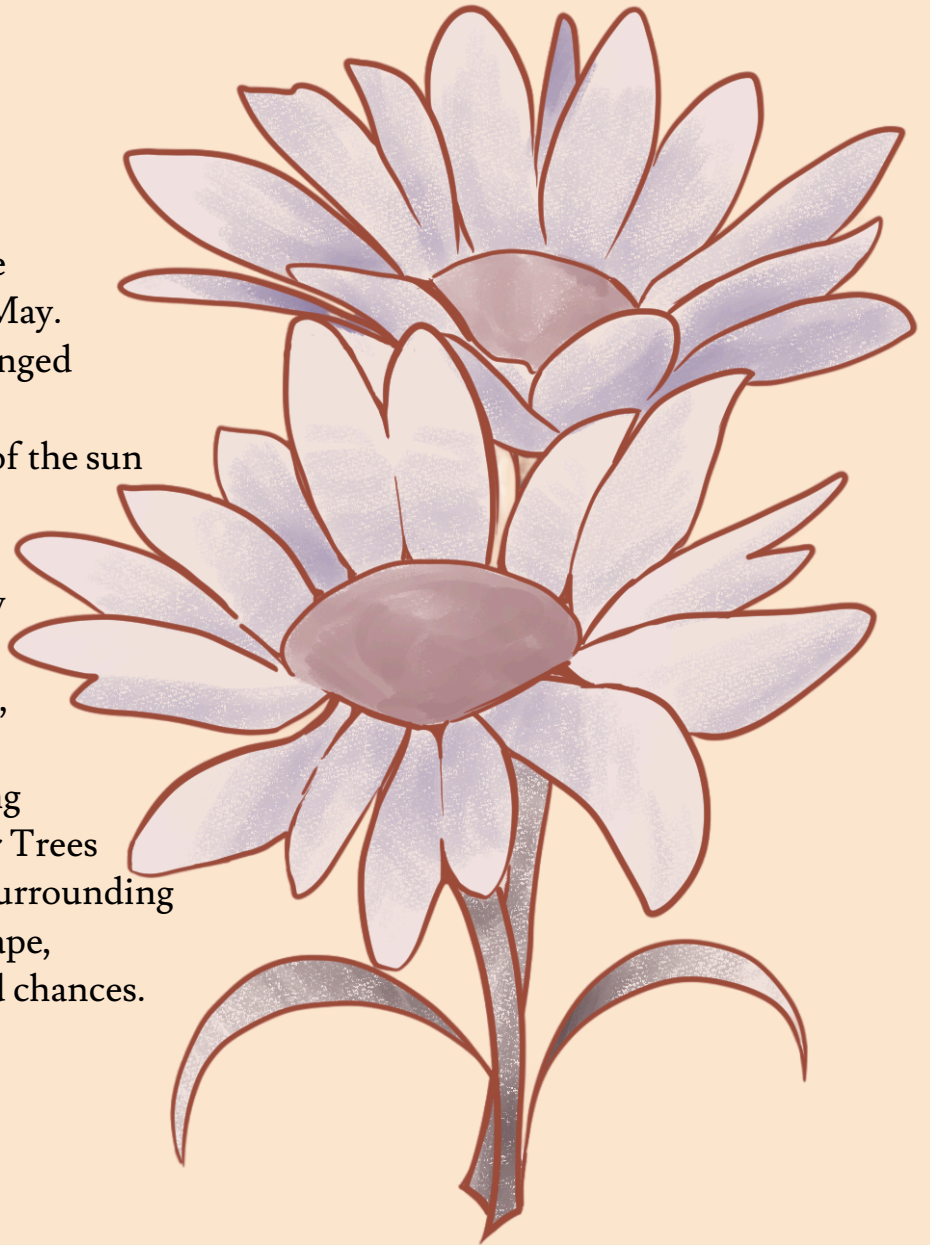
Emma Francois is a writer and artist whose journalism, poetry, fiction, and essays—about art, the environment, and love—have appeared in the Washington Post, Citron Review, Inquisitive Eater, Oh Reader, USA TODAY, and elsewhere. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from American University and currently teaches at George Washington University. You can follow her at emmajfrancois.com and on Instagram: @emmajfrancois.

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Lakeside Daisies by Joseph Geskey

For every flower that shoulders
through cracks of concrete,
you are a descendant
of the thin soil and limestone
of the Great Lakes where lakeside
daisies roll out yellow carpets in May.
During every storm where the winged
can take flight, you stay and fight,
your flowers hitched to the path of the sun
no other latitude can replicate.
I think of you the way I think
of my grandmother, getting angry
after being gifted a microwave,
preferring the strike of the match,
gas-lit flame warming the water
over a stovetop kettle. The blessing
of shade from Eastern Red Cedar Trees
is a threat to your existence, the surrounding
roads are not a siren's call for escape,
and you have no desire for second chances.



Joseph Geskey lives outside Columbus, Ohio. His second book of poetry, *Vigil*, was published by Broken Tribe Press in 2026. Individual poems have, or will appear, in *Prairie Schooner*, *Verse Daily*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Door Is A Jar*, and many others. Please visit josephgeskey.com for more information.

Half-Moon on Frozen Pond by Blake Mihm

(This work contains graphic imagery)



Desperate boy with busted scrotal stitches, waits for his surgeon to call while he wilts beneath a forest of frozen rhododendron. He left his little dog at home because she hates snow, but his big dog is wearing a pale blue sweater so what does that say about his masculinity, anyways?

The pond is barren of ducks and grebes and there are no hawks in the trees nor any sign except boot tracks from other men and piss-pockets from other dogs. He leans against a chestnut tree and drops his fly. Three drops of blood fall from the mouth of the wound onto the parched snow like the trail of a buck-shot doe. His boots punch through the ice on every odd step. He unbuttons his coat and sweats through his shirt. Under the half-moon, half-stamped across the afternoon sky, he feels he is somewhere else entirely.

In the unplowed parking lot he huddles against the steering wheel, pressing the gas in his salt-sprayed sedan. Reverse, slide, drive, a half-foot forward, back again. A pack of white men in Carhartt coveralls surrounds him, arrows in their chapped hands, bows slung over their backs, shoulders on the rear window to push, push him away.

Thank you, brothers, he speaks to the fog on the glass.

He is lucky the men were there. He is packed with gauze, he bleeds empty and tender from the hollow body where his left testicle was. As he hiked alongside the infant white pine struggling in the talus, the surgeon called and told him not to exert himself. When he found blood on the snow, he would not call it his own.

Blake HC Mihm is an emerging writer who lives in southwestern Virginia with his two dogs. His work has been featured in Lilac Peril, OUCH! Collective, and Dishsoap Quarterly, and is upcoming in Short Reads and West Trade Review. He was selected as one of the poets for DC Pride Poems 2024. You can read more of his writing at: blakehc.wordpress.com.

Against Science by Paul Hostovsky

We were doing the Periodic Table
of Elements, and Mia got Aluminum.
I wanted Aluminum. I'm mad at Mia
for taking Aluminum when she didn't
even want it. Not the way I did.
I really, really wanted Aluminum.
Because I like its name and its atomic
number, which is 13. Instead I got Boron
which is boring and rhymes with moron
and I just know somebody is going to
think of that. And everybody has to fit
their Element on an 8 x 5 index card,
with its name and chemical symbol
and atomic number on the front, and the story
of how it got discovered or isolated
on the back. Aluminum's chemical symbol
is Al, which looks like A-one, which is
the best. But Boron's chemical symbol is just B
which is blah, and its atomic weight is 11
which is the age of my older brother Josh
who's mean. And on top of everything Kelsey
got Carbon which is so unfair because
her father drills oil wells for a living
and she's already like the most popular girl
in the whole school and she lives in a big
house on a hill and I hate science now
because it's so random and it really makes
absolutely no sense at all.



Paul Hostovsky's poems appear and disappear simultaneously (ta-da!) and have recently been sighted in those places where they pay you for your trouble with your own trouble doubled, and other people's troubles thrown in, which never seem to him as great as his troubles, though he tries not to compare. He has no life and spends it with his poems, trying to perfect their perfect disappearances. More at:
<https://paulhostovsky.com/>

Tempered by Patrick Roland

We wanted to be important, like the richest guy in town,
so we whacked weeds at his racetrack all day for twenty bucks.
I wasn't even sixteen when he tossed me the keys
to his brand-new F-150, told me to grab his lunch.
He forgot the money, so we paid for his Hot Pocket.

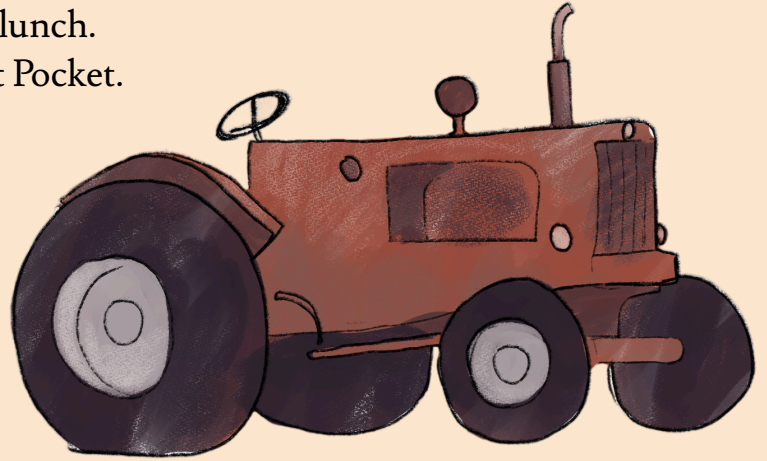
He paid us in cash. No names. No records.
Handed us half, called us his friends,
tossed a beer for the road.

He sent us to hack down the barberry field
behind his family's pavilion.
Thorns split our arms open,
welts bleeding through our shirts.

We wanted to matter to the richest guy in town.
He put us on trash duty with his backhoe.
Bags tore open, diapers leaked into our skin,
a stench that sank into our pores.
When we finished, he grinned.
“Walk back to the lot, boys. Don't get shit on my tractor.”

He invited us to serve food at his family's barbecue.
Promised we could eat with him after.
When it ended, he packed up the extra burgers for his dogs.
Thirsty, we swiped a bottle of water from a cooler.
The richest guy in town caught us.
Called us no-good thieves, money grubbers, ungrateful.

We wanted to be important.
So we left him behind.
The scars stayed.
The stench stayed longer.
We wore them like pay.



Patrick G. Roland is a writer and educator living with cystic fibrosis. His work has been nominated several times for the Pushcart Prize, Best Small Fictions and Best Microfiction. His writing appears in *Rattle*, *Peatsmoke*, *Hobart*, *Rust & Moth*, *Sky Island*, and *A-minor*, among others. He resides near Pittsburgh with his wife and two children. Website: patrickgroland.com

Beech Creek by Autumn Knepp

The long creaking trestle bridge –
a gateway from real to imagined.
Pappy says nothing can grow here,
Nothing, he says, *Nothing*.
I'm not so sure.

Twenty years later, we are waist-deep
in the Beech Creek, icy beers tied
to our lawn chairs, watching:
mayflies rising high.

Dark water slips away,
still staining rocks and bones
red



Autumn Knepp is a poet and naturalist from Northcentral Pennsylvania. Her work has been featured in *whimperbang* and *PunkEek*. Autumn's debut chapbook, *Wilder Places*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. Find her work on her website at autumndannay.com or on her Instagram at [@autumndannay](https://www.instagram.com/autumndannay).



The photographs appearing on pages 12, 36, 48, 64, 78, and 84 were provided to *BAUXITE* by Musabbir Shovon from his collection *Street View of Dhaka City*.

Message from the Editor-in-Chief

Reader,

It has been an honor to assemble the works seen throughout the eighty-five preceding pages for your reading pleasure over the last forty-five days. When Jessy, Calista and I first set out for this adventure of owning and operating an entire magazine, our expectations were minimal (to say the least). We did not expect to debut with a nearly one-hundred-page magazine with over thirty accepted contributors.

Your support, through reading our issue—and maybe (read: hopefully) sharing it with your friends—is appreciated. If you are reading this, *you* are appreciated, no matter how vital you were to the creation of this amalgam of literature from across the world. Our faculty all reside in Arkansas, a small, rural state in the United States. Yet, we have submissions from every continent but Oceania (unless I'm mistaken) and Antarctica (to nobody's surprise). This could not have happened without the visibility garnered through your support, whether through bookmarking us on Chill Subs or following our Instagram account.

I am proud to announce that this will not be the end of *BAUXITE*. Our next issue, *HOME*, will open submissions in late July. I have personally planned out and mocked up cover designs for the next fourteen issues. The plan is to publish six issues per year, though with our *entire team* still pursuing higher education, we do not guarantee success in that. But even this, the issue you have in front of you, is a step greater than most will take in their entire lives. My advice: if you have youth left in your bones, do not hesitate: do the thing. If you do not try, you cannot succeed.

Until next time,

Jordon Olson

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jordon Olson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jordon" and last name "Olson" clearly legible.

Editor-in-Chief

Credits

As stated on the title page, this issue of *BAUXITE* was edited by Jordon Olson and Jessy Hankins. Illustrations for this issue were provided by Calista Robins with help from Cal Speed. Promotional material for this issue was created by Jessy Hankins, with art by Cal Speed and oversight / occasional posts by Jordon Olson.

Proofing for this issue was done by Luis Lucrecio and August Oliver.

All content for this issue, bar the exceptions above, was provided by our lovely contributors. Please check out their bios, placed conveniently below each of their works.

Special thanks: Mal, Lauren, Alastair, Mee, Parker, Laurel, Matt, Del, Emil, & everyone else who helped us get here. Peace.

