

MOLLUSK
LIT - issue 2 -





Issue 2
"Inbound"

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Editors' Note

Sascha Chernesky and Rida Zulfikar

Art is a journey. A lot of the times, it is a journey of the self — a method of self-expression, but also a way for us as writers and artists to discover our voices and own personal values. For Issue II of our publication, we wanted to focus on the complexities of the human experience as captured by all the extremes — from the most beautifully mundane stories to the most utterly visceral poems we read. Through all of these stories and personal journeys, we found the power of the artistic journey. For instance, take the cover art for the issue. We loved that Fiona's work encapsulates the element of magic that we believe is so important to our art form. We believe that the artistic journey can help us learn things we didn't even know about ourselves. Thus, we came up with the title of the issue: "Inbound".

For this issue, we've started including Author and Artist Statements with each work. Art is an incredibly personal discovery shared between an artist or writer and their work. We hope that including this part of the journey will help us better connect with each work.

Before we pass it along to our amazing contributors, we wanted to recognize how honored we are to have built this community. Mollusk Lit started as a mere supposition, and in these few months, we have received many, many more submissions, contributions, and suggestions than we could have ever anticipated. We are so lucky to be embraced by the literary community in this way.

Okay, that's enough from us! Thank you to everyone who made our second issue possible — everyone who submitted, everyone who liked one of our posts, Duotrope for providing a platform for us, and lest we forget: our new and amazing executive editor, Kamaria! Lastly, thank YOU, the reader! We hope you will laugh, and cry, and everything in between.

Always,
Founding Editors-in-Chief, Sascha Chernesky & Rida Zulfikar

When the Sky Meets the Sea

Fiona Ang

What made me inspired to make this artwork is a notebook cover I saw at a store, but instead of sky and sea, it featured clouds and moon. I've always loved drawing nature, I also love the colour blue, which is why I used the sea and the sky for the element of this composition. This piece shows a girl from the sky meeting a fish from the sea. The circle in the middle is a portal-like from the sky connected to the deep sea. This art is about how different things can emerge together to create something beautiful. This illustration was made digitally with the canvas 1378×2039 pixels. My primary tools were a soft dip pen and fading pen, and it took me 14 hours to complete this composition.



Inbound

Mollusk Lit | Issue II



Cricket Rhapsody

Anshi Purohit

Editors' Choice

Crickets. Tonight, all I hear is the fierce cacophony of crickets.

They will not halt their incessant chirping, broadcasting unspoken dilemmas for the world to bellow from rooftops in a raspy call-and-response sequence.

Tonight, I saw a car lit aflame as the traffic crawled, succumbing to the eternal static eating away at our dulled minds. We will not succumb, we whispered to ourselves as the car slogged along to radio music.

Tonight, I sat next to a girl I was not supposed to love in a car ride home from orchestra.

Crickets; they haunt me, staining my thoughts with the hollowness accompanied by their throaty rasps beneath a rising ochre moon.

Tomorrow, cicadas will swarm the roads and send cars sprawling over ravines—the natural world order from the Earth's first jettison—but in the wake of a full moon and after the crescendos of evensong tide over, we are left with chirping. Cicadas will follow me into school, waving a spidery limb as I flash an idea while staring at the boy in front of me. How does human chemistry input its seemingly flawless equations to produce an unfamiliar whole gathered in trembling hands that did not wish to cradle a born failure?

Are we more like crickets or lost birds?

On nights like these with her beside me—strapped to our own isles of unbecoming and becoming—an endless cycle overwhelms me. I descend into the hollowness we are birthed from, an abyss where the crickets feast on starved souls.

I would rather sell my soul than have it broken and discarded as it withers in a landfill of broken human things. Even there, I would not escape the crickets' ephemeral callings and rough-sewn tethers. I am not supposed to do many things; even existing is a complex dilemma nobody is willing to help me navigate. The

world is hard enough on sentient beings as it is; we do not need any more rules presiding over self-governing bodies.

I am an unspoken mess with no destination or journey except the concentric circles defining her personality, the overlapping contradictions paralleling my own. She is too religious, too rule-abiding and narrow-minded for me. Yet, when she surprises me I am stunned and she continues without stopping, shocking me with each treasure I unearth.

She knows more than I can fathom. And yet, she rests her head on my shoulder or pokes my dimple in a rapid, almost frantic, gesture. We watch the sun's orange tears spill from behind dust-smote windows and glazed, sagging eyelids oozing with pus. I have picked up on things during my tenure living a life as a doppelganger, as an inhibitor of crickets, this invasive parasite of my dreams and ambitions threatening to send me to remote isolation.

One of these things withstands the tests of time and trust: the crickets never lie, and I am irrevocably in love with her again.

Anshi Purohit (she/her) is a writer living in Maryland. She has been published in twelve literary magazines such as the Eunoia Review and Mobius Lit. She has also been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Aside from writing and reading, she loves listening to music and eating dark chocolate. You can follow her on Instagram @an.sheep_

Jetty Mirage

Ethan Riddle

Artist Statement

The intention of this artwork is to illustrate the feeling of serenity experienced by one's presence within nature. The fading of life from existence to various remnants of the past reminds us that nature should be cherished for its temporality and be preserved otherwise from external harm.

Hi, my name is Ethan Riddle (he/him/his). I am an artist living in Easton PA at Lafayette College. My art has been published in Carpazine's 29th issue, Wrongdoing Magazine's third issue, The Lehigh Literary Magazine's second issue, and Skyie Magazine's fourth and eighth issues, and has been displayed in The Dunning Art Gallery and The Yetter Family Gallery. Above all else, I love surrealism and visual trickery. In my free time, I enjoy running and reading books that interest me. You can follow me on Instagram @ethanriddle88.



Don't Look Back

Elise LeSage

At the gas pump, the selkie digs in her glovebox for change. She finds two punts and twenty-one cents. Still short, she pleads her case to the cashier.

“Aye, love, I’m sure you can make it up to me next time—one way or another.” He laughs, and it is the sound of thunder, of rusted rudders, of masts snapping in the wind.

Driving home, the selkie sees that her eyes in the rearview mirror are pinkish and wet.

“I do not miss being a seal,” she says.

Her husband is at work all day, fishing. The baby, Rowan, cries and cries, a daddy’s girl. The selkie sings lullabies. She dangles puppets and hand-purees yams. Doesn’t matter; Rowan cries anyway until the husband comes home. Too tired to play, he collapses on the sofa and pats Rowan’s head. She curls beside him, blissful, quiet.

The selkie regards them as she cleans up dinner. “How sweet,” she says.

The selkie does not miss being a seal.

The next day, the selkie and Rowan watch some other selkie mothers let their babes loose in the sea.

“In a few years, that’ll be you,” she says, pointing to a little girl who’s begun to grow flippers.

“Be safe!” a mother calls from the shoreline. “Come back when you’re good and ready to be wed.”

The little girls twirl in the water, eyes rounding, legs fusing, laughs sharpening to yips. They swim out, further and further, until their bodies are only small, grey dots on the horizon.

The selkie and Rowan linger to watch, even after the other mothers have left.
The selkie does not miss being a seal.

Years pass. The fish have been elusive for several seasons, so the selkie takes a job at the shopping mall's perfume counter. For eight hours a day, she stands behind a small, tulle-draped desk, spritzing fragrances that make her eyes water.

"This will keep you warm in the winter," she tells one woman, dabbing her wrist with a sugar-and-bourbon scent.

To another woman, she recommends a flowery fragrance whose bottle is shaped like a star. "This one," she says, "will make him fall in love."

The selkie's manager tells her she's being too whimsical. "Stick to the sales scripts," he advises. "You can't make those other promises, like, legally."

The selkie nods. She does not miss being a seal.

Then, one day—and sooner than the selkie expected—Rowan begins complaining of cramps and aches. She's been having strange dreams, she says.

"It's time," the selkie tells her husband.

He nods, tearful as he musses Rowan's hair.

As per tradition, the selkie is the one to walk her daughter to the sea. The waves are green and startling, too rough to sail—and yet Rowan sprints in without fear, her laughter like a bell.

From the shore, the selkie waves. Come back soon, she is supposed to call. Come back beautiful, ready to shrug off your skin.

Instead, the selkie wades into the water and kneels down beside her daughter until her dress is ruined, drenched. "Don't look back, my darling," she says, kissing Rowan's salty cheek. "Just swim, swim, swim."

Elise LeSage is a writer and graduate student based in Greensboro, North Carolina. Her stories have appeared in UCLA's Westwind, Portland's Buckman Journal, the Pseudopod Podcast, and elsewhere. You can follow them on Instagram @lofiliterary or on Twitter @e_sages.

Cordial

Ola Yacoub

Selenophile

He who seeks the light; never asks. He who seeks belief; never frets. His phases appear, with every day's aura.

The new moon. He appears; new. crisp. Happy features; imposturous personality. Stoned emotions. Euphoric scent. Ah; I remember it quite clearly. He sees her. Her looks; different from others. He feels wild. The buzz in his ears floods with hysteria.

The waxing crescent arrives. He feels excitement and joy. Nostalgic moments walking up the stairs into his brain of admirable memories he cannot quite forget. He feels complete; not really. He misses her touch. Her voice. Smile. The steady breathing on his chest when she falls asleep. He misses it.

The first quarter. He smiles. At her only. Her only presence. His smutty mind deafens his senses until he falls into a quick limbo then wakes up from it to realize he'd been staring for so long. He feels complete, kind of. He loves her hair. How she tucks it back when distracted. How she squints her eyes when she's concentrating. He loves it.

The waxing gibbous slowly peels open. He's excited. He's wild; so, into the action. Her voice undresses every emotion he has left. She feels different. A good different. Maybe he met the one. Maybe. He feels complete; almost. He adores her talents. The beautifully poetic words escaping her vocal cords. Her angelic voice. He adores it.

The full moon unleashes. He wants her. All of her. There isn't a second that passes that he doesn't think about her. Even accidentally. As if he's almost being watched by her every second. He has to act perfectly. A careful kind of perfect. He feels complete; he loves her. All of her. He wants to spend all his time with her.

The waning gibbous. Breaks. Sudden; oh, so sudden. It's sad. He loves her; he swears on it. But not as much. He misses her touch; he does. But not as he did. He adores her talents; he does, I promise you. But something isn't quite right with him.

The third quarter. Melancholy awake. Thinking of her. Not as he used to. All that worries his precious mind is her flaws. Why does she have to act like that? Why doesn't she do what I ask? I only ask for enough. I want to feel enough in her eyes. It's sad.

The waning crescent forcefully cracks. He feels numb. Hatred; not hate. He feels confused, scared. Upset; not sad. Disappointed but not surprised. He missed her. He adored her. He cannot keep his mind off of the thought that she left. Fast; very fast. He loved her.

The new moon appears once again. New; again. crisp. Happy features; imposturous personality. Numb emotions. No scent. Oh, I don't quite remember this. He sees her. Her looks; same as the last. He feels nothing. The buzz in his ears fill with traumatic nostalgia. He walks away.

Lost Chapters

Finding a letter, you never thought you'd find. Your heart squeezes with nostalgia; eyes betray each other as they crack with tears. Feeling every detail of your memory.

Scent of happy days; confused lips. Frowning your eyebrows. Your brain suddenly locks eyes with the lost memory. You feel yourself lift up from your seat.

As you live it again. The sky; sunnier than ever, cold wind. You look younger. Still fresh with love. April smiles at you holding a gift. Take it carefully, please.

April 12th

Ola Yacoub is a sixteen-year-old girl that has always been passionate about writing. She is currently in her senior year in high school. Ola has been writing short stories since she was seven until she discovered her love for poetry. She thinks it's a fascinating way to describe how you feel by "coating your words with a little sugar" and forming it in a way where everyone would relate to it somehow.

An Earnest Cross

Tanner Burke

Mom forgot to brush her teeth before we left for her father's funeral. Technically, yes, he is my grandfather, but we don't call him that. He's lucky we even referred to him as Mom's Dad, but she insisted. Though, to herself, I've no idea what she would've called him. Probably something awful and crass. I think she might've forgotten to brush her teeth on purpose, just to make sure her father's funeral had as little dignity as possible.

"Carrol, do you have any gum?" Mom asked her newest new boyfriend.

Carrol was a man with a woman's name who acted like a man with a woman's name. I think that's why Mom picked him.

"You could check the glovebox, maybe," Carrol muttered, eyes hyper-focused on the road.

My sister, whose name is Shelby, started digging in her purse next to me, rattling all the Jesus bracelets and bands she wore on the hand she smoked with. She had nicotine gun in there for sure, and I wanted to tell her to offer some of that to Mom. Not really a time for joking, though. I sat between her and my brother Mike, who was scrolling through some alt-right conspiracy theory account on Twitter and complaining about a headache, in the backseat. Shelby moved enough to bug both of us boys, digging around in her purse until she was up to her elbow and she called out.

"I've got some, Mom," she said and offered a silver stick up to Mom's seat. "What kind is it?" Mom asked.

"I don't remember. Mint something. It'll smell like you brushed."

"Is it spearmint?"

"It might be." And she paused for a second to let Mom think. "Is that the one you don't like?"

Mom, who thought too long about which lace overlapped which when she tied her shoes and thought too little about whether or not her next job would have dental insurance, scratched her head. Then, she grunted and reached a hand back. “It’s fine. Thanks.”

“You don’t have to take it if you don’t want it,” Carrol chimed in, hand over the console and onto her thigh.

“Yes I do.”

And she unwrapped it, put it in her mouth and chewed.

Mom was always careful about chewing with her mouth open, about looking people in the eye when they spoke and only giving moderate enthusiasm to anything so as to not look like a “cretin”, as she said. That was inherited, we knew that, not something that came natural. But she wouldn’t ever shake it. So, she chewed with her eyes on the window, at the landscape of rotting telephone poles and low-hanging wires. We didn’t hardly hear her groan through how much she hated the taste of spearmint.

Carrol did, though. He patted Mom’s thigh, then rubbed it up and down and smiled that therapy kind of smile and said, “Are you doing okay?”

“I’m alright, yeah. I just don’t like the taste.”

“Sorry, Mom. I don’t have anything else.” Shelby was looking out the window, too. Probably to look ahead at Mom’s reflection in the rearview and make sure she wasn’t in trouble. “It’s fine, babe. Thank you. I’m sorry I didn’t say thank you.”

Carrol smiled back at Shelby, who didn’t look away from the mirror. Next to me, Mike had stopped scrolling and tapped me on the leg. I looked over at him and he was grinning, a sly and sort of evil kind of grin, and then he said, “Well, Shelby, that’s not true about not having anything else. You’ve got that special gum, don’t you?”

“Shut up, douche,” she answered.

“Hey!” Carrol called back, like we’d listen to him.

“Here I was thinking you’d turned over a new leaf, chewing Nicorette.”

“Yeah,” I said, “It’s another tobacco leaf, though.”

“Give her a break, guys,” Mom said. She’d always been partial to her only daughter, her first kid. Us boys should’ve been thicker skinned, she said, so we got less attention, less concessions, less love. But, we obeyed because we were conditioned to and the car went quiet again. The rumble of the frigid, rough road beneath us was the only reminder that we were moving at all on that long, lonely road to the funeral.

Mom spit out her gum after a few minutes, back into the aluminum wrapper with a little crinkle and it went into her purse.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it? And I bet your breath is a lot—” Carrol started. “I love you to death, Carrol, but we don’t have to talk to know that, okay?” Mom said. She was still looking out the window. The first couple of small buildings began to grow out of the horizon, next to wilting chain-link fences and gutters like open mouths swallowing up the scum of the city.

“That sounds like something your father would say.” Immediately, his gaze went down to his lap.

Now, Mom turned away from the window. She stared red-hot daggers through Carrol and slapped his hand away from her thigh. “It’s bad enough I have to see his dead body today. I thought I could go without thinking of him alive.”

“I’m so sorry.” Carrol tried to put his hand back on her thigh, but was slapped away again, harder this time, like she was really trying to hurt him.

We kids had no words for this. We knew about this kind of territory, the forbidden realms of conversations that didn’t make anybody feel good, that only served to dredge up old, rotting wounds. Carrol was still learning, but we couldn’t teach him this. These were things you learned on your own, as you learned Mom. The ins and outs of her trauma, the places that she was trying so hard to forget.

Mike went back to his scrolling, Carrol to his driving, Mom to her brooding. Everyone back to their original mark, the place we were most comfortable with each other. Silent, independent. Mom took the gum out of her purse and rolled down the window at a red light. There was one of those endless gutters beside us, where everything flows down forever, and Mom threw the gum in there. When the light turned green, the little silver speck had turned brown and soggy and then disappeared altogether.

Early last year, when Shelby moved back home from Houston with a couple thousand-dollar psychology degree and no job, and Mike was trying out for the baseball team with a hand-me-down mitt, Mom got a call from a hospital clerk at Saint Something-or-Other’s. The clerk said that Mom’s father had been admitted long term.

“Okay,” Mom groaned on the phone, “So is he asking for money? Because I don’t have any either.”

“Uh, no ma’am,” I heard the clerk say through the phone. I was on the couch, but Mom’s phone was on speaker. She’d had her ears boxed by her father when she was eleven and they never worked the same. Our house was loud not as a quirk, but out of necessity.

“Then, what? What have I got to do with any of this?” Mom groaned.

“He has stage four prostate cancer, ma’am.”

Just the sound of those words made my heart ache. Until I remembered who it was that was sick. Then, I felt like he’d gotten his dues. I could tell Shelby and Mike felt the same when I saw them cautiously escape from their rooms to eavesdrop with a sick look on their faces.

Mom had these old glasses that she wore at the tip of her nose and she took them off and swirled them around in her hand. She sighed, a long, heavy and telling breath. It was a sound like she was taking in just as much as she was breathing out, like she might’ve been kind of choking on something and couldn’t get it out of her throat.

“Alright,” Mom said. “Call me again when he dies. Thank you.”

And she hung up.

Creeping slowly around the corner of the hallway and towards the kitchen, Shelby worked her face into a frown just in case. I saw Mike retreat back to his room quietly. “You alright, Mom?” Shelby asked, reaching out a hand to touch Mom’s arm. “You don’t have to

do that,” Mom said, replacing her glasses and looking down at her computer. Shelby pulled back her arm and turned to look at me. Like, what do I do, how can I help her, I know how to fix this and I knew that she didn’t, so I just left it. Eventually, Shelby did, too.

Mom, though, was almost completely unbothered. She looked down through her glasses, squinted at her computer and said, “Looks like I overdrew. Can’t believe I forgot that.”

“You need money, Mom?” I called.

“No, thanks. I’ll work it out,” she muttered. She always told us that she was taught never to accept help. Or show any weakness at all.

My mother’s father was the type of guy who would go to Mom’s basketball games just to find new ways to critique her. Or make Mom sit outside to eat dinner when she got sick because he couldn’t afford to miss a day of work. Mom told me she grew up hating the guy and didn’t think he had any remorse about how he raised her. And that she didn’t have any forgiveness in hers. So she never did forgive him for any of it.

I’d never met him because my Dad demanded that I didn’t ever see the man. Then, when Dad walked out and it was Mom’s decision again, she said it was up to us, but she didn’t advise it. And we love her and we listen so we didn’t ever call him, send him any letters, or even friend him on Facebook. He was just as much a stranger to us as the woman who called and told us he was on his way out.

I never saw Mom so thoughtful as when she knew he was dying. Every day I saw her stare at a stain on the tablecloth or forget she was biting her nails until it started to bleed into her teeth. If I hadn’t known better, I would’ve thought she loved him despite herself. That all those years of torment stuck to her and that he was a part of her and she had a bad case of the blues because no matter how much she hated him he was still her daddy. Maybe that thought abused her more than the others.

Then, the woman called and said he died and Mom was back to normal again, mostly graceful and gentle and trying to work all the worst parts of her father out of herself and, thus, out of us. She told us it was her own Mom’s dying wish to see the old weasel finally kick it. “I’m sure she’s at peace, now,” Mom told us after she got the news.

“You think they’ll see each other on the other side? If he makes it over there?” Mike asked.

“I doubt that,” she answered.

“Which one?” I asked.

She just shrugged. I thought that was fitting.

When we pulled into the church parking lot, there were only five cars, one of them being the hearse, another we weren’t sure of that had to be the pastor’s. We figured it to be the Lexus. “I guess they sold this one out,” Carrol joked.

No one laughed. But, the church did look more barren after he said it.

We all squeezed ourselves out of the backseat, mumbles and grumbles turned to fog in the thick cold outside. There were no trees around, no garden in front of the church, just a

little sign that said “Presbyterian” and nothing else. A probably useless telephone line ran parallel with the street and quiet crows sat on top of it trying to relish in what everyone else was enduring.

“Is it an omen, you think?” I asked.

“Well, he’s already dead.” Mom spit her gum out into the wrapper and tucked it into her purse. “Okay. Let’s go.”

So we followed her inside. Single-file, we entered the one door that still opened and found a seat on one of the stiff maple pews in the back of the chapel. The ceiling was lower than I remembered, but it had been a while. The stained-glass windows were stained in ways I don’t think they ever intended. At the front of the chapel, the cross looked to be tilted a little to the right. Someone, probably the pastor’s wife, had found an old picture of Mom’s father and printed it in the lowest resolution possible and framed it at the front of the chapel. There were plastic daisies rimming the frame and a few more nestled beneath his casket.

“You guys don’t have to go up if they ask us to pay our respects,” Mom whispered.

“Are you going to?” I asked.

She didn’t answer, apparently embarrassed by the eyes that were now glued on us. A few old people in the front rows turned and looked at us. I recognized most of them as regular church attendees: the Nelsons who were too nice not to invite everyone over for brunch when the service ended. Mr. Beasley who wore a hat like he thought we couldn’t tell he was bald. The Valentines with their matching coats, and a lady I didn’t know. Her hair was tucked into a bandana and she wore glasses that she looked over to read her program. Then, the pastor came out from his office and took his place at the pulpit. Carrol postured up next to Mom, but the rest of us slumped into our seats to listen.

“Welcome all,” he began, reading from cards on the podium. “Today, we honor the life of Robert Mason Everett the Fourth. The Good Book says that nothing can separate us from the love of God. We are always worthy of love, it says in...” and he ruffled some pages trying to find a reference.

“Did this guy ever meet your father?” Carrol whispered.

Again, Mom didn’t reply. She was digging through her purse until she pulled out an aspirin and downed it dry. Her eyes were red and swollen as she watched the pastor dig around in his book. From all the way down the pew, I could feel the tension in her hands.

For a minute I wondered what it would be like if my own Dad died, then remembered that he left all of us and probably took some younger woman away to Mexico or something. If he died, I think I’d only know by some unlucky miracle and I’d forget just as soon as I knew it. Mom didn’t get that luxury. Much as I’m sure she wished for it.

Mike leaned over to me and said, “Jeez, this fella’s old.”

The pastor spoke with a raspy voice and had age spots on his hands that we could see as he waved them around. I just nodded to Mike.

“You think he’s due up next?” Mike pointed towards the casket.

“Probably. He’s probably prepared, anyway.”

“What does that even mean? Prepared to die?”

I guess Sunday School didn't make a dent in either of us. Because I shrugged, then looked back at the pastor who continued to speak and wave his hands and slowly march towards his own black casket by pretending he knew what it all meant. Hell, maybe he did know and I was just in the dark.

The pastor continued, “We knew him only briefly, but he made an impression. An earnest man and genuine in all he said and did, and in all the people he knew. I think, though, that I may not know nearly as much as his daughter who is here with us today.”

All heads spun to us. My instinct was to hide behind my collar or the pew in front of me or a sibling, but it was impossible. Then, I looked over at Mom who just bowed her head really low like she was trying to bury it into the space above the floor.

“Maybe she would like to say a few words for us,” the pastor said smiling. Expectant eyes all turned on us and I saw Carrol distance himself from my mom on the pew. It was like a blank spotlight was waiting to blind Mom and she wouldn't look up at it. Until she did and she waved all the eyes away from her. Shaking her head and her hands and away the burden of having to create something nice to say about her father.

The pastor coughed to bridge the silence, even tried to summon a hack, but it was too hollow to fill the church. So Mom raised a finger and rolled it around so that he could move on.

“Then, I guess, we can...end with a quick blessing of the dead.” And the pastor bowed his head.

I don't remember the blessing. Because down the pew I could see Mom trying to straighten the cross with her gaze. It didn't work.

When the service ended, everyone sort of went off in different directions; Shelby went out the front door to smoke away from the building so she could watch the crows. Mike played football on his phone behind the podium. The pastor's wife went to the office and returned with a tray of store-bought cookies, a variety pack enough for maybe forty people. I think I could count on one hand the people that ate any, but they were there, ready and capable for anyone willing to forget about the dead body someone had just carted out the front door. Carrol had three and talked to Mr. Beasley in a hushed voice about how great Pastor So-And-So was.

I thought the pastor was kind of indifferent during the service, that the whole church stunk of apathy, but I didn't say anything. Couldn't say anything, really. The whole church felt too small for me and still too big for the small crowd of people inside. I felt like nothing I said to anyone would resonate at all. Not even with the Guy who owned the building. So, I kept my mouth shut.

Until the lady I didn't recognize came up to me. Her eyes were sunk deep into her head and she had dark teeth like they'd been used for all the wrong things. She patted my arm lightly and tried to give me some look of comfort or something else, but it just looked sad. "I'm so sorry for your loss," she said.

"Thank you," I said because that was the correct thing, but not what I wanted to say. "You all must be heartbroken."

And then I really didn't know what to say. I nodded but not because I felt what she said. Pretend mourning is all black like the night and I couldn't stand it.

"I'm Holly," said the woman and she offered her hand.

I took it, shook and dropped it.

But, she didn't leave. She just stood there looking at me like the burden of conversation wasn't her fault.

"How did you know him?" I finally asked.

"Oh, I didn't."

I raised an eyebrow.

"No, I just came to pay respects to the dead. I do this a lot, actually, especially when I'm sure his importance is in question. And not that many turn up," she said, gesturing to the mostly empty chapel.

For some reason, I was irritated. Mad, even, that she would shame his funeral like that. It wasn't her place to do so, even if her thoughts were almost exactly my own before she said them. I crossed my arms and looked over to my Mom. Mom crossed her legs in the front row, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

"We don't need your pity," I said.

"It's not pity," she said, apologetically. "No, I'm so sorry. I'm not trying to be disrespectful at all. No, I do this for me." She paused for a while, eyed me like I was going to validate her, then said, "I think that grief is kind of romantic. Don't you?"

Suddenly, I decided I was done talking to this woman. I said, "We aren't grieving." I left the woman, who managed to disappear into a crowd of less than ten, and went to sit next to Mom. She hadn't moved since I last saw her, just breathed and breathed and breathed.

When I sat down she smiled, exhausted. Then, the pastor came and sat next to her, patting her leg. Mom scooted away from him, cleared her throat and said, "Thanks for all

this.” “Of course,” the pastor said, not really humbly, “It’s the least we can do for Bob. How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine.”

Carrol appeared behind the pastor, the last bite of an oatmeal cookie in one hand, spilling crumbs on the pew below him. He patted Mom’s shoulder. “You know, it’s okay not to be fine. Of all people you can really express yourself in front of, God and I are two great options.” “Uh-huh. Thanks, Carrol.” She patted his hand back.

“Yes, death is a difficult thing. It is best dealt with head-on,” the pastor said. “My mom died a few years ago, actually. And all of my grandparents and aunts and uncles. And a dog, just last winter. Dog cancer. Didn’t know that was a thing. Anyway, I know death pretty well, now. I think I’m well-equipped.”

The pastor smiled, that pity kind of smile that said he didn’t believe Mom worth a damn and if he did, he thought she was only trying to cause trouble. “And your family? Are they well, too?”

Mom looked over at me, eyebrows raised. It looked like she was relieved to be redirecting. I had my hand in my pocket turning my phone from mute to loud until my fingers started to hurt and I only stopped when I remembered that no one would care. He asked if I was well and I wanted to tell him that I was well enough to head home, but Mom’s face told me to be kinder. I think she earned that much.

“We’re fine, too,” I said.

“That’s good to hear. You’ll let us know if you need anything, okay? God be with you,” the pastor said, then left without giving us time to tell him that we wouldn’t and He wasn’t. “He did a good job, didn’t he?” whispered Mom.

I opened my mouth like I might say something, but I had no answer to that. It was weird to me. Not that she wasn’t generous or appreciative ever, but I don’t think she would ever spare any sympathy for her dad. When I looked over at her, she was still looking above her dad’s photo right at the cross. It was still crooked.

“Are you doing okay? Really?” I whispered back.

“Oh, yeah,” and Mom looked back at me, a melted plastic kind of smile.

“Was he right about him being earnest? And genuine?”

“Genuine, yes. Not earnest. Well...I don’t know. I don’t think he was.”

“Earnest is like sincere, I think. Like the Cross,” I said and I pointed at the Cross,

tilted a little to the side and old, “It still means Jesus and blessings and stuff even if it kinda doesn’t. It tries hard, I guess you could say.”

“I know what earnest means,” Mom scoffed at me, then she stopped. Again, she studied the cross, looked like she was chewing the inside of her cheek to nothing. I guess I could’ve gotten her another stick of gum to stop all that, but it felt like she needed me there. Like she needed someone to understand all of it with.

“I guess not. He was never earnest.” Mom stood up and went to the tray of cookies, broke one in half, and put part of it back. The rest she ate in three bites as she picked up her purse to head out.

On the way home, we listened to the radio too loud to hear each other’s thoughts and that was good for us. Carrol bobbed his head to the songs he knew, but drove slowly and made complete stops at all the intersections. Mom just looked out the window, tracing the shapes of the sky with her finger. More telephone poles and wires flew past, frozen in space as we blew through it.

“Is he really the fourth?” Shelby asked while an ad was playing.

“He was. I think he was the third to die, though. His dad is in...I don’t know.” Mom didn’t look away from the window.

“What did you think, Mom?” Shelby asked.

“About the funeral?”

“Yeah.”

“It was fine. I think they did a good job.”

Carrol nodded, patted Mom’s thigh like he’d been doing all day, then went back to his ten-and-two position. I felt a little confused, though, and asked, “Didn’t you hate him?” Shelby elbowed me, but my question stood. We all knew the answer; I just wanted confirmation that we were all still hating him in solidarity. I thought she wanted us to hate him because she did. If her mind had changed, though, I’d have to reevaluate the feelings I had for my family.

“I did,” Mom said, and she rolled down the window a crack even though it was cold outside.

“She hates him and it’s nice to see him dead, I think,” Carrol blurted out.

“No,” Mom said.

Carrol went beet-red. His eyes didn't stray from the long, lonely blacktop ahead of him again.

"I think it was fine, that's all," Mom said. "I can still hate him and think his funeral went okay, don't you think?"

The car started to get colder and the wind whipping through the small crack in the window made it hard to hear Mom. But, no one complained because Mom had a lot to say and the cold was kind of welcome because we were all scrunched together. Everyone listened.

"I remember when I was nine we went to that same church for an Easter service and he did my hair in little pigtails. Then, he told me I looked ridiculous and didn't even change them. I looked ridiculous because of him, I kept thinking. But I couldn't say it. I don't know why I couldn't say it. Maybe I was scared." Mom rolled down the window a little more. Bits of frozen, flaky sky whistled in through the crack. The cold wasn't so nice anymore.

"There was one time, maybe at my graduation, when I looked up in the stands after I got my diploma and your guys' Grandma was screaming and jumping for me. And Dad didn't stand up. Didn't even smile."

The window kept going, more of the world outside coming in. When the window was all the way down, the wind and the cold blew Mom's hair all over, twisted up into a bird's nest but without the care and respect. Us kids in the back, irritated earlier, huddled tight together to keep warm and gritted our teeth against Mom's release. The wind howled like a dying animal.

"Oh, man, I hated him. He was never nice or loving or anything good. Always sour and rude and just regretted that I couldn't be a boy. Or regretted that I glued him to Mom or something. He didn't ever have to be there, though. And I wish he wasn't because I hate him so much." And then she started crying. Hard cries that the wind picked up and rattled against the unforgiving walls of the car, and then outside and up to the Heavens where they vanished. "I hate him for being so mean to me and my mom, I hate him for never smiling, I hate him for never trying, I hate him for being such a bitter man, I hate him for neglecting me and never loving me and I just hate him. I hate him so much," she cried and cried and cried. And no one answered.

Then, almost too quiet for us to hear over the pitiless wind, I heard her say, "But, I hate him the most for dying."

The cold was stuck to me now. It tore through my clothes, stung my cheeks red. My teeth chattered, but I clamped my jaw shut to listen some more. I knew she was done, but I wanted to listen to the frigid wind wrap itself all the way around her dead silence. Like a hug, a bitter cold one. A marriage of two miseries.

Her shoulders shook. Her hair continued to twirl and jerk. Her open hands lay facing

up in her lap, expectant. Empty. Carrol went to the heater beneath the radio and turned it all the way up, then corrected his position again. Mom didn't notice. Just shuddered with heavy sobs, all the memories she just recounted weighing her down.

The sky outside was gray, soulless. It was all I could see past Mom, her sobbing silhouette absolutely still against the world. When she finished crying, she rolled up the window and gave us all a little kindness, some small relief. Sniffing, she took a long breath and brought down the visor to clean her face in the mirror.

Outside, it started drizzling, bigger drops than the tiny flakes the clouds were shedding a minute ago. They tapped lightly on the windows through which Mom just emptied herself. It looked to me like she didn't have any room in her for the rain right then.

She turned around to us and said, "I'm sorry, guys. I'm so sorry."

The rain fell all around us, but we didn't pay much attention to it.

We got home a few minutes later, warmer and more solemn than we were when we left. Or harrowed is more like it. We saw death and family and tried our best to feel nothing, despite ourselves and our natural tendencies. And now that we were home, we learned to feel nothing again. Or tried to.

But, again, despite myself and what was best for everyone in the house, I followed Mom to the kitchen table and sat down next to her. Carrol went to his recliner and started tapping away at the world on his phone. Shelby followed suit and Mike vanished into the hall, probably to his room, but I didn't know.

Mom set her hand on my forearm, then tapped it a couple times, like she had something to say. When I looked up at her, she was silent. Nothing left to say.

So, she got her glasses from the little pouch in her purse and set them on the edge of her nose, that same way where I thought they'd fall into whatever she was eating. The pads on the edges of her nostrils, sticking to her and holding on to the very edge of dropping and shattering and losing their purpose. Right there where they were either immensely helpful or doomed.

With those resilient glasses, Mom pulled out her phone and went through her photos. She went to an app I'd never seen, started scrolling through photos. They were all scanned ones, all actual photographs from generations past. Mom was a girl wearing a sequin dress in front of a sycamore in a city park. She was a girl shooting a free throw with a tight ponytail and a baggy uniform. She was a daughter standing in front of Mount Rushmore with a dad, smiling with gaps in her baby teeth and holding her Dad's hand.

"This is the one time he was nice to me," Mom said, pointing at the photo of them at Mount Rushmore.

He looked to me like he was happy, too. Her Dad, I mean. Even if he would go on to pull her hair and criticize her weight and her intellect and her choices at every family restaurant. He looked like an actual Dad for a minute. Easy to confuse them, I guess.

Mom tapped the trash icon in the corner and deleted the photo. It got sucked into the void, her youth and all her happy memories. Setting down her phone and taking off her glasses, she sighed.

“How are you, Mom?” I asked.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. Not at all.”

I just nodded because I didn’t know what it meant, what it could mean.

“Would you get me a glass of water? Please?” she asked.

I did as she asked. Then, when she finished it, I put it in the sink. I had the strong urge to remind Mom that I loved her. That she was a good Mom. She looked like she was thinking hard, though. And feeling too much. So, I walked past her without looking at her, down the hall and went into my room. I turned out the light and laid in my bed, thinking about that crooked cross, trying hard to bend that mental image until the cross stood up straight.

Midnights

Syd M.

Dedicated to Aidan McCarthy

you were unique to the universe,
 passion and love, enough to occupy it,
a friend with his heart in his hands,
 to be shared with whom accepted,
though you are no longer walking on the Earth,
 the moon shines like your periwinkle eyes,
as it always has, and always will,
 your words reach me through the stars,
messages, praise and thoughts heard through the winds,
 like your hand is softly brushing my hair,
singing the song of Love Me Tender,
 imagining a dance with you under the moonlight,
my head to your chest, arms around your neck,
 beating of a heart drumming in my ear,
a thousand stars and storms could never stomp the agape,
 you never stopped showing even after death,
midnights are ours to share now,
 just as much as before your time came.

each midnight i spent with you,
 softened this stressed and fragile mind,
filled with regrets and heartache,
 as far as i have come along,
with this journey amongst the stars and moon,
 my final regret is that i never said,
i love you.

To Evolve

Syd M.

For a star to be born, there is one thing that must happen:
A nebula with clouds of gas and dust must collapse.
So collapse.

 Crumble.

 That is not your destruction.

For a planet to arise, there is one thing that must happen:
Gravity must take and take everything it needs to consume.
So consume.

 Construct.

 That is not your disadvantage.

For constellations to reveal, there is one thing that must happen:
Ceremonial or directional connections must be created.
So create.

 Compose.

 That is not dishonorable.

That is your birth.

A chance to collapse, consume and create new meanings.

 Take it and evolve.

Syd M (they/them) is a writer living in Texas. They have been published in Querencia Press, Iceblink Lit and more. Above all else, they love coffee, penguins and anything space related. In their free time, they love listening to music which helps to inspire most of their pieces. You can follow them on Instagram @syd.m.poetry

Nun's Pilgrimage

D C Boyle

Artist Statement

The nuns march relentlessly to do their good works and travel only with their faith. The picture is oil on canvas.



David Boyle has painted many oil paintings since the mid-nineties which have sold well in Wellington, Palmerston Nth and have sold my sculptures from Hastings City gallery New Zealand. David's art has been seen in online magazines and paperbacks such as Last leaves, The Woodward Review, Five on the Fifth, Radar Poetry and Backwards Trajectory with more coming. Website is boyleswellington.

Claws

Selina Vanity

CONTENT WARNING: Graphic Violence

Author's Statement: Claws was written in a midnight bout of motivation to do something. The type that makes your fingers itch and your mind race. When I get like this I always write — I pour my heart into a google doc. They're always filled with a rage I feel I cannot express.

She brought his head up and smashed it on the concrete, screaming a guttural sound as she did, the howl of a caged animal. His head hit the floor with a thud and immediately his eyes rolled back and his body went limp. She sat there for a moment, looking with a feral glint in her eye like a fox with its paws wrapped around a rabbit's throat, its claw digging into the throbbing carotid artery. She sat there breathing, her ragged breath almost synced with the unconscious man. She clutched his dark hair more firmly in her hand, her knuckles turning a bright white—a skeletal hand of death. And she brought his head back up and slammed it back down with an audible crack. She rammed his head into the floor again and again. The splitting of his skull gave way to squelches of blood, the splatters painting a scarlet, unforgiving mural that split across the path. It was painted everywhere. Her clothes were drenched in it. It was already crusting under her fingernails. It was even running red streaks in her grown out bleach blonde hair. She rammed his head into the floor again and again. Until her arms stung with acid and her breaths were shallow and tears streamed down her face. She looked down at her blood stained hands and cried and cried. Cried not for the man who lay dead before her but for the girl she once was. The girl she'd never be again.

Selina (she/they) is a writer living in England. In her free time, they love to read, write and listen to music.

Father's Ashes

Erin Jamieson

I scatter ashes into the lake
where I learned how to swim

In the misty sunlight
I remember

glossy-back swallow
perched on a branch
the only bird I remember
from tedious lessons
my father gave on walks

When he is gone I linger
shadowed silhouette
on quiet bluish gray
with touches of algae
that tangle between
my calloused toes

it's impossible to say
where my body ends
and the shadows
begin

Erin Jamieson holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Miami University of Ohio. Her writing has been published in over eighty literary magazines, and her fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Twitter: erin_simmer

The Podiatrist Will be in Shortly to Work on Your Nose

Richard Hulse

I'm in my mid-seventies and most of my life failed to fully protect my skin from overexposure to the sun's rays. Used sunscreen when I thought about it, but not to the extent I should have. The result, four surgeries to remove cancerous tissue from my chest, shoulder, ear, and back. Along with these operations, I've had many precancers burned off my face, top of my head, various other places on my body.

A few months ago, a scabby spot appeared on the side of my nose as it had many times before. This time it bled a lot more than it had in the past. I didn't think it was a big deal until I mentioned it to my wife, Debi.

"It might be cancerous," she cautioned. "You should get it checked by your dermatologist. Look at the tip of my nose. I have a scar from the basal cancer my doctor removed using the Mohs procedure five years ago."

"Mohs?" I said.

"Yes. Don't you remember? The surgeon cut thin layers of tissue one at a time from my nose. Had it examined by a pathologist using a microscope, who let the surgeon know if it was necessary to remove more."

I looked closely at Debi's beautiful face. "I know you had that ground-breaking surgery," I said, "but I can't remember how many layers they removed before they got it all."

"Four."

I gulped. "Maybe I should just let things be. Take my chance it isn't cancer."

"You're too smart for that, Rich. Aren't you?"

I contacted my Kaiser dermatologist via e-mail and explained my situation. She asked me to send a photo of the spot on my nose to give her an idea what we were up against. I captured two clear shots of the bloody, scabby tissue with my cell phone and sent them to her. After examining both pictures, my doctor arranged an appointment for me at her office in Camarillo, a fifteen-minute drive from my house in Oxnard.

The day of my visit, I sat in the waiting room with half a dozen other masked patients. A female security guard routinely greeted everyone who entered and pointed at a chart.

“Good morning. Have you had any of the covid symptoms printed here? Have you recently been exposed to anyone with covid? Have a nice day.”

Everyone questioned responded in the negative.

When my name was called, I followed a nurse down a hall, where I was weighed, escorted to a room. “Please be seated, Mr. Hulse.” She took my blood pressure. Asked what medicines I took. How much I exercised. The nature of my visit. Finished with, “Dr. Malakouti will be with you shortly, sir. Please take a seat in the exam chair.”

Having been with Kaiser for over forty years, I knew what was coming next. Twenty minutes of me sitting staring at charts on the wall, instruments, machines with blinking lights, the clock, before my dermatologist knocked on the door and entered the room.

After closely examining my nose, she gave me the news. “I think the spot in the area known as the supra alar crease is cancerous. We’ve got to find out what type. I’m going to perform what is called a shave biopsy where I use a razor-like instrument to remove tissue from the questionable area.”

A bit nervous and anticipating pain, I managed a smile. “Go ahead, doc. Do what you gotta do.”

She swabbed my nose with an antiseptic, then took out a hypodermic needle. “This shot will numb your nose and keep it from hurting when I do the biopsy.”

I’ve felt pain before. Am usually tolerant of any type. But wow, when she jabbed the needle in my nose, it hurt so bad, I thought I might shoot through the roof. When she did it a second time, I did my best to avoid yelling out the f-word. Gritted my teeth and squeezed the arms on my chair until the pain finally subsided. Within seconds, my nose felt numb along with my right cheek and right eyelid. Even my upper lip.

After Dr. Malakouti removed tissue from my nose, she placed the biopsied tissue in a container and handed it to her nurse. “Richard, we should know in a few days if the spot is cancerous, and if it is, what kind.”

I received a phone call from my doctor’s nurse with the results a week later. “Mr. Hulse, the biopsied tissue was cancerous, but it’s the basal cell type which is the least dangerous skin cancer. In most cases such as yours, it is nearly one hundred per cent treatable and rarely returns.”

“When can I get it taken care of?” I asked.

“How about we set you up sometime the last week of March? What is known as Moh’s surgery will be done at the Kaiser Woodland Hills facility by another doctor.”

“Fine by me. I am familiar with the procedure. My wife had it done a few years ago.”

Debi drove me to Kaiser Woodland Hills the day of my appointment. After I checked in, we sat down and waited for my name to be called. A nurse appeared from behind a door.

“Richard,” she said.

I stood up. “That’s me.”

“This way, sir.”

We walked down a hallway and she ushered me into a room. “Sit down and take off your shoes and socks.”

I did as she asked and waited for further instructions.

“I’m going to take your blood pressure before Dr. Kline sees you.”

“Dr. Kline?” I said.

“Yes, Dr. Kline.”

“I thought Dr. Liang was going to take care of me.”

“You’re not Richard Pringle?”

“No, I’m Richard Hulse.”

“Oh my God! Excuse me, Mr. Hulse. You’re the wrong patient. I’m so sorry for the mess up.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry. I was wondering what removing my shoes and socks had to do with removing cancer from my nose.”

After nearly being treated by a podiatrist, I ended up under the care of Dr. Liang’s nurse in another room. She took my blood pressure, reviewed my meds, asked me to put on a surgical bib and lie down on the adjustable hospital bed.

A friendly, perky Dr. Liang entered the room. She explained the Mohs surgery procedure and clarified, “This may take anywhere from an hour to four hours to complete. Hopefully the lesser time.”

“Go for it,” I said. “I have all the faith in the world of your ability. Kaiser has always done good by me.”

The doctor examined the area of my nose where she planned to operate. “First, I’m going to use a surgical pen to outline where I may have to cut, clean the area with alcohol, deaden your nose with a shot of anesthesia.”

The nurse draped a sterile dressing around my nose. I prayed the needle wouldn’t hurt like it did when my other doctor performed the biopsy. Wrong. IT HURT LIKE HELL!

Within seconds though, as with the biopsy, my face felt numb from the bottom of my chin to the bridge of my nose.

Dr. Liang removed the first layer of tissue and treated the area with a process known as electrocautery. Smoke rose from my face, and I smelled what I can only describe as rancid burned flesh.

“Your wife can come in and be with you while we microscopically examine this first layer of tissue,” my surgeon said. “Hopefully, you’ll be heading home soon.”

Debi joined me for the next half-hour. We small talked about the weather. How our grandkids were doing. What we should have for dinner. She thumbed through a magazine as I laid there contemplating whether there was more cutting to come.

Dr. Liang rejoined us in a less perky mood. “I’m sorry, we didn’t get it all. We’ll have to cut out another layer. Mrs. Hulse, you’ll have to return to the waiting room.”

Debi gave me a thumbs up and left.

Anesthetize. Cut. Cauterize. Debi visits. Examination of tissue under a microscope.

During the operation part of this process, I felt comfortable and didn't even feel a smidgen of pain.

We went through this routine two more times, before Dr. Liang returned to the room with good news. "Richard, we finally got it all! You and your lovely wife are free to head home after we dress your wound, explain your post-operative treatment, and finish the paperwork."

I felt relieved, until Dr. Liang removed the bandage covering my nose. "You know, I'm not totally satisfied with the results of the surgery. If I leave it the way it is, there may be a bit more disfigurement. I think I need to suture your nose and pack the remaining gap with some of this special healing stuff I've got here."

Thinking we were close to being out of there, I readied myself for hopefully the last round of treatment. I watched as the doctor systematically worked a needle and thread up and down in front of me. By the time she finished, Debi and I'd been at the hospital nearly five hours.

As we breezed home on the freeway, I felt pleased the surgery was behind me.

"How's it feel?" Debi asked.

"I can't feel anything if you mean pain. Nada. Zero. Zilch. Nothin'."

"Good. I didn't feel anything either after I had my surgery."

The rest of the day I took little cat naps, because I'd slept very little the night before. In between winks, Debi read the recovery instructions to me.

"It says you shouldn't bend down at the waist, which can increase blood pressure in the head and increase the risk of bleeding."

"Keep the wound covered with Vaseline and a bandage if you go out in public."

"Shower, but don't run water directly over the healing area."

"Keep the treated area elevated above the heart as much as possible during the first week."

That evening, we enjoyed pizza and glasses of chianti. My nose still felt numb and so did my upper lip and teeth. I chomped on a piece of pepperoni, tasted blood.

"Son of a bitch," I yelled.

Debi leaped to her feet. "What's wrong?"

"I think I bit the inside of my mouth, although I didn't feel it."

"I'll get you some cotton swabs to dab it."

Forty-eight hours after my surgery, Debi announced, "It's time to remove your bandage and examine your wound." She gently peeled it off as I stood in front of the bathroom mirror with my back to it.

"What's it look like?" I asked.

"Look for yourself."

I turned around and managed a smile. "It looks gross, but not as much as I expected. The doc said what she cut out was about the size of a nickel."

Debi laughed. "Looks more like four cents to me. Let's clean it with this q-tip then apply more Vaseline and a fresh bandage."

For the next four weeks, my wife dressed my wound a minimum of three times a day. Each time I examined the area where the surgeon sliced and diced me, it appeared a tad smaller.

Thirty some days after the surgery, my nose is as close to looking like it did before I went under the knife. And I learned two things—Dr. Liang is a genius. I need to religiously apply sunscreen to exposed parts of my body when I go out in the sun.

Also, I'm never going to look like Paul Newman, but my wife says under the circumstances, I'm still a good-looking son-of-a-gun.

I am a retired school teacher who lives with my wife in Hollywood Beach, California. We both enjoy taking walks on the sand and enjoy watching dolphins surf the waves at sunset. I have written two narrative nonfiction books: My Brother Bo: Addicted in Paradise and Forty Crazy Years of Friendship.

Mitzpah

Christ Keivom

An uproar floods the streets. The gods
have been worshiped all day.

One stands with crossed legs playing a flute
as people herd around him for a dance.

The others prostrate to a God whose name is a veil
over the face, revealing nothing.

All week, I have wanted to worship
in your arms, giving nothing in return
only asking for more.

It's been 2000 years since God said:
"Yes I am coming soon"

My grandmother thought he would return
in her time and so did her mother.

I worry the world will end,
when we are absent from each other.

Above, in the acres of blue, the plane
carrying God is already crossing the sky.
And we are elsewhere, but never beyond prayer.

Interpretation of the Word Greed

Christ Keivom

On how much I want you, there is no ending.
I stand on the edge, looking for the horizon;
finding nothing. I walk back to the starting point.
If love is a condition how sick I become—
Longing remembers your absence.
The absence remembers your memory.
All day, I become the shadow of a shape
that is slowly losing its shape.
& all I want is to be that which
is everywhere and be wherever you are:
air, sky, anything you pass by.
How similar the words *lost* & *cost*.
which is love without the lover.
If my name was a breath—
Would it be an inhale or an exhale?
Strange how, when your mouth is on mine
the body fills up like a balloon,
ascending to the ceiling. & as if by a string,
desire keeps me tethered to your body.
What did Kunitz say to his wife in that poem?
“Touch me. Remind me who I am”
& when you do, my hands ask for *more, more, more*.

Christ Keivom (he/him), is currently pursuing his master's in English Literature from Delhi University. His work has previously appeared in Novus Literary Arts Journal, Mulberry Literary, Monograph Mag, Write now lit, The Chakkar, Farside Review, Spotlong Review, Agapanthus Collective, Native Skin, and Blue Marble Review to name a few.

Unleashing the Heart

Poorvanshi Tyagi

my love bleeds for you
on reckless nights
it stains the carpets
of your living room
and finds the nape
of your neck
where i leave imprints,
blotches, kisses painted in stardust.
it bleeds blue
on the letters I write for you
it swims & floats
in pointless gossip
tear-streaked cheeks
and frozen time
that we keep to ourselves
some midnights.
it blossoms in
my tight-lipped smiles,
your caramel eyes

and the lingering calm
we share some midnights
and it blossoms in you
it gives you faith
it gives you strength
it gives you a home
built not on promises
but on careful deep breaths,
learnt love languages
& mirrors to show your wrinkles to
the rest of the world can't see them
but i can
write them into melodies,
share your tears
(it's not yours, it's our tragedy)
lay your head on my lap it's
okay
if you lost on the battlefield.

Poorvanshi Tyagi, a 16 year old from Uttarakhand, India, is an avid reader and a budding poet. Her work has been published in two anthologies, namely - The Buried Tales & Letters To The Dark. Besides writing, she enjoys dancing, photography, and music. She loves to read literary as well as historical fiction in her free time.

The Storm Within

Toby Ameson

Twelve years old, and I was the one with a calm voice,
and steady hands, uplifting everyone I could reach,
for I understood suffering is always at the core.

Old soul, they called me, and wise beyond my years,
when I had the balm they demanded for the burns
of harsh living, of dark times like old, rotting boards
covered over with fresh carpet to sell the house,
when I knew the tangle of their Gordian knot
better than they did, and could cut to the heart
and free them with a handful of words.

But too sensitive, they decided, when my bleeding heart
was given also in inconvenient places—a spider in a cup,
rescued with trembling and tears from boys with matches,
or shocked expressions and barked protest in lieu of a jester's laugh
when the joke was too cruel to be funny,
or to the enemy and the friend equally, because both
are alive and hurting, and I know I can help.

I don't care who is right when it's more important
to stop the bleeding. We'll sort it out later.
Torn souls no different than torn flesh in triage tents,
sorted by who will do the most harm in the long run
if the psychic wounds are left unattended now.

It should never have been my job, my turn,
to control the tides of the bleeding minds,
my responsibilities piled up so high it snapped the legs
right out from under me and my life collapsed.

It was the work of somewhere between two and five
adults—negotiating the bosses, the mortgage, the marriage,
the parenting, the intergenerational woes in the rungs
higher on the family ladder, never mind my own troubles—
that landed in my lap. I had answers, and thank God I did,
because our lives would have gone out from under us
a lot sooner if it hadn't been for my steady voice
and calm hands stemming the hemorrhagic flow.
But if the adults couldn't handle it,
it should never have come to rest
on the shoulders of a child.

I learned very quickly. The bad things, too.
Like how to take lashes into my own back
to prevent the whipping of others.
How to strive with bleeding feet toward a goal post
that would immediately be moved out farther
because I approached with the audacity
of reaching the unreachable, the unattainable ideal.
How to ignore pain of all kinds and levels
until I couldn't hear it killing me anymore.
But then the price of my sacrifices began to show up
as missed classes and brain fog and hospital bills,
and my brilliance was forever dulled, burned out
before it was ever even truly my own.

Then they said I was stupid for pushing so hard,
stupid for ignoring the pain, stupid for taking on too much,
stupid for giving up, stupid for getting up and trying again,
and everything I did was stupid
because that was an easier pill to swallow
than the gaping truth under the rotting floor boards.

I broke myself to save them, out of love and necessity,
and over and over and over and over and over,
and when I was no longer sound enough to stand,
they said I was stupid for cracking my own foundation.
If I had known that I was sacrificing my health,
my freedom, my potential, my autonomy,
my brilliance and my resilience and my joy
for all the years of the rest of my life,
without so much as a thank you or I'm sorry,
and with a heaping serving of scorn and shame,
I would have screwed them over instead.
I dream about time travel so I can let them reap
what they would have sown without my intervention,
so I could have had the strength to finally escape
instead of tripping on the threshold of adulthood
and returning crippled to the festering bed of family dysfunctions.
I never reached adulthood, and the loss is my private black hole.
I grew up too fast. The vacuum of innocence left storms within me.
On the event horizon, I write to fill the void.

Toby Ameson (they/them) is a queer, disabled writer living in Los Angeles. They have been published in International Human Rights Arts Festival Publishes. They love adorkable romance fluff and dark fantasy, sometimes mixed together. In their free time they love spending time nurturing their kid, their soulmate, their animals, and stories that create change and inspire hope.

Angry Ocean

Michael Anthony

Artist Statement

Angered by centuries of our callous disregard, oceans are beginning to show us the raw power of that anger. We can respect that to our benefit, or ignore to our peril.



Michael Anthony is an artist and writer living in New Jersey. He has published fiction, poetry, illustrations, and photographs in literary journals and commercial magazines. Most recently these include Flyover Country, On The High Literary Journal, West Michigan Review, Drunk Monkeys, Bodega Magazine, Raw Lit, and The Closed Eye Open. His work may be viewed at: MichaelAnthony.MyPortfolio.com

Tuning

Zary Fekete

“I hate you! I wish you were dead!!”

The words echoed off of the walls of the living room and were punctuated by the slam of my daughter Claire’s bedroom door. It happened every day...more and more every week. I couldn’t keep the fights straight anymore. There seemed to be so many reasons why she was upset. I smothered her. She had no freedom. I didn’t respect her choices. I didn’t like her friends.

Was this what I had been like when I was young? Surely not. I couldn’t ever recall having the energy to really care about something so deeply. Or, at least, I didn’t want people to think I had forceful opinions of my own. I wanted to flow along with what everyone else wanted to do. I didn’t want to cause ripples. Claire seemed so forceful. So full of spirit when something spited her. That seemed so foreign to me. When I was in high school I was always content for other people to decide for me. It always seemed easier to go along with what my girlfriends wanted to do.

I stared at Claire’s closed door for a moment, trying to remember what I had done wrong this time. I couldn’t remember. I stood next to the piano and traced a finger across the key cover. I willed my mind to slow down. What had we been arguing about? Something about algebra. But it wasn’t really about algebra. It never was.

I took a deep breath. Claire would come back out shortly. She always did and then we would make up, only to start at it again later. The cycle was endless and exhausting. I needed something to take my mind off of it for a moment.

I sat down on the piano bench, fingering through several loose sheets of music. Maybe this would calm me? Maybe if Claire heard the music she would be curious and come back out. Maybe the music might calm her mood.

I studied the pages uncertainly. I hadn’t really played since high school. The piano was a gift from a friend who moved last month. The instrument came with several sheets of beginning music and a few simple pieces by Beethoven. I picked a simple-looking piece randomly and started to plink out some notes, but I immediately

stopped. No. No, not right. I thumped the black key a few times. My friend told me it would need tuning. I kept putting it off and dealing with the off-key D Flat. Come to think about it, that was very much like me, too. I'd never been one to fix things or take matters in to my own hands. I usually waited for others to do the fixing. That's why the piano wasn't tuned. I hadn't the energy to make a call. I just put up with the out-of-tune D Flat. But today my ears couldn't take it.

I stood from the piano and walked toward the kitchen when the doorbell rang. I opened the front door and saw a middle-aged man in a grey suit. He held a leather bag which looked well-used.

"Hello, madam," he said. "I understand you have a piano in need of a tune-up?"

I hesitated. How did...?

He produced a few tools from the bag to show me he was the real thing. Wordlessly I stepped aside. He came into the entryway and took off his shoes. They were scuffed, but well-cared for otherwise.

"It's down here, I believe?" he said, indicating the hallway which led to the den.

"Yes," I said. "Did Mary call you?"

He smiled at me and turned to walk down the hall. "No," he said. "I could hear you playing from the street. That D flat key isn't quite right, is it." He chuckled as he turned into the den.

When he saw the piano against the wall he let out a sigh. He passed his hands over the dusty top like he was petting a cat. "She's a nice one," he said. "How long have you had her?"

"Only about a month," I said.

"Did you have experience playing piano before she arrived?"

To my surprise, I felt glad he was here. "Yes," I said. "I bit. I mean, I played some when I was a young girl, but nothing much recently until...she arrived." I smiled to myself, enjoying the female pronoun he had given the old instrument.

He nodded. "May I?" he said, indicating the bench.

"Please."

He sat down and began to trill his fingers up through the keys a few times. I noticed he purposefully didn't strike the guilty D flat key, almost as though he was saving it for greater attention.

"Lovely," he said. "She has a lot of life in her yet. Now then..." He straightened his back and struck the D flat key a few times. With each thump the note gonged off-key. "Has it always sounded like that?"

"Yes," I said. I felt ashamed. "I have been meaning to get it checked out, but I wasn't sure..."

"...wasn't sure how to get ahold of me?" He turned to me with a smile.

I smiled back. "Yes, I suppose."

He stood up and opened his leather bag. He took out a small, gold-colored instrument. It looked a bit like a cross between a tuning fork and a hammer. He stood up and opened the top of the piano. With a small grunt he lowered his arm into the piano back. I could hear the

faint tinging of strings as his hand moved around in the piano's depths.

"Strike that D Flat a few times, would you please?" he said.

I moved forward and thumped the black key. As I did so, I could hear the note subtly change. It went from twanging off-kilter in the room to a more rich, refined sound. As the note changed the man's face changed with it, his smile increasing in joy.

"Ah, that should do it," he said, and pulled his hand out of the piano. He closed the top and sat back down on the bench, putting the tuning hammer down next to him. He cracked his knuckles quietly for a moment and placed his hands on the keys.

Then he played. The air in the room filled with a cascade of notes, tumbling across one another. The air seemed to shimmer around him from the rich, thick chords. Satisfied he stood from the bench and snapped his case shut.

"Well, no problems now," he said. "May I wash my hands in your bathroom?"

"Of course," I said. "It's just down the hall."

He nodded, moving down the hall. I followed him. A moment later I heard the water flowing from the tap. I marveled at how quickly the whole thing had happened. I was strangely delighted. The problem was fixed and I didn't have to do anything. The water in the bathroom shut off, and he returned, straightening his suit.

"Madam, I thank you," he said. He handed me a card. It was white with black lettering. It said, Mr. Anderson, Tuning. "If you have any more problems, just call me."

"What...what do I owe you?" I said.

"Oh, nothing," he turned to me with a smile. "I love any opportunity to tune something in need of care." Then he walked down the hall, opened the door, and was gone.

#

Slam! I heard Claire's steps disappear outside as she ran for the school bus. My hands were lifted, mid-argument, where she had cut me off. Clearly my attempt to coax her out of her angry shell with music had failed. This time it was about the tattoo she got last week. I asked her where she got the money to pay for it. Her face flushed red, she called me a bitch. And, now, as usual, she was gone.

I dropped my hands and went to the kitchen. The unwashed dishes in the sink stared up at me. Below the sink on the ground there were several day's-worth of accumulated food stains. I felt like a poor excuse for a mother. All my energy seemed focused on gearing up for the next confrontation with Claire. Everything else in the house was falling by the wayside. Looking at the dirty dishes made me feel guilty and tired. I didn't feel like cleaning, but clearly it couldn't be put off anymore.

I reached for the sponge in the drain dish. It was soggy and ragged. I bent for the lower drawer to get a new one. The drawer stuck as I pulled at it. I had to yank extra hard and then it gave way with a jerk and the face plate struck my knuckles. I winced and sucked at my hand as I took out a new sponge from the drawer. Slowly I soaped the sponge and gave a few

limp passes across the plates.

I piled the plates in the drying rack but I couldn't bring myself to tackle the silverware in the bottom of the sink. I stood in the kitchen for a moment listening to the drip drip of the water gurgling down the drain. I turned and wandered into the den. Maybe I would try the Schubert piece this time.

I stopped, my eyes on the piano bench. The tuning hammer. It was still on the bench. Mr. Anderson forgot it. But, surely, he would be back once he realized it was gone. I reached down and picked it up. It had a heavy, balanced feel. Holding it made me feel a strange sense of calm. The hammer felt warm against my fingers.

I walked back into the kitchen and reached for the lower drawer. As I did the tuning hammer bumped against the face plate. I braced myself this time, ready the drawer to stick. To my surprise, the drawer slid out effortlessly. I felt like I was touching melted butter. I slid the drawer in and out a few more times.

How long had the drawer been sticking? Several weeks at least. And now, suddenly, it was smooth? I frowned as I looked at the drawer face. I bent down to look under the bottom of the drawer. As I did I put the tuning hammer on the ground. I didn't see anything under the drawer but smooth wood.

I closed the drawer and reached down for the tuning hammer. My mouth dropped open. The hammer lay on the floor with circle of clean tile around it. The food stains around it were gone. The circle was perfect as though it was drawn with a compass.

Slowly I reached for the hammer. I touched it, half expecting it to shock me. It didn't, but it did feel warm. I picked it up and cradled it in my hand for a moment, enjoying the odd calm it produced in me. I turned it over a few times. I noticed a small engraving near the handle. It said, Mr. Anderson. Tuning. I looked at the drawer and then back down at the circle in the stains.

Feeling ridiculous I lowered the hammer over another dirty section of the kitchen floor, keeping it hovering in the air above the tiles. Nothing happened. Then I touched the hammer to the floor. I gasped. The stains dissolved as though they were oil separating from water. I dropped the hammer in surprise. It skittered across the floor a few inches and came to rest on a new section of the floor, and, once again, it was surrounded by a perfect circle of clean tile. There was a traced path of clean tile across the floor, neatly marking where it had slid when I dropped it.

I stood up and backed away from the hammer. The kitchen was silent. Outside I could hear birds in one of the trees twittering. I stared at the hammer. Then I reached into my pocket to took out the card. Mr. Anderson. Tuning. I couldn't understand what was happening. I took several deep breaths.

Carefully I reached down and picked up the hammer. I looked around the kitchen. My eyes settled on the wall mirror. There was a small piece broken from the corner, a casualty of one of the arguments with my daughter from the last few days. She had thrown a mug, missing me and striking the mirror instead.

I stepped across to the mirror. I looked at my reflection, surprised to see my mouth was still open. I closed it. I bent down, and gently touched the hammer against the broken corner of the mirror. Noiselessly the glass extended itself, as though it was liquid mercury, and filled in the broken corner.

My throat felt constricted. I stood up and closed my eyes. Breathe, I said to myself.

#

Later that afternoon I sat in the living room on the couch. On the coffee table were several objects. I had collected them from throughout the house. A broken doll, forgotten from under my daughter's bed. A sweatshirt from a camping trip from last summer with a stain on its arm. The broken coffee mug Claire had thrown at me. They were all lined up on the table. I had touched each one with the hammer. They were flawless with no cracks or stains. I stared at them. And I kept looking down at the tuning hammer in my right hand, feeling its warmth pulsing against my fingers. What was this thing?

A loud crack shattered my thoughts. I jumped and looked up. The living room window had a crack running from top to bottom. What happened? I stood and walked to the window. I looked out through the glass at the ground outside. There was a small sparrow flittering on the ground. It had flown against the window and broken its wing. Wordlessly I held the hammer against the window and watched the crack repair itself. Then I walked to the front door and went outside.

In the backyard I stood over the sparrow. It was frightened. It kept craning its head around, trying to make its useless wing work. Slowly I crouched down next to it. I held out the hammer. The tiny bird shuddered and was still. It was looking at me with one terrified eye. Gently I touched the hammer against its wing.

With a small hop the sparrow righted itself. It took a few practice flaps. It folded both wings against its body and looked at me for a moment. Then it flew up into the sky and was gone.

#

It was late afternoon by the time I heard Claire's step outside the front door. I sat in the living room on the piano bench. The hammer was in my hand. I was nervous, breathing rapidly. The front door opened and closed and then I saw her crossing the doorway toward her bedroom.

"Claire?" I said, willing my voice to stay calm.

She stepped back into the doorway, tapping her foot impatiently and cocking her head. We looked at each other for a moment.

"Well?" she said.

"Would you come in here and sit with me for a moment?"

She rolled her eyes. "I've got homework."

"It will just be a second."

She shrugged and came into the room, dropping her bag on the floor. She circled around to the couch and sat down, twirling her hair in her finger.

"What are these?" she said, jerking her head in the direction of the repaired objects on the table.

"Nothing. I was just cleaning up a bit."

She nodded and sat back against the couch. "What do you want?"

Nervously I tapped the hammer in my hand for a moment. "Claire," I said. "I have been thinking about us a lot today."

She snorted and looked up at the ceiling. "Here it comes," she said.

"No," I said. "I want to know...to understand. I just need you to..."

She laughed and stood up. "I don't have time for this." She crossed the room and grabbed her bag. I stood, holding the hammer. Her back was to me. I took a breath and stepped toward her, lifting the hammer. I stretched it toward her back.

A split second before the hammer could touch her back the doorbell rang. Claire disappeared into her room. I stood, frozen with the hammer still extending into the air. A moment later the doorbell rang again. I swallowed and shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I went to the door and opened it.

It was Mr. Anderson. He smiled at me.

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you, madam. I seem to have forgotten..." His eyes landed on the hammer in my hand. "Yes, there it is," he said. "May I?" He extended his hand.

Instinctively my hand closed around the hammer for a moment. Then I handed it to him. He took it and the warmth of its presence in my palm slowly faded away. As he took it his eyes registered a moment of surprise. He looked at me and then past me at the hallway behind me. A burst of loud music began playing from the direction of Claire's room. He looked back at me and then glanced down at the hammer in his hand.

"It feels it has been used a few times since I was here," he said.

"I..." I said. "Yes. I'm sorry."

He nodded. "It happens. You must have found a great many things which needed tuning."

I was surprised to find my eyes welling with tears. He put the hammer in his bag and snapped it shut.

Then he noticed my eyes. His face softened. The sound of my daughter's music continued clanging in the background. He smiled and gestured in the direction of the music. "I'm glad I came back when I did," he said. "Before you made a mistake. Some things may be tuned. But other things require a different kind of attention."

He turned to leave, but then paused and looked back at me.

"But don't give up," he said. "Everything can be repaired given enough time."

He turned and walked to the sidewalk and then disappeared down the block. I stood in my doorway, hearing my daughter's music, and looking at the large world outside.

Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary and worked as a teacher in Eastern Europe and East Asia. He has a debut chapbook of short stories out from Alien Buddha Press and a novelette (In the Beginning) out from ELJ Publications and a novella coming out in early 2024 from Darkwinter Press. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. Twitter: @ZaryFekete

Self Portrait with Pain

Judith Skillman

Artist Statement

Self Portrait with Pain was done with oil on canvas, and inspired by a feeling state—chronic pain—from a pedestrian accident 41 years ago. There is surrealism in the persona's features. One eye is wide open, the other almost shut. Nose and mouth blur and are features layered in a palimpsest over a pale, almost mime-like complexion. States of suffering are magnified by an x at the neck. I hope a viewer may see the portrayal of trauma and its lingering aftereffects.



Judith Skillman paints expressionist works in oil on canvas and board. She is interested in feelings engendered by the natural world—see judithskillman.com, <https://www.etsy.com/shop/JkpaintingsStore>, <https://www.saatchiart.com/account/artworks/823323>.

Recall

Sfarda L. Gül

Maíron Thálassa. Ucha Zugha.
Kiršnas Mári. Sew Dzov.
Did I recall correctly?

My *máti* stares at me
from a needle pinning

to my wall the map of a land
my feet are yet to tread upon,

warding off the jealous blue-eyed
glares I doubt are there at all.

Yet my feet recall that soil from
immemorial centuries gone by

when sycamore and lime scattered
the grassland of that old plateau

and *Vits'e* smelled of *pakhlava*,
loukoúmi, *paponi*.

Halvás tastes of childhood.
From *حلو* (*halvâ*), if I recall?

Only sunflower—the kind my
northern siblings favour.

My ancestors' Anatolian tongue
craves the sesame of fasting on

Great Lent. The peanut of escape to
Argentina from the Ottoman sword.

My *máti* stares,
asking me, '*do you recall?*'

The poem you just read is peppered with unfamiliar foreign words. The very opening lines are several translations of “Black Sea”, including in Pontic, Laz, Proto-Balto-Slavic, and Armenian respectively: Μαύρον Thálassa (Μαύρον Θάλασσα), Ucha Zugha (Uça Zuğa/უჩა ზუგა), Kiršnas Mári (Киршнас Мари), Sew Dzov (Սեւ Ծով)—all languages of incredible importance to the author. Máti (μάτι) means “eye” in Greek, a term also used for the blue glass Evil Eye bead which holds incredible importance to SWANA and Mediterranean cultures (and unfortunately faces much appropriation). Vits’e is an indigenous Laz town in Rize Province, modern-day occupied Türkiye (now Turkified into “Fındıklı”). Pakhlava is baklava, loukoumi is lokum (i.e. “Turkish” delight), and paponi is the Laz form of galaktoboureko, all of which are Anatolian desserts. Chavás (χαλβάς) is a Greek form of halva stemming from the Persian *halvâ* (حلوا), a type of dessert most commonly made from sesame or sunflower seeds following oil extraction. The peanut halva referenced in the poem, called mantecol, emerged in 20th century Argentina from Greek immigrants.

A writer and artist since her early childhood brought up in a Police State, Sfarda L. Gül's (alias) creative focus hones in on the macabre and introspective, the grotesque and juxtaposing—a deconstruction of social ideology and human suffering influenced by her upbringing, historically erased mixed ethnicity, and dark-sided emotional disposition. When not engaging in art, Sfarda is enthralled in ethnography, linguistics, and social activism aiding to uplift ethnic and queer minorities of her native SWANA and Eastern Europe. She is the curator of independent publication Lacrimosity and Righteous Rage which hosts a Substack newsletter, as well as the 2024 debut author of The Hypostasis of Dissent duology. Read Sfarda's poetry and short fiction in Musing Publications, Metachrosis Literary, Qafiyah Review, and Split Pomegranate among others. Find her on social media @sfar.da.

About Mollusk

Mollusk Literary Magazine is a global online literary magazine that seeks to amplify the voices of a new generation of writers and artists. It was founded in 2023 by Founding Editors in Chief, Sascha Chernesky and Rida Zulfikar. We aim to empower those interested in submitting by implementing a transparent timeline for submissions, quick turnaround, feedback on submissions when requested, and additional resources for writers. We help writers and artists break into the industry, gain more familiarity with their writing, and promote voices that haven't yet found a place in the public eye.

Mollusk Lit believes that the word "watashiato" (*n.* curiosity about the impact you've had on the lives of the people you know) encapsulates our ideology succinctly, because we wish to expand the curiosity of everyone who happens upon our page—readers, writers, artists, and editors alike. Writing and art are exploratory mediums. Discoveries are made every day, ten million times over. Maybe you'll make a few here. Maybe you'll connect with this character or that culture. Some words and images will stick with you forever. Through the writers, artists, and works we promote, we hope to remind our creators that their work, their time, their words and images are not only deserving of their love and attention, but our love and attention, and that of the public eye as well.

Let us learn something new. Let us feel warmth, thrills, wonder. Let us share our fears and spread the burden of our hurt so that we all may carry a lighter load.

You have already left the world a better place.

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