

Letter From the Editor

I don't need to tell you all how terrible this year has been. You know that. This issue was supposed to come out in AUGUST, but I'm just so glad it's here now. Every time I get to publish a new set of artists, I get so ecstatic. I love my job regardless of anything happening around me. I'm excited to transition to quarterly publications because this means longer submission periods = more submissions = more artists = greater reach = more exposure for under represented creators, which is our whole goal. I hope you ~~can~~ find something here to enjoy, and be sure to find your favorite artists online and tell them how much you love their work!

All the best,

Madie.

The Things Herein

POETRY

Olaitan Abdulafeez

Ode to the Pathways in my Head 7

MP Armstrong

eulogy for larry kramer 8

to drink tea at the end of the world 9

i ask again 10

Jide Badmus

EXTORTING GOD 11

Talisman 12

Clayre Benzadón

Sleight of Hand 13

Panic Attack 15

Orange Somatics 17

(Un)Fallen No. 5 *by Edward Lee* 19

Stela Brinzeanu

A Nation of Pavlov's Dogs 20

Urban Fox, E17 21

Hannah Brown

The Central Limit Theorem, Revised 22

I Used to Scare Magpies 23

Kristine Brown

the ones who hurt you 24

Waking 25

Diane Callahan

The Way You Talk About War 26

Lost Titles 27

(Un)Fallen No. 10 *by Edward Lee* 28

TaNia Donatto

the camera performed the surgery	29
John Dorroh	
The Promise of Water	30
Pink	31
Aleah Dye	
Steam and Glow	32
Annelise Edwards-Daem	
Growing Pains	33
Home Time	34
Grace Alice Evans	
june	35
(Un)Fallen No. 29 <i>by Edward Lee</i>	36
Sam Frost	
I Hope You Had the Time of Your Life	37
Guava	38
While He Sleeps	39
An Old Tattoo Shop, Grantham, England	40
Atlas Brenner	
Is this a reference to something?	41
Mukund Gnanadesikan	
El Viaje Peligroso	42
Trevann Hamilton	
I Want to Read about Black Women Laughing	43
Stephanie Jacobs	
Innocence	44
Christy Jones	
vulpes cogitatio	45
Jessica Kim	
Look up	46

Angelina Martin	
knee-jerk	47
Syd Richardson	
Swan	48
(Un)Fallen No. 39 <i>by Edward Lee</i>	49
Rikki Santer	
Around Our Corner	50
Feathers	51
Circus Lullaby	52
Redux Suite	53
Jen Schneider	
The Daily Puzzle	54
Morning Greetings from Ms. B's P.S. 54	55
Fortune: Flavors of Welcome	56
Boloere Seibidor	
preach, preacher	57
Elliott Voorhees	
Maidens at the Motel 6	58
(Un)Fallen No. 69 <i>by Edward Lee</i>	59
Sarah Wallis	
Breakfast in Greece	60
ride	61

FICTION

Mehreen Ahmed	
The Beach	65
S.M. Colgan	
Cleansing	66
Mike Hickman	
Dodgem	67

Tara Van De Mark

A Mother's Worst Nightmare 69

Kaila Woelk

Run 71

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Doug Hawley

Amnesia 74

Alice Lowe

Careless Love 76

Rebecca Minelga

Independence 78

Ekphrastic 79

POETRY

Olaitan Abdulafeez
Ode to the Pathways in my Head

I set forth on this path / riding shotgun / on this hubristic road / playfully sashaying through the
foliage in the boulevard / of my nonexistent fantasy, I wrote this / with a cauldron of molten gold / on
my back & these words I say / with a heavy mass of / rock on my chest //

with a mind soaked in paranoiac vistas, a head / sinking / in grisly mental images / & one eye welled up
in blooming tears / the other prospering / as bright as the moonlight / of a cloudless sky night / I spit
these words voyaging solo / on the route that links / my tongue / to / my brain / through infinite
musings, in gaiety, ecstasy, for on this road / are denizens of dolor / hawking woe / advertising in the
language of salty fluids / even so, these words, I put on a pedestal— to idealize and idolize—for in this
world / & in these words do I find my frith //

now call the wise men / & women / let them in obeisance flock this / turbulent road / with their
thinking caps / & like Thanos—snap me / out of this reality / for all roads lead home & / home is the
graveyard, not the battleground //

“i gave you books. you gave me plants. books live. plants die.”
larry kramer, *faggots*

the signs of age look identical on both
plant leaves and book pages: curling edges tinged with
shades of brown, an ancient scent of familiarity,
seeds buried somewhere brimming with a

beginning and a loss and more beginnings.
but i have murdered every spiky succulent
and tangle of ivy that ever perched, textbook-
chlorophyll-green, on my windowsill. no matter how

often i prodded the soil. no matter how much sunlight
pried from the cloudly northeast ohio sky graced
the pots with its shimmering winter rarity.
stories, on the other hand--transitory symphonies

that circulated the county after the paperback
left my hands, their sounds wound sans serif roots
around my arteries, tucked their hearts inside
my ventricle. and i think this eulogy has been bubbling

there ever since *the normal heart*, marinating along with
your inheritance of acidity, waiting to pinball up
my throat and into the bitter pocket of life here
tucked inside my coat, somewhere else. but instead

i was here, and the sourness exploded from the crevices
between my teeth and painted my cheeks and dripped
into the rest of the town, rancor curdling in the gutter,
and you were gone and the flowers were blooming and

we'd never be happy again, just like you wanted.

drop a teabag into a cup of boiling water.
watch the rich gold spread, leached from the
leaves, and sweet aroma bloom into being.
breathe in the warm, damp air. hope that
more mold does not decide to burrow
into your bones, or at least that the sips
of gilt-liquid might gnaw the rot away
like some kind of sunlit-magic sweetened
with two pink packets of artificial sugar.

gulp while waiting for the morning news.
feel your pulse pressed up against the flat
ceramic turn cold; swallow and look for
anything gathering at the bottom of the
cooling water. do you believe in reading
this? can you believe at all, let alone in a
prophecy, when the world is wrapped in
an opaque filter and needs to be torn open
before anything useful can be derived?

do not answer. you do not know, any more
than i do. that is the essence of the end of
the world, scrambling for purchase when
all you see is the water, one scalding drop
catching on your fingertip and plunging
your hand into the mug as if that could
help. that is the lesson of the end of the
world: not knowing what to do, getting
hurt while waiting for the tea to brew.

for an explanation of love.
there is always someone willing, with
a deceptively simple comparison. today:

your friends are endorphins from
a jog through the park in the warm
simmer of summer sun, the frosted glass
of lemonade afterwards.

your lover is a hard drug,
delivered direct to the brain,
& exercise & food
do not compare.

except, i once walked five miles for
an ice cream cone, & as i started to
walk home, eyes full of sunset &
mouth full of rocky road, i was glad to be

sober. i am perpetually sober &
i have never regretted it, even when
i am pouring wine.

i suppose i will just have to ask again tomorrow.

I.

How quickly the warmth of your worship cooled into a mist. How easily our altar accumulated dust. Your mask of loyalty slipped like the sun into the horizon at the death of day. I remember how you pelted the earth with libations & spilled my name in a mantra—poured oil on my feet & filled the air with fragrant smiles. How you called me father, wore me like a pendant—tucked me in your heart like the scripture.

II.

This idol is a glutton—set before him a buffet of adulation & waltz into his heart. If that fails, offer tears as ablution to invoke mercy.

You try to fit god between your palms but he's as a bubble. You sink your teeth into waters of supplication, falling as desperate tides against my hull but I am Olumo, unmoved by your antics.

Your lover is a communion cup.

Your name is on a yellow sticky note, crammed with two others, on a prophet's desk in Ogbelaka. You will be dumped in the morning, only you will not be told. He won't be bold enough to relay *bàbá's* verdict.

"Yetunde's cellar will run out of space, her barns will mock the seasons—but the nursery will grow dust & cobwebs."

I heard your lover failed to return when the Benin project ended. He moved in with the slim girl, the one he met at the new market—the one the priest said was fertile as the swine. I learnt he was back at a prophet's lair, with a new list of three. What happened to the girl he met in a pastor's vision, the one who would be his sure harbour, whose *ẹlẹdá* is strong—who he should not cross?

They said he called last week, 6 months after your last call. This time the oracle chose you.

my nails are a rasp
that fractures the thicket

of impulse makes
my knuckles
bleed

resistance
is so limp
how do I stop

myself from hurting
myself with my hands

the act of digging
myself out feels
mythical jolted

this is a test
of self-control

precision of hand
means something different
when my fingers want to
curl up like a raven's
claw ravenous
scarring uninhibited

have you
ever watched
a berry bleed
so feebly

it looks so vivid
free raw

to dissociate
i etch
her out so she

(Sleight of Hand, continued, no stanza break)

can reach
out for her
missing physical-
ities

Clayre Benzadón
Panic Attack
after Joanna Newsom's "Only Skin"

Only skin it is only skin
but it feels like a sharp
string knotted around
my wrists

outside of myself
is dissonance
mute voice
dissociation

I lie down for
sixteen minutes—

I have to close my body
but softly, because when I do
it's constant clenching,

asterisk body latticed
through my bedroom
rug

a harmless shaggy
corpse a cover
for panic

At fourteen, enclosed
in a fur coat, I'm running off
with someone on a cruise

After my family
finds me
I guilt trip

gulping to the point
of panting for air

(Panic Attack, continued, stanza break)

about to vomit
and my heart
 my heart blooms
 beneath
 vein of feather-
 weight
 frame—

Skin is
as malleable
as scraps
of sassafras

so easy to burrow
into like yarrow

and it is an addiction
to be a woman
who strips off

 her body,
 peels it
 off in
an attempt to detach from
the past of
 skin.

I was never instinctive enough;
took your blood
orange by the slice.

I had to use a knife
to skew its rind.

Peel through example.
Slit a nail through its navel,

 midsweet,

 sip the top,
then spit out the pips.

Now try it on me.

When you licked my stomach
button, I touched the blade
to your nose to test

its bluntness.
You didn't think
to withdraw.

I drew you with my tongue
enough times to forget food,

almost stabbed you
with my hunger,
which only exists since

I've learnt it
through my body.

Somatics are semantic:
you squeezed the color

(Orange Somatics, continued, stanza break)

orange, full of rage,
out of me so hard

I ignited, sensitive:

I (be)came pulp
and laved myself

near my navel

with own valent
juices.



(Un)Fallen No. 5
by Edward Lee

Stela Brinzeanu
A Nation of Pavlov's Dogs

At five o'clock every night
The village sinks into darkness
At the flick of a switch
By some big, swinging dick
A member, no doubt, of the Party.

A nation of Pavlov's dogs
Well trained and obedient to our Master
The good citizens have lit their candles
The bad ones are fast asleep,
And the ugly are out fumbling in the dark
Combing history for forgotten mistakes
To collate and to flaunt in the Master's face.

There are, of course, the mad ones too—
The losers, the dreamers, the fools
Who are sworn to finding the dragon
To fight and to slay
To set free once and for all
The long-held captive –
The bright new dawn, the promised day.

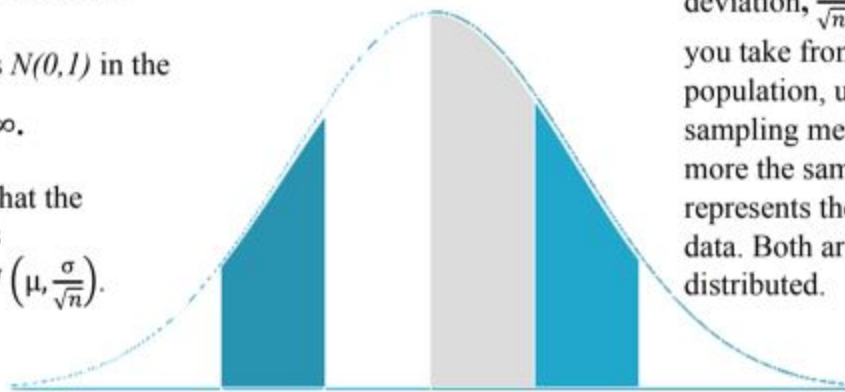
Awash in moonlight I lie awake
My ghastly skin a memory from the future
An unbidden reminder, lest I forget
The rules of the game, which
I haven't chosen, but must play.
You, urban fox, crying in the night
Distressed, sublime,
Ripping the air–
Your scream is mine.

“168.5 lbs is the average weight for women, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.”

If \bar{x} is the mean of a random sample X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n of size n from a distribution with a finite mean μ and a finite positive variance σ^2 , then the distribution of

$W = \frac{\bar{x} - \mu}{\frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{n}}}$ is $N(0, 1)$ in the limit as $n \rightarrow \infty$.

This means that the variable \bar{x} is distributed $N\left(\mu, \frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{n}}\right)$.



Take a population of data with an average, \bar{x} . The data from that population is spread into numerical categories by the standard deviation, $\frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{n}}$. The more you take from a population, using random sampling methods, the more the sample data represents the population data. Both are normally distributed.

We keep growing, we keep breeding, and as our forests burn and our suburbs mushroom,

$n \rightarrow \infty$. What are we measuring? What human qualities can be distilled into a bell curve to be measured and reported?

“A human being is not measured by the number on their scale, but by the contents of their heart.”

Hannah Brown
I Used to Scare Magpies

I used to scare magpies.

We couldn't watch shows with

my fledgling body,

Magpies featured.

Unclothed.

Magpies eat all we have.

Tiny hands gripping.

Magpies eat more than we have.
Magpies will take your children

lumps of cement I ran
frenzied, rabies spilling from mouth,

and

to scare off the magpies that ate the seeds that we

Drag

out for the well-mannered birds.

Drag them

to Hell.
Everywhere outside is
Magpies.

Kristine Brown
the ones who hurt you

a feature on your front page,
his seasonal aspiration
soaring through a dull sky,
descending onto your pillowcase
emptied of caramel candies,
the ones you vowed to never miss
but that was just another aching lie,
initially annoying but a faded shading
by the weakest graphite, broken pencil
scrawling formerly hallowed names.

treat these stairs as bleachers
while hundreds swarm at the curb below.
and when you get to the top,
knock yourself out with some kettle bell cartwheel.

this is how you mock the news
without the trouble of swallowing whole
rulers aplenty for each open house
your translucent children refuse to attend.

feel the jolt of a busted knee
and the flap of an open book bag.
headphones collapsed on shoulder blades wide
while eyes sigh shut behind warped glass.

I've had this jacket for too long
and it holds its own without a word
about why it wrinkles in August's glow
or cold black tea spilled days before.

Diane Callahan
The Way You Talk About War

A quiet man dies one day in December
on the wings of a blackbird, and the world hears
heat, gunfire, loss. Your eyes sing like a soldier
marching to the pyre, fluent in the language
of blood-stained soil on your boots, complicit
with embers rising from the east. You don't
speak for the dead, but you can walk beside them
or at least slaughter what's left, even though
none of it means a goddamn thing.

if i read enough books
i will leave my body
she wrote but I didn't believe her
until her paper-thin self
floated somewhere between
Márquez and O'Connor
and I lost her
in the shelves where
every page she left behind
shriveled a little
for want of
her touch.



(Un)Fallen No. 10
by Edward Lee

Small palms of the body converge, are clasped, and they hold
each other, propping up the curious crown, keeping it still.
Pierced ears swallow the demands adorned with “please”

and house a single gem. Nearly black hair with its pleas
to be free was never heard. It was bounded and held
by translucent globes, twisted. This girl would say that steel

was weaker in comparison. This girl’s gaze was steel.
But not cold. It was cool, durable, a kind luster. *Please*
look at mommy. Look right here. Now hold

still and look into your own eyes. The strawberry
red dress with sugar white collar held gingerbread skin.
She’s so sweet. Despite pleas, the camera flashed.

The flash performed surgery on the girl who was me.
Its scalpel cut at the beauty beyond skin, bound to bone. Saved
nothing. My cleverness remained gasping on the stretcher.

My witty and reticent tongue, powerless.
The flare, the click, was a wreath of ancient snakes, turned me
into stone. Its chisel chipped away at the statue, saving
all the curves. A shell of red, white, black and brown was saved.
She was left a doll to be made up again and again, deciphered
by an outside iris. You look at the image in time.

A face, half a body without her name affixed.
What is left to save, but everything? Others don’t
know the story, only the sculpture in their mind’s museum.

You see the image of the lamented girl in red.
She lives in me.

John Dorroh
The Promise of Water

I want to shed myself like snakeskin, to leave my weathered tracings in green garden furrows. That dry sky, its arid breath, robbing ground and grass of what it craves most often, the low ceiling of desperate promises of significant accumulations. It never happens like they say. I swear I'm in love with water, the promise of life, the most succulent evictions of overdue precipitation. So often I am let down and feel that I must move my life to another house, but even there exists fulfilled promises which are conditional at best.

Your art frightens me,
like standing too close to the fire,
leaning into scoop out some memories –
when my dad died in January, my friends
had a bonfire and we roasted him until
his skin was nice and crisp. I couldn't eat
him because there were no sides, just meat
which was overdone. He never would have
served that to anyone.

At night, I wonder
how deeply
the moon breathes.

Does it gasp
with the exertion
of lighting
green fields and
dusty roads,
or does it count
to ten
on every inhale,
every exhale, peacefully
aware
of the approaching
sun?

Does the moon
breathe audibly,
or does it
take it in
in whispers?

Can I feel it
on my neck? The air
of the moon?
The perpetuity
of its labor?

You returned one night.
Your eyes no longer like
warm breath on a cold window.
Your tongue no longer blue
like a bruise.

My pupils followed my
tears, down to dry feet,
that stood on fertile soil
gone strange and black,
like the uncanny crack of
a child playing near the
edge of Brighton pier.

A silent scream slid from my lips.
You returned to your home under the tulips.

My breath releases the words: *He's dead.*
More damaged than before, my body
a ball in the centre of my bed,
I long for you even more.

On our way home,
We drive away
From the sun-kissed patios,
White salamander-covered walls,
coconut ice cream served
in a coconut shell,
And the splashing and swimming
In the chlorine-blue pool, under
the heat of the bright Spanish skies.

Instead, we swelter in this stuffy SsangYong,
eating ham and cheese rolls,
that sweat along with us.

Do we have to go back?
We all whine, bread spurting
from our mouths.
Yes, of course! Holidays don't last forever.

But why not? Why don't they?
Why can't they?
Tears started to well in
My eyes. *Why? Why?*

And we didn't stop, even for the toilet,
Until we hit the channel tunnel.
And we'd never go back. *Never.*

i speculate. is there *anything* else left?
an open window.
the sky above continues its somber repose; the stars burned out. depleted.
i pull the curtains. grant myself permission.
to scrawl through the desolation, the weariness
make *it* solid. make *it*
so that i can touch *it*.
approach and mend *it* with my bruised palms, numb and cold against the sultriness of june.
this summer, i try to become.



(Un)Fallen No. 29
by Edward Lee

Sam Frost
I Hope You Had the Time of Your Life

It starts quickly, me on top & he says “keep going. I want to see you come.” He pulls my hair to arch my neck & before I go down, I see the tattoo. The movement and funky font stirs hope that I’m misreading, so after he comes, I ask “does this say what I think it says?”

“It’s a Green Day lyric.” And I don’t say “I know, obviously.” I don’t tell him about prom & dancing to this song with the first boy I loved. This isn’t a moment for sharing more than our flesh, but I want it to be. I want to tell him we camped the day after prom. It was my first time in a tent,

& we fucked while our friends were right outside the fabric. We fucked on the beach because we were young & thought it was adventure in it’s most primal state. Then, I never came during sex. Now, his fingers curve my body’s slope & he’s hunched over, breath caught

in smokers’ lungs. His cum drips down my torso & his sweat merges with my sweat & my hand grips the curls of his hair, & I want to come & I try to come & I think of that first lover, shocked to see me, California sun soaked & wine stained tongue latched onto this almost stranger. I come.

When she hands over the bag, she says eat
it all, every bite. This is how you consume
me. The pink flesh is sweetest, & it's your
mouth that drips as it surfaces.

We slow dance in this empty bar as upstairs
becomes our private home, this space created
for only us, right here, now. One drink turns
to two, and your fingers find me.

On a ferry to the next island, you sleep
& I sit calmly, happiness like sugar. My skin
burns like yours in this small cave as water spills
back and forth. This— that, is happiness.

Sam Frost
While He Sleeps

I want to tell him his breath is the universe
held in open palms, & I don't need music,
not tonight, no. My chest follows his chest
as I try to find words worthy of his waking
eyes still clinging to crust, clinging to sleep
in its final breath. His breath is the universe
held in clenched fists & I don't need healing,
not tonight, no. My sores and open wounds
can't cling to him the way they want to; tight
lips bleed red, bleed glue, bleed sealed. Not
tonight, no. His lips move & they're whispers
I can never know. Maybe they're hauntings
or dreams or goodbyes that he must breathe
out to the universe— it's waiting. Beautiful
things know he's worthy, as the sun can't rise
without his breath, without his gentle smile.

Sam Frost
An Old Tattoo Shop, Grantham, England

An old man with inked up arms squished
his eyes shut tight as a fresh jar of salsa
& said "I hope you're ready for the pain."
He said it was bad & I tried not to shake
as the artist stroked his razor along skin
with a back & forth graze gentle but firm
as a hand squeeze from an almost friend
or past lover still large enough to wound.
When the hair was gone & he was ready
to stain me, I looked away & prepared
for torture, both eyes locked on my first
love. His eyes looked teary, as if he felt
what I was about to feel. The buzz buzz
started & my skin was pierced & I let out
a giggle & looked towards the old man
with inked up arms. "Kinda tickles, right?"
He winked & I wanted to laugh but held
my breath. It was over & black ink on arm
flesh & bloody background ready to quiver,
itch from beneath the tight, plastic wrap.
Dad's initials stared up & I was branded
& it was comfort, like a reminder to cry.
As if I needed a statement, some bold
move to make flesh scream what I can't
say: this changed me, of course it did.

It's not that bad, once you get used to it.
When the sun has set, and you're cold in the dark,
You'll find solace in your burning rage.
You'll feel the heat of your anger warm your body.

When the sun rises again, you'll drink iced coffee,
To smother the fire that has grown in your heart.
The rage that warms your body will leave you cold and alone.
And, one day, you'll find yourself in a cold, dark grave.

It's not so bad, once you get used to it.
I feel the smoke coat my lungs,
The ash fill my mouth,
The fire burn my stomach.

One day, it'll be okay,
Just not today.

Cactus spines and heat's sharp dagger
Do not defeat my weary legs
Though burnt skin peels
Beneath the wrathful sun
A journey's pain
To craft a better future
Void of lacerations
From fate's acerbic flog
Along the way some perished
Not in vain
Always remember sacrifice my son
Your future and my past
Link trembling fingers
For in them now
Hope's hummingbird we hold.

Trevann Hamilton
I Want to Read about Black Women Laughing

Black women laugh too
That running away from the joke
Doubled over
Hands-on knee
Tears streaming down
Hoarse
Laughter

We are not only vessels for pain and mourning
Some days joy reaches out of us
To hold our mouths taunt

We hold our sisters' hands and shake it
Not just for comfort and solidarity
But to pass the laugh to her

We hold our stomach
Not from grief and loss
But because we simply can't stop laughing

They told me I loved my freedom. They spoke as if that was something I wore like a wool dress on a sticky, hot Kansas day. I felt their glares slide through me with eyes too stunted to see. They would have ripped me apart if they had the chance. Talking about my hips that swayed and my throaty laugh. Whispering how summer brought heat that riddled my body sweaty, and how he had no choice but to soil me. My white shorts stained grass green. They believed me to be a woman who grasped for more when actually I was a girl begging for love.

Christy Jones
vulpes cogitatio
previously published by The Collidescope

i caught Never, sent her wistful siren back to half-past autumn, but there are so many more liquid pulses, nestled serpentine synapses, finely tuned to blend with blood & breathing. it's like separating bone from sinew, cake from frosting, white from snow, or your voice from my waistband.

these, far too large to be squirrels, pounce on my clotheslines, Longing teasing Amity like mz. popular changes her mind. grief's the only rhythm, and these strings remember, remember that stretch There. that ache, This latitude. the potency of low when grass is whisper-near and is you taut or is you wavy, sines and wonderings? how much did they loosen, and how much of you came unraveled at birth

at the night sky
sprinkled with the remnants of stardust
from yesterday's supernova
e x
p
l o
s i
o n
and

I wish your hydrogen heart

could fuse with mine
we'd be sailing
across galaxies
groping for rings of
planet
ary nebula
where heaven trickles
down from specks of stars
but
dawn bleeds from the edge of the universe
reminding us of our love:
star-crossed.

there is still a world out there
unexplo(re)d(ed).

you've shed your baby fat
and unbridled optimism
by now you've caught on
that from today until the ground takes us back
it's mainly just back pain and regret
and you've made peace with that
because you get laid sometimes
and you might go to Scotland one day
so you're painting the mailbox
a fun color
and sinking in for the last longest haul
because your blistered heels demanded it
and you're sick of searching
for a shadier spot
but still
whenever something bad happens
whenever you feel
hurt or humiliated or hungover
you have to fight your body
and its old desperate impulse
to zip yourself into a duffle bag and flee
to another town, one where no one knows
your family name or how inconvenient you are
to love
or how many putrid secrets
slink between your butter yellow teeth
when you decide to get drunk
on an empty stomach

Perhaps a swan in a river,
an elegant little boat of flesh and blood
flitting across bodies of water like Belostomatidae
Appealing to the muse's watchful gaze
In the way long necked corresponds with elegance
And whiteness finds its equivalence in beauty
The metaphor is beaten to death and just as hideous
As the roach-body of the water bug
Fasten your pincers around prey and preform some elegance of your own
Liquify the insides of your catch
So the viscera sits atop on a filmy layer above the river water
And strike the soft flesh of human hands with your teeth
Like the elegant beak of the swan
When it lashes out to wound,
And perhaps poets will create sonnets out of you



(Un)Fallen No. 39
by Edward Lee

At 6:23 a.m. 11-year-old Lizzie Robertson-Rutland
was hit by two vehicles as she tried to cross the street
to her school's bus stop.

How many tears can pink
Mylar hearts hold
fluttering from the utility pole
that witnessed your killing.

How can we spool you
back, press a blunt stylus
into a sheet of acetate
then lift your double
collision from the world.

Eyes tight fisted
we see your bowels
 bust into your chest,
your spleen & heart
 rupture,
 ribcage shatter
 & flood,

stillness of your princess
 t-shirt, spinning of your
 unicorn earrings, skewed
lullaby of red dawn
 flashing,
 syntax of
 hit & run.

Rikki Santer
Feathers
after Ligaya Misham

I'm riddled with pinions.
Some mornings I feel your ghost
heartbeat, tiny bird deep
inside my body—
you parachuted
when the storm
of my mother's sudden
death made landfall. I collect
plumes from passing vultures
their mythology escapes me
yet I am tethered
to their hunger for the dead.
I never named you
but I knew your way
the fractal life for the brother
you left behind
the one who discards me.

Half leaves, half sails
bouquets of sluffed feathers
on my nightstand
my porch
totems on my window sills
dormant quills
to right my sorrow
with the smallest of filaments
held together
by microscopic hooks.

You my drifting cloud dream your axis mundi high wire again
your calliope nursing cousins Miss Melody & Miss Cacophony
Hush Hush it's just too much still too much exhaling
from your life-sized posters peeling tall & tattered on fences &
barns Octaves of ideas sired by dime novels & run away
wishes curling at supper tables in Zanesville & Chillicothe
Memory peeping through a paper hoop elephants sashay
on revolving cabinet cards nonsense bruises clown car
upholstery whips of lion tamers slither through sawdust
How to deride distance from mud show pageant to tweeze
clarity from sideshow angels Hush Hush Miss Bareback
dream beyond your launch sideways dream beyond
the final striking of the tent

*What about your journals—/pages
of proof you never changed/ no
matter what the mirror tells you.
-Kim Addonizio*

When I was 16, I filled a journal page
about my first job—the lingerie department
at Kmart— and how I imagined those black
see-through baby dolls with eenie weenie
red bows pretending they could counter
divorce proceedings. Today with my man
of three decades—clear cold of December,
this overlook above Darby Creek, this elevator
taking us closer to heaven & I am winged,
the *Peter Peter Peter* of two titmice plucking
thin branches that vein cloudy blue. Beat
by beat the have-to want-to push-pull slide
of it, the nagging lacunas—knife to cut bread,
knife to nick my enemy. At Osprey Lake
no osprey but my shoulder far from his
as we stand in solemn rupture beneath
sixty or so turkey vultures, punctuating
the arms of a massive oak as dusk settles
in—next entry to claim me.

Morning routines used to set in motion days of sweetness. And joy. Honeysuckle walks at dawn. Public transport commutes on rails - green, red, orange lines, too. Coffee with colleagues. Chatter wrapped in light linen. Dinner dates - salt rimmed glasses, olives on toothpicks. Spicy nachos with extra cheese, jalapenos, and zesty chili.

Daily puzzles, too. Acrostics, square grids, sudoku boxes
- my form of playful prayer.
No identifiable solutions. Hangman all that remains.

Now, crosswords overwhelm. Two-letter words for ____,
six-letter words for ____, four-letter words with a second 'e.'
A third 'm.' *Me* - only backwards. Stuck in the middle
of a perplexing puzzle - no longer playful - and no obvious
- or imminent - solution. Each of us, subjects in an expert
acrostic, played like the novices we are. A random "U."
An unruly "O." Why? No - "Y."
You - only different. Backwards, too.

Now, night becomes day and day
becomes night. I seek a 4-letter
word for ____.

Once coveted - G__D___E / _E D D __ G _/
Fill in yours here: __ _ _ _ _ _ now nothing more
than a symbolic X on a calendar crossword.
Even the Splenda
jar runs low - as puzzles go unsolved.

There are no substitutes. Can't swap an A for an E,
Splenda for splendid, no thank you.

I see only blanks. __, __, __.

Do you know a three-letter word for fear?
Dread? Death? No. Tic?

Tic. Toc. Clock minutes count as sand timer
drips. All I come up with is: W H Y

Morning greetings spill through speakers, one per room - affixed to paint chipped, asbestos poisoned ceilings, unknowing silent killers so unlike the noisy violence on our daily steps - *Good day to all....* - beside a single ceiling fan whirling unseen toxins that will later form dark spots on our young and still developing lungs - in each of the building's fifty-three rooms. Inside jokes of hidden closets and haunted versions of ourselves from classes prior inhabiting the final dwelling. The missing room No. 54. *Did you see...?* Misplaced backpacks, clear by compliance - it's regulation. *Did you hear...?* Uninhabited chairs that squeak. Each room, a relic from the 1920s, home to no less than thirty-four warm bodies of all shapes and shades. Principal - Ms. B. - shares updates on weather - *cloudy with a chance of rain* - isn't it always the case? - and schedules - *extended time for third period* - my stomach flutters, foreboding and dread of monthly cycles with neither supplies - clear backpacks only - nor options for pass-permitted bathroom breaks - *I'd rather not say...* - always closing with the words I wait for - the reason I - we - all eighteen-hundred plus of us seeming misfits, tagged before birth and by zip code - show each day and on time - *No matter what, Remember - you are loved.* Static. Click. Now done. Silence. A single chair squeaks. Rubber soled shoes shuffle. Someone coughs. Pick up broken No. 2 and write. *Love you, too.* Ms. B. Rip sheet of lined paper from spiral notebook. Crumple, tight. Place in right front pocket. Nod. For now I know the voice of kindness.

Laminated signs in square and rectangular blocks shout words of WELCOME, ALL.
Thirty-plus point fonts of bold, sans-serif print. Clusters of gold and silver – faux,
of course. Chimes alert clerks of accepted invites as palms press bulletproof glass
doors. Blank eyes squint. Reveal small print. Two-point font with familiar facades.
Bodies move to capital position. Eyes track. Life's never been CAPs for All.

how ardently he talks about Jesus and his twelve disciples,
his voice rising and falling like a football commentator's. I watch his lips
press forward to say "hallelujah". his hands demonstrate heaven. a gold band
flaring on his ring finger. and right there on the altar, I'd take him
through the pages of the Songs of Solomon. holding his
sex in my hands, pressing my lips to it, just as he does to the microphone.
the choir starts singing and then stops when he returns. his coat is off,
his chest pushing against his shirt like it wants to
break free. tiny ants crawling up to my neckline.
I am seated in the front row, laughing at anything he says, leading his
eyes to the urgent gap between my thighs.
when he finds it, I either freeze or shake with undiluted lust.

She can't own a strap-on in her state
so she flies to see me / in rented rooms
with cotton sheets perfumed
an inoffensive vanilla
and anonymous beige walls
that will hold everything tonight
and remember nothing tomorrow.

Here she says she can be
herself / the one who presses me
into the hotel carpet
with her cock and calls me her
slutty baby girl. Even though
she's younger than me.

She holds my neck
grip greedy tight
like I am a prized
possession cherished
and valuable / but
still owned. She pulls out /
my face from the floor
by my hair and holds
me between her thighs
until she is burning
alive again at last.

Draped in cheap sheets / the afterward
pain faded to yearning / which is still pain /
I tell myself I can turn this into something
sapphic: the toga-clad maidens
twined redhot/figures immortalized
on a cracked vase. That image
testament she feels,
like I do / fullthroat thick
with a swarm.



(Un)Fallen No. 69
by Edward Lee

The light feels newborn here,
full of mist and dust roses, the blush
of the new day with the water

still cold, breaking easy, breaking
calm, on the rocks below
our quaint veranda fixed table.

A quick dip and a look at the sunrise.

Promise of bread and honey, bath after,
languid, relaxed, emotion pooled faster,

towelled off, you come seeking to seduce
and why not, why not, give in to you?

Suspended in this knot of time, off radar,

no agenda, no calendar, no breaking
calamity, just breaking calm, breaking easy,
the rhythm of days relaxed.

like horse, or camel, like tyre swing
like through a season, like holiday
like bicycle, like child
like song, like story, a trembling fever, like love,
like love, like waiting to begin
like journey
like making a long, slow, mistake
like pen running out
like companion going, going, and long gone
hello goodbye, goodbye hello
like the road calling, like wanderlust
like travelling the length of the country
your body, rolling countryside, staying outside
in the rolling waves
like shipside, like quay, like ride
like go, like going, and always onto the next
adventure,
like road trip, long journey, like wheels rolling
like choose,
like seasons, like falling, like springing, summer
and wintering, over wintering, migrations
skyfulls of clouds or birds, flocking
like trouble
like a whale in the ocean, a tail in the surf
like trouble beaching a turtle
like feeding a frenzy, like lady luck
like ride
finding your tribe and making a journey,
singing a song, finding
and then losing your way
like waiting to begin, beginning like ride
locomotion like Kylie, like re-invention by water
by air, through time and space, like ride
like pressure, greenhouse and farm
like a fire burning down

(ride, continued, no stanza break)

(embers aglow drawing in wildlife –once,
seen in a film) a film, music video, like ride,
it's wild on the open road, just ride
see the open night sky
and stars falling into the road
making a life in art, like ride
the waves, the waves at the end
of the earth where the ocean rolls on,
rollercoaster flinging
life at the shore, like ride
riding motorbike, make your mother cry
but like, ride anyway
to the coast, to escape, into the blue,
and on into the infinite blue
like ride
like seafaring nation, notion to sail away
flight like flitting like going, going, long gone
like picnic in sepia old pictures on yellowing
walls, like plan, like coach trip,
like train journey and tour and all the old ways
of living, taking music to the masses,
what a ride,
what a rush,
like safari, see the elephants and lions
and giraffes so tall,
like boat trip downriver to the sea,
always the sea, she's always the sea,
and she's always there, like life,
like sailboat, across the ocean set out
like sail right back into her heart, like ride
like loving make love like question
like answer, like ride, ride, ride...
like waiting to begin again
begin at the beginning, again
like ride, like ride of the moon

(ride, continued, no stanza break)

around us and Earth in orbit
around the sun, she rides,
like ride of heart around love interest
like going, like gone, and long gone,
like lost, and lost in reverie, just ride,
ride it out, ride time and space may fold
it out, just ride, like odyssey, like despair,
like life, like absolutely no choice,
but hold head up high
like hover, like soar,
like hellfire,
like wing beat,
like angel after anger,
like ride
like ordinary spin and ordinary ride
start again and ride
like starfloat and love never was
but it was and we ride,
we ride,
we ride

FICTION

If I compared youth to a summer's beach, then I reflect on its rippled peach. The golden sand which time could never reach. It's pretty, pristine ripples preserved like the clenched newborn fist, saw billions of years come and go, but never touched the sands to bleach.

However, sandcastles may break. Mandalas wiped off. Children played, past, present, and the future. Clearly, the time had moved on. But the beach remained without a blemish. The sea by its side, carrier of bloody bodies, pirate histories, papyrus battles. Homer passed on. His Wine-dark Sea remained just the same.

A new day was issued. A fresh face of youth. New creases appeared on the skin once it was smooth. Unchangeable and predictable and unwrinkled, but, time over time. Sands soaked up human dramas played over it.

I sit here on the sand today. I sat here many moons ago. I shall continue to sit until I break my bones. Time will touch me. Time touched the great Ozymandias. Futile. But the sands proved more powerful than all. Time stood still at its edge without a stir.

You watch the skin peel from your arms, sheeting flakes of white. Beneath, the red, raw skin, young and fresh. Something that ought not be revealed, and it tingles to your bones when you brush your fingertips over it, a stinging illicit pain.

There was a post, once, that you remember seeing on Tumblr. The spelling was American (surprise, surprise when so much of what you see on Tumblr is so very American and you yearn for other voices, familiar ones whispering of familiar things and not these things that have become familiar), and spoke of how when it's cold, "I can just put on more layers" but when it's hot "what am I expected to do, peel my skin off?" or words to that effect. As if prolonged exposure to the sun would not do the same.

There is something to be said for the cold and how it preserves, for wrapping up in blankets and hot water bottles. But there is something to be said, too, for seeing the grass scorched white, the stark unreality of it when there are so many shades of green and when that green will come again, at the first rain.

The person who made that post would not credit how the burning sun renews the world. As if the blast of heat is all that's needed to clean away the past and start afresh. All that's needed to persuade the earth to give up its secrets – the patch that remains deep green too long (what was buried there?), the circles marked in crops, not aliens or witchcraft but where someone lived, once.

How it sloughs your skin to reveal mottled freckles you had forgotten existed, adds a tint of copper to your dark hair. Imprints of a past life, memories held in strands of DNA.

The chocolate doesn't melt. Billy doesn't reach him. The dodgem doesn't move.

The Dairy Milk revolves and keeps revolving. The boy's classmates don't say anything because they wouldn't have thought he could be so dumb. But Mrs Rimmer knows what he's doing. She scorns the idiot boy. Is he trying to break the machine? Of course he knows how it works. He's clever enough. She doesn't need to teach him.

Exposed and shivering in PE kit, the boy tenses on the line. There has been no demonstration. So, he does what he thinks is required. He runs, worn plimsolls slipping on damp grass, and he hears, too late, the parade-ground bawl from the teacher in the Schwarzenegger tight T-shirt. The man muscles down into the boy's face, eyes popping like Looney Tunes, and he spittle-flecks him with derision. Doesn't he know that Billy couldn't have made it to the baton even if he'd run backwards? He's done it to the poor bugger on purpose, that's what he's done. Look at Billy there, wheezing, hands on knees, lungs in knots and oblivious to anything but the need for his inhaler.

The boy is sitting at the wheel and, up until this moment, it has been so exciting. Usually, he'd watch the rides, linger around the stalls, pick up a few discarded chocolates or cadge a freebie being handed out. This time, though, dad had agreed. Perhaps the gee-gees had gone his way this week: he's got his ride.

He could tell Mrs Rimmer that they don't have a microwave at home. He could say that he's no idea how chocolate melts in a microwave. But still she wouldn't believe.

He says nothing to the Schwarzenegger T-shirt. Half the class think he's done it on purpose to embarrass Billy, and that confuses them because they'd not had him down as the type to join in the baiting. The other half don't know what is happening. The new boy is running the track on his own. They knew he was an oddbod, but they'd not expected this. If it bothers them, they don't say. It'll be something clever, they know that much. He's got an attitude, this one.

The boy sits there, wrenching the wheel from side to side, and the dodgem doesn't move. The other kids, merciless, they go for him, and now he moves, pinballed from side to side, and he looks out towards the barrier and the man standing there with the fag on and his hand in his pocket. He'll be contemplating a pint on the way home as he jangles his change and misses entirely the boy trying to attract his attention. The teenager with the purpled face gets to the boy first, accuses him of "pissing

about,” fair hauls him out of the dodgem and tells him to play it properly next time and not spoil it for everyone else.

There is no mention of pedals on the way home.

The young man in the Burtons suit and the new tie is introduced to the staff on the same day as his interview. The headteacher seems particularly pleased with his new acquisition and Deirdre and Timothy and Linda listen to his qualifications and experience and seem impressed. He shakes their hands, each one of them, and does his best to meet their eyes as they search for him somewhere behind his specs. He smiles. After the head’s questions in the interview, he makes no further promises right now. September will be the test, he knows. Just as he also knows that however well he does with his new job and his new class, some things will never change.

The chocolate will not melt. Billy will not reach him. The Dodgem will not move.

That is why he is here.

Tara Van De Mark
A Mother's Worst Nightmare

In the surgical room alone, I lay on the table, surrounded by equipment that gleams white, silver and sterile. The voltage above shines with an unnatural glow that highlights every pore on my body. The paper crunches against my back, the hospital gown only covering part of me.

A voice comes over the loudspeaker, "Do you want to see your baby?" I nod. Then, unsure whether they can see me or not, say out loud "Yes, please." The wall in front of me flashes bright and becomes a screen, I prop myself up to see more clearly. A perfect circle appears, like a single drop on still water. Inside the circle is a cluster of cells that makes up my blastocyst, my baby girl. The picture disappears.

Warm tears wet my cheek as I ready myself for the start of this new journey to motherhood. Dressed in surgical garb they enter with the catheter that holds her. Inserting a cold metal speculum, I watch on a screen as the catheter goes in and liquid ripples into my uterus. I am silent and still. "All done!" they say, leaving. I am empty though, alone. She is still on the petri dish, still under the microscope, still in the lab, still not a part of me.

I lay back and look directly into the light, wanting to scream for my baby. But what can I say to their medical precision and process, "I have this feeling that you haven't done your job and my baby girl is still in your lab." I know their smug faces would just dismiss my concern as hysteria, tell me I signed waivers that this might not work, look and say they see nothing in the lab.

Three years later, I stood on the icy gray bank and hung my boot off the edge, where land ends and the abyss of water begins. Below are shadows of creatures the size of houses, floating, conserving their energy until their next meal. The inky water melds into the night sky, becoming one dark velvet drape over our world.

The crinkling from our bags echoes in the darkness as I do a last check to make sure we have everything. I glance up briefly, she is still safely in the boat, sitting upright, ethereal, and unnatural for a toddler. Her face is in the shadow of her hood but little vapor clouds buoy up each time she exhales. Her chubby fingers clench the boat line, I had told her sternly, "never let it go!"

We are ready for our escape. Then my eye catches my mistake before my mind realizes what I have done. She is floating a foot too far from the shore, unmoored. I had untied the boat from the piling, that end is now floating under the water, she sits there, holding the line to nothing.

My body is frozen as my mind speeds through every option, but I already know there are none. She floats away into the velvet curtain, gone.

Four more years later, our knees tap lightly against each other with the rhythmic sway of the train. The abandoned buildings and graffiti from my childhood pass by as we get closer. Her backpack is open next to her, a sailing picture book peeks out, along with “Gnarly the Narwal” a favorite stuffy who is missing half a horn. The table between us is strewn with crayons that have been lovingly used down to a small nub and underneath it all her coveted drawing book full of art.

I alternate between looking out the window and looking at her big hazel eyes that go unblinking for fear of missing something. The conductor’s voice from the loud speaker above says, “Next stop, Baltimore, Penn Station.” She sweeps her crayons into their box and is bouncing out of her seat before I have even zipped up my purse.

Our adventure is about to begin. I grab for my phone and feel nothing. She is walking away, just out of reach, so I quickly bend down to see if the phone has fallen. The phone has everything on it. As I lift my head the man across the aisle smirks and I realize that it was him who had grabbed my phone.

“Give it back!” I growl. Glancing forward, she has moved even further away. He smiles, my face heats, and I call for the conductor who runs towards us.

“This man took my phone,” I yell. The conductor looks at the man, who calmly pats down his own body and feigns surprise as he pulls my phone out of his pocket.

“So sorry, I must have accidentally grabbed it.” He shrugs, his words are like slippery silk as he offers it back to me. Confused, I look down the aisle again for her, but the car is now empty.

I run to the window as the train lurches forward, pounding on the glass. I scan for her on the platform, willing her hazel eyes to look back at me, but she is gone, again.

Right now, his hands are holding me, stilling me. We are deep inside the cocoon of our comforter. I am wet, dripping with tears and sweat.

“Shh, I’m here. It’ll be okay.” He murmurs to me, methodical, like he is praying. Awake now, I stop crying, inhaling deep through my nose and then exhaling out my mouth. At first my breath comes out stuttered with little sobs, but with time the release is smooth.

“Is she okay?” I ask, as I try to fall back to sleep.

“Yes my love, she’s fine.” He whispers. I know he is lying. The baby that never was, she grows older only in my nightmares. But I believe him for now so I can sleep and see her again in my mind.

It was fun when we met and fell into each other. I was happy and you were happy. Well, I seemed pretty happy. Or, I felt happy when I was around you? I'm not entirely sure. Something about you lifted me up.

Are you some kind of witch?

I'm just joking, of course, but it kinda felt like that. You swallowed me up, or I dived into you. Does it really matter which? In the end, I was covered in you and lulled by the feel of your skin against mine.

You definitely had some kind of magic. But, I don't think I did.

Maybe it's better this way. You dimmed me, smothered my senses. I missed so many things because I couldn't pay attention to anything else. I didn't see so many things.

What do you want? Do you want me or everyone else? You can't just do it like this, can't you see what it's doing to me?

I used to think you didn't notice all my little things. And I thought I was better because I noticed yours. But you did see them, you just ignored them because it was inconvenient.

You told me once, do you remember? I always thought I was the one who was hooked, that I cared more. And then you woke me in the middle of the night and you made me promise that I would never leave

And I did. Of course, I did.

So why did you?

Whenever we talk, I feel like I'm inconveniencing you.

We used to talk for hours, spend most nights together.

You made me promise. You woke me up and you made me promise.

Why did you do that, if you didn't mean it?

I keep reaching for you and finding nothing.

How can you just do this to me?

I promised.

I'm so confused. This doesn't make any sense, nothing changed.

Maybe the problem was the promise.

I didn't imagine the way that it was between us. I saw it and felt it and it was real. So, how can you be this happy? You seem so much freer, so much lighter.

For me, everything is so much darker. Too heavy to carry.

I kept the promise the best way I knew how. I carried all of you. And I would've taken more. I would've taken all of it. Cut me open and stuff it all inside, there's plenty of room.

But, I made you unhappy? I was always bleeding, sagging under the weight of everything and you found it annoying.

But I didn't stop trying to find the answer. To be whatever it was you needed me to be.

I tried so hard. I was always trying so damn hard. And you never did. You gave me so little even as I ran miles to save you an inch.

You only want me when the fun is over. When you need somewhere safe to rest. You have your fun and pour what's left into to me while you recharge.

You never woke me up again. Not to make promises, anyway.

And I waited.

And I'm so sick. So sick of being this heavy. So sick of being the place you dump yourself when you're tired.

I don't have whatever it is that you need.

It wasn't magic, after all. It was just an illusion.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Doug Hawley

Amnesia

previously published in Wilderness House

I've had clinical amnesia, but it was relatively insignificant. Some other cases have been earth shaking. Let's start with a lesson ignored or forgotten to the present day. The Smoot-Hawley Act of 1930 started a trade war and according to Wikipedia it was catastrophic. There is general consensus that it contributed to the Great Depression. Subsequently, raising tariffs have been tried and failed on many occasions, including as it is currently being used by the US president who seems to think that he is a good businessman. Classic economics has always held that people and countries should usually buy the cheapest regardless of where it originates, making tariffs counterproductive.

I don't think that Representative Willis C. Hawley of Oregon, the Hawley of Smoot-Hawley is related to me.

Variations of the tulip mania or bubble continue to recur with maddening frequency. The tulip bubble occurred in the Netherlands in the 1600s when for complex reasons which can be found elsewhere, tulips became overvalued – the extent is not clear – until their value fell. During the dot-com bubble of 1995-2000, many people lost all their money (much like the tulip buyers) going into debt buying money-losing companies' stock that had .com in their names.

The Great Recession of 2007-2009 (official dates, but the hurt lasted well beyond 2009) had many causes, but one was the implicit belief that home prices always go up despite many counterexamples. We bought our current house in 2003 and after we moved in, home buying was so aggressive, and competition to buy so high that some people were putting up "Not for sale" signs in their yards. Of course house prices don't always go up, and over-leveraging was a big part of the recession. Both banks and buyers were guilty, because of the infamous "liar loans." We are wondering if the next bubble is starting, because we have gotten several approaches recently from agents wanting to sell our house.

In the 1960s the US got heavily involved in fighting in Viet Nam, which ended in severe damage to both countries. In the 1990s multi-cultural Yugoslavia began its disintegration after dictator Tito died. You might think that anyone conscious in the 1960s would conclude that it would be a bad idea to invade a multicultural country in Asia and depose its dictator. It was a bad idea, but the US leaders at that time must have had amnesia when both President Bushes decided to invade Iraq. It seems that Saddam Hussein was our friend, in part because Iraq had oil and he was the enemy of our enemy Iran (side note – thinking that the enemy of our enemy is our friend is a truly bad idea). Using poison gas against Iran and killing his local opponents was not a serious enough offense for the US to depose him, but invading Kuwait was.

Many Americans have declared the despicable current president (I don't use his name) the worst ever and seem to have no idea how small his body count is compared to his predecessors, including two Bushes, a Johnson and a Nixon.

Prophets are continually praying on people's fears of end times, sometimes for monetary gain. Regardless of how many have falsely predicted the date for Armageddon, at least a few will believe the next prediction. Remember Heaven's Gate?

In recent years we have heard about reaching the end of the age of irony (Graydon Carter) after the 9-1-1 terrorism. Of course it wasn't anything like the end of irony. After the "too soon" time was over for comedians, life went on as usual. Likewise, as long as there are people alive, there will be no end to history (Francis Fukuyama to the contrary). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world went from two dominant powers to everybody for himself, not such a huge change, and most lives were unchanged. When Rome or Mongolia either rose or declined were people talking about the end of history? If they thought of it, they were probably too smart for such grandiose pronouncements.

My personal amnesia started on a normal day for me, March 31, 2018. It was another stewardship day removing ivy in the local Tryon Park, something I had done perhaps a thousand times. After driving home, I had lost so much memory that I thought Barack Obama was still president and I didn't know what year it was. After alarming my editor, she took me to the emergency room. I was tested for stroke or other brain damage, but they found nothing (brain joke). After being there for about five hours, I was released. The next day I was more or less normal. The doctors said I had idiopathic (medical for "we don't know") transient global amnesia which seems to happen randomly and may not recur. Perhaps I should be concerned, but because it is something over which I have no control, I am not.

I must be all right now because I haven't bought any dot-com stock or tulips and the neurologist said that my brain wasn't bad for an old man. Images showed a few holes which explains why I can never remember the weather forecast.

For over fifty years I never listened closely to the song "Where Have All The Flowers Gone." In the last year I noticed that it is a loop in that the end of the song is also the beginning. The implied answer to the repeated "When will they ever learn" is "never."

The purple-dappled moth orchid (phalaenopsis) appeared at my doorstep one morning shortly after my grandson's death last May, a thoughtful gesture from a friend. A few weeks later I noticed the little yellow-flowered phalaenopsis withering in a coffee mug on a cluttered shelf at the used bookstore where I volunteer. The owner told me that a customer brought it in, that she felt guilty for neglecting it. "I'll kill it," she said. "Please take it home."

One is a cherished remembrance, the other a challenge. My history with orchids was dismal, but I wanted, needed these to prosper.

I placed them on our dining table, by a window that faced the deck and canyon beyond. The light wasn't great but it was the best I could offer. I watered weekly, fertilized occasionally. To my delight, they flourished. The blossoms lasted for months, what seemed an exceptional bloom period. When they went dormant I clipped off the bloom spikes and continued to provide food and water, but no special diet or care—no coffee grounds or ice cubes, chatter or chants. Nor did I forget them, my probable sin in the past. Over the months I watched eagerly as they produced nubs of new foliage, emergent spikes, delicate buds, and, in late spring, flowers opening one by one. Had I unwittingly found that Goldilocks "just right" equilibrium between too much and too little?

Orchids symbolize love, beauty, luxury, strength. Confucius equated them with nobility and morality. In ancient Greece they signified virility (the name literally meaning "testicle")—Greek women believed that if the father of their unborn child ate large, new orchid tubers, the baby would be a boy. Orchids' beauty and dignity, opulence and sensuality, exoticism and evil have been depicted in literature and lore. I'm drawn to their wicked allure, like *Gone Girl* author Gillian Flynn, who says our dark sides should be nurtured "like nasty black orchids." In *A Woman of No Importance*, Oscar Wilde speaks of "an orchid as beautiful as the seven deadly sins."

In *The Orchid Thief*, Susan Orlean mucked through Florida swamps following collectors—aristocrats, smugglers, and a few wackos—who had succumbed to "orchidelirium." One old orchid hunter compared it to "chasing a green-eyed woman or taking cocaine ... a sort of madness." Or calculated greed, as in the case of John Laroche, who poached wild ghost orchids to sell on the black market.

There are more than 25,000 species and 100,000 varieties of orchids, some rare and endangered, others cheap and plentiful at nurseries, home stores, even Trader Joe's. They're easy to grow, yet we agonize over their care, awestruck by their aura of mystery.

“Sharrry Baby” is a variety of oncidium, one of my favorites, also called a chocolate orchid for its fragrance. I used to think it was “sherry baby” for its amber flowers, the color of dry-but-not-too-dry Amontillado, or a tribute to Frankie Valli’s “Sherry Baby,” popular during my teens. I enjoyed their delicate blossoms and alluring aroma, but I never succeeded in getting one to rebloom.

My friend Geri had a horticultural magic touch. The tiny, sun-deprived deck of her top-floor, north-facing condo was a mini botanic garden, vigorous flora flourishing over every inch. Tree ferns anchored shady corners; red and purple fuchsias enticed eager hummingbirds. Clematis, which require several hours of daily sun, climbed and cascaded around railings. Even sun-loving succulents adapted to her shaded tropical jungle. Pots of vigorous cymbidiums proffered profuse spikes of waxy blooms, but her cherished orchids lived inside under skylights. She ministered to them with periodic soakings, airings, and feedings of seasonally-adjusted nutrient-balanced fertilizers. They rewarded her by blooming twice a year, year after year.

When Geri died, her daughter gave me one of the orchids. I’m sure I did everything wrong: left it outside through peak summer days and near-freezing winter nights, sometimes in bright sun, sometimes too shaded. I watered and fertilized with good intention but lax attention. And yet, perhaps still infused with Geri’s care, it bloomed once more before perishing.

I tried to keep them all alive in my half-assed way, but my efforts were, at best, a feeble step up from benign neglect—what the old blues song calls careless love. My grandson’s memory deserves better. The precious purple-white blossoms, the little yellow ones too, will soon fade and fall. Through sheer will and with a whisper of Geri’s karma, I’m determined to nurture them through dormancy and into their next flowering.

I am sixteen when my mother, chaperoning a class field trip, takes my hand to cross the street.

I rip away from her grasp and snarl, "I can cross the street by myself," while a bus load of my peers looks on.

More words hover on the tip of my tongue, but I'm too humiliated to risk a sidewalk fight with an audience. I refuse to sit with her for the ride back. It says enough.

I don't need you.

I am 30 when she tries to explain how to boil a pot of water for spaghetti; 10 years running my own household, married, with my first child toddling around our feet. Yet, as she shows me the cabinet in my childhood home with the pots, I am sullen and sixteen again. "I know, Mom. I've made spaghetti before."

I don't need you.

The first time I saw a Guide Dog in an overstuffed easy chair - his and hers and his wife sat on the couch - shock stole my voice. A thin-lipped smile pasted over clenched teeth, holding back my horror.

Once, she'd been the warm weight of a wiggling pup in my arms. Over weeks and months I'd painstakingly taught her the rules; come when called, stay by my side, don't eat off the floor, stay off the furniture... I'd molded and shaped her, then sent her off to college to find her partner and her purpose. All for this? To find her sprawled languidly in a living room chair.

She didn't deign my disgust with her attention, eyes only for him. He thought it was funny.

I don't need you.

My sons are just learning their manners: please and thank you, chew with your mouth closed, elbows off the table.

I imagine they, too, will grow up. One day I will look at them, degree or wife or child in hand, and fuss, "Napkin in your lap."

Will their eyes tell me a story as old as time?

I don't need you.

Maybe not, but I hope you'll still want me.

The photograph disturbs me. It is ugly and visceral, yet it fascinates me. I hate it and I can't get it out of my head. It is hello and goodbye in the same breath; death and new life; birth into a hopeless world.

I am sobbing, clutching an eight-week-old puppy to my chest, her warmth and weight dampening the heaving of my chest as I try to breathe. Behind me, the shadowed maw of an open door, a black hole that has sucked up my very heart. I've turned away, unable to face its darkness, but even the pale fur of the puppy in my arms can't bring new light.

I wish I was a pretty crier, tears catching on my lashes, like fresh dewdrops tracking down my cheeks, glistening in the sun. But I am not. My face is screwed up, lips turned down, chin wrinkled. My cheekbones have hollowed with my agony, the muscles of my brows and my neck standing stark. My hair, pulled back, provides no modest curtain for my grief. I have nowhere to hide but in the soft pelt tucked against my cheek. My shoulders bow forward, curled around this new life I hold as if it is an anchor. She doesn't understand my clutching hands, my squeezing arms.

It is holding my newborn son and counting the days until he leaves me. They seem forever and are no more than a blink in time: not nearly long enough for the love, the grief, the pride, the wretched responsibility of raising another living being. The window does not open wide enough for me to follow where he will go, and I am angry to be left behind.

Anger. Can I let myself feel anger? It is my own fault, after all; I knew what I was signing up for. One year; no more. What right have I to this wretched feeling? I must be strong. Stronger than the teenage girl saying her first goodbye; strong enough to carry the burden of grief for my son, now old enough to understand the loss; strong enough to begin again, knowing the outcome will be the same.

It is all lies. Stories I tell myself to deflect the pain. Youth feels in sheets of lightning, quick as a blink and then gone, again; I roll like thunder, building in the distance, crescendoing, then drifting away. Momentary pain lingers, mocking hope.

It is a long goodbye, counting down the days like a woman awaiting labor pains. I wash the blankets, the bones, the bowls. I pull the baby gates out of storage and replace the large kennel with a smaller one. I am nesting, but in reverse. I am a riptide, going in two directions at once.

My son misses them when they go, but the grief I carry on his behalf is far more than his own. This is, perhaps, the greatest lie I've told myself: that my own sense of loss is nothing more than a reflection of his. Why must I deflect my pain? Why must it have some greater purpose to be warranted? Why is

my own anguish unworthy of my attention? Why must it be annotated, explained, footnoted within the larger narrative?

I come back by degrees. I would stay in this shadow place of sorrow if only to avoid my gibbering voice, the hiccupping of my lungs, the humiliation of a body quaking and trembling, acting beyond my control. That is the root of my fear, after all: not being in control – of my body, of my grief. The root of my anger: fear perverted and turned outward. It cycles, loops back on itself, builds anew.

Can I learn to sit with this fear, like I will sit with this new life? Wrapping it in nurturing warmth and love, patiently teaching, preparing, shaping. Can I see myself through cloudy eyes as half so deserving? Can I give myself permission to grow beyond the mold I've contorted myself into? And, in the end, can I learn to let go?

Just beyond the edges of the picture my husband waits, arms open. I pause, breathe. The puppy sandwiched between us wiggles, stretches, and I feel the warm swipe of her tongue under my chin. My tears become a wet laugh as the future unspools.