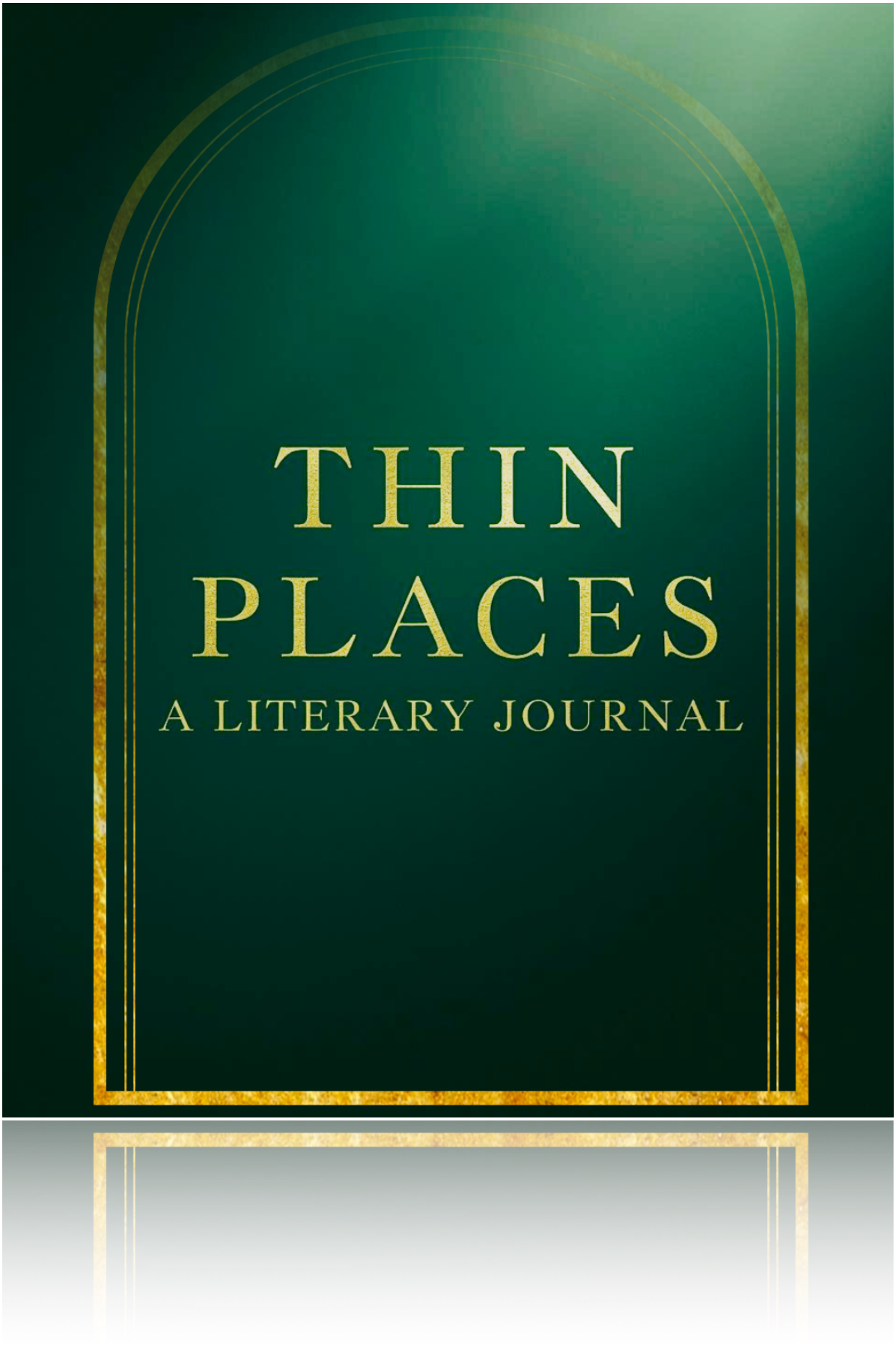

THIN
PLACES
A LITERARY JOURNAL

Thin Places:
a Literary Journal

New Writing
on Thin Places and Sacred Spaces

Issue One
May 2026

Edited by
Sarah Law and Jane Liffen

Thin-Places.org

Introduction

The Editors

We're delighted to welcome you to the first issue of *Thin Places: A Literary Journal*. The concept of the 'thin place' is a Celtic one, denoting a geographical location where heaven and earth mysteriously meet, and the veil between the two is lifted. Such thin places might traditionally be found in shrines and in nature. For this journal we are also including writing on a wider interpretation of thin places, which include the thin places between and within human persons (and sometimes animals and angels), and infusing our experiences of dream, myth, longing, loss and vocational choice. Intersections of past, present and the cycle of the seasons can all have a thinness, a note of the spiritual and sacred, to them too. It's been wonderful to receive so many and such various submissions. Jane and I have been amazed at the range and high quality of all the pieces we've read. We hope you enjoy the selection of essays, poems and stories presented here, and we look forward to reading and publishing more writing inspired by thin places and the sacred spaces. Perhaps this journal itself may be seen as something of a thin place, where you are able to read, seek, reflect, and connect with the veils drawn back.

Sarah Law, Editor

I am excited to be involved in the editing of this new journal and delighted to read such a wide range of thought-provoking pieces exploring thin places in their many forms. I was particularly struck by how the everyday is used in many of the the pieces to ground the spiritual elements explored, often resulting in an added poignancy. I was also impressed by the high quality of the work submitted to the journal and included in this first issue and very much look forward to reading future submissions.

Jane Liffen, Editor

ESSAYS

Synapses & Secrets: The Greek City in Your Brain

Tamara-Lee Brereton-Karabetsos

A Non-fiction Reflection from Athens, Greece

The air in Athens at 5:00 PM is a thick, literal tapestry of exhaust, sea salt, and the impatient radio frequencies of five million lives in motion. To a stranger standing at the edge of Omonoia Square, the scene erupts as pure, unadulterated chaos – a frantic surge of motorbikes and yellow taxis threading through narrow streets while riders relish Freddo espressos atop six thousand years of crumbling ancient ruins. To those of us who call these stone veins home, there is a hidden, rhythmic logic to the gridlock. It resonates remarkably with the synaptic gaps within our own skulls: millions of distinct signals vaulting across voids, trying to forge a connection amidst the noise. In my country, the brain isn't just a biological organ; it mimics the city itself.

This process is a masterpiece of concrete precision. At rest, a neuron maintains a negative charge, a state of quiet readiness known as the resting membrane potential. When a thought is ignited – by the charcoal scent of roasting lamb or the sharp, metallic thrum of a distant bouzouki – voltage-gated ion channels haemorrhage open. This allows positively charged sodium ions to flood the cell, a surge called depolarisation. This electrical wave cascades toward the axon terminal, the precipice of a vast, silent canyon: the synaptic cleft. In the laboratory of the mind, this gap is unimaginably small – only 20 to 40 nanometers wide – yet it represents a total structural break, a microscopic chasm between self and signal.

Electricity cannot cross it. To bridge this divide, the brain performs a secret, internal alchemy called vesicular exocytosis. Tiny bubbles called vesicles, packed with neurotransmitters like glutamate and dopamine, fuse with the cell membrane and spill their contents into the void. Like the sweet, heavy scent of frankincense smoke during a Sunday liturgy, these chemicals drift across the gap to bind with specific postsynaptic receptors. This chemical 'handshake' ensures the message survives the silence.

The 'secrets' of our collective identity are often most visible in our quietest, most ancient rituals. I recently stood in the shadows of a sun-drenched Byzantine church, watching a young child reach out to light a slender beeswax taper from a central, burning flame. In that small, flickering movement lies the perfect biological metaphor for neuronal signalling. Just as one candle kindles the next without the original flame diminishing, an electrical action potential propagates along the length of a neuron. It is a chain reaction of light that leaves the source intact while setting the entire network ablaze.

I remember a Tuesday last July when this 'neural network' failed on a civic scale. A transformer detonated in Kypseli during a relentless heatwave, and the city's electricity evaporated. Sitting on my balcony in the sudden, heavy dark, I felt a hollow vulnerability. Without the monotone hum of air conditioners or the neon glow of the corner tavernas, Athens felt 'brain dead.' It was a stark reminder that our identity as Greeks isn't found in the static, silent

marble of the Parthenon. It exists in the messy, vibrant transmission of life from one person to the next.

In Greece, we are taught from a young age that 'inertia leads to chaos,' but I believe it is our neuroplasticity – the brain's ability to recalibrate its synaptic strengths – that ultimately empowers us. We are a culture defined by the 'gap' – a people who have survived by constantly forging new, creative ways to leap across the voids of history, economic crisis, and geographic distance. By understanding the 'city in our brain,' we realise that the noise of Athens isn't a flaw; it is the symphony of a resilient country that refuses to let its secret light go out. Every time a child lights a candle, we are firing the synapses of a nation that has mastered the art of staying connected against all odds.

Days in Direction

Nell Starr

These storm-tossed paddocks hold a story: there were children playing in the sunlight; and at evening they ran by the light of fireflies, jars open, stuffed with leaves and twigs with holes poked on top, in case fireflies breathe once captured – no one remembers from last year.

I remember years ago driving to the centre of this place, a farm in rural Carolina. The driveway held a hundred tire treads (as if these too could talk), cars slurring in carrying their cargo of human joy and need. My car was one of them. I found my way by climbing the stairs to the small room above the kitchen, where together with Bill, my director and friend, we might be still and have no answer, only openness. I came to find direction; our talk was punctuated by not-knowing, and silence. I don't know whether it was deeply meaningful but with its worn fences and fruit trees, this place gave me hope and healing. It left an imprint. The river below was spirited, the woods sighed with the wind, the house held our secrets safe. Once a woman, a priest, went down to the river, emerged from the water and gave herself a new name. The paperwork could wait.

Someone shouting on the stairs once frightened me – a man with a wrong appointment time, angry and agitated, like a storm loose in a sacred grove. Bill interrupted the man, confronting him on the stairs, teaching me afterwards how to hold myself tight and so scatter the darkness whatever its source: clutching the chest and heart til I could breathe again. It wasn't the man who distressed me, I confessed; it was what he carried, or seemed to, the way we all may carry things, dark thoughts backed up with nowhere to go.

A lesson, then: light like hope is piercing and pure, and we are capable of it: us, silt-lunged, full of dust. So we learn to clutch for air and light, and let go. Because it's in the releasing we attain it, after all. Life, I mean. Some of us go about this desperately at first, but later, if we remember to be kind to ourselves and each other, we learn to breathe without such fear… and breathe for others, like trees do, encircled.

So I was taught in that moment, with the green world framed by upper windows, to abide another's pain and not worry about my own; it will come round in time

for us to deal with. When I hear of Bill's pain, come at last, so cavernous it threatens to swallow him and all he loves (for the wind blows messages more directly than any of us) I know to clutch him in my mind, to pause in the stillness, though I am half a world away. Living where I do, my night is often another's day; and so awake at different intervals we keep watch on one another, stoking flames that once touched, like fireflies do, with a common memory of light.

Two Towns Over

Jon Fain

I live two towns over from the one I grew up in, and sometimes, more so since my parents died, I drive through it. Almost always when I do, I'll pass by the house where I was a kid.

Only it's not the same. My old house was torn down, and morphed into a much larger one – a Monster Home, McMansion, What-Have-You – where they mirrored the original structure, a tall green Victorian, as the central section, then expanded out on both sides. There's a swimming pool right in back of the house and an attached three-car garage where our unpainted, broken-shingled shed used to be. Like the shed, yard we played in, and trees we climbed, the retaining wall that my father built between the house and the driveway, where my younger brother and I placed our hands in wet cement, is also gone.

Soon after we moved in, my mother got the story about a previous resident from Mrs. Gale, the elderly neighbor across the street. I was in first grade so it was a few years before my mother shared the story, told me there had once been a woman who 'entertained men' there. And according to Mrs. Gale, ours wasn't the only one in the neighborhood. So was a smaller, ramshackle house down the road, separated from where we lived by a mostly wooded lot. It became abandoned when I was in sixth grade or so, but before that a woman named Lizzie lived there.

It wasn't clear when she moved out, if she died or what, but after she was gone, kids who lived nearby started talking at school about sneaking in. I felt like I had more right to go into Lizzie's house than they did, and a better way, harder to be seen by neighbors or the cops. I could get to it by going from my yard, through the woods, ending up at the back of the house. It was easy to get in via an open window on the ground floor and I'd often get a friend or two to come along.

The place was full of trash, mostly paper, but also unopened canned goods, dishes, glasses, silverware, clothes, and other junk. The piles came almost up to the ceiling, but it turned out there was treasure in there. We would dig down into it and sometimes find sealed white envelopes with money inside. Once a dresser we unburied had some loose bills in a drawer. It was never more than a few dollars at a time, but still a thrill. And sometimes we would find pictures in those envelopes – black and white photos from the burlesque era, women naked but covering up with giant feathers or a bunch of balloons.

Many years later, I finally told my mother that we had gone into Lizzie's house, what we found there. I decided the statute of limitations was up. She seemed surprised and maybe a little disappointed. Although not so much that I had done such a thing. I thought it was more because she'd missed out on the adventure down the road, through the woods.

*

When we moved in, Mrs. Gale was in her mid-seventies, tall, with long gray hair that she wore braided and arranged on her head, sometimes covered by a kerchief. She usually wore a long purple skirt and a white blouse and a colorful embroidered vest. Mrs. Gale's house – her husband died soon after we arrived – was set back on a heavily wooded property across from ours.

When my mother visited, my brother and I would sometimes come along. We entered through a screened-in porch by the garage. The rooms were small, especially the kitchen and bedrooms, but the living room had a large picture window that overlooked the trees behind the house. Mrs. Gale's favored place was a rocking chair by the window, at a table where we would play games. When I got a little older, the first 'job' I ever had was mowing the small yard, more moss than grass, which bordered her house, with a rotary blade hand mower.

Mrs. Gale was adept at a unique type of craftwork, in which she took woodland things and made them into 'scenes.' She built little bunnies from different-sized pussy willows and glued them onto a plaster of Paris base, and used other natural pieces like bark, seeds, weeds and twigs to create characters playing tennis, bird watching, riding bicycles, playing cards, and catching butterflies (to name a few). Outside scenes were completed with a background of trees with birds, or picket fences, or if set inside, perhaps a living room with a fireplace, bookcases and furniture. One had a cuckoo popping from a clock while a pussy willow bunny read its newspaper in a rocking chair below.

Mrs. Gale had shown others how to make the scenes over the years, starting with her daughters and their fellow Girl Scouts. My mother was interested in learning how too, and began working on her own versions. She went into the nearby woods, and on field trips with the older woman, collecting the materials. As she grew more confident in her creations, she began to bring them to the area crafts shops where Mrs. Gale had been selling hers.

I was in college when Mrs. Gale, in her late eighties, died. My mother told me that after the funeral she went across the road to her house, to which she had a key. Perhaps she wanted to take a last look at the oldest and the best of Mrs. Gale's scenes, displayed in a glass-fronted cabinet.

My mother went into the living room, to Mrs. Gale's rocking chair. As she started to sit down, she told me later, it felt like someone was already there. That someone being Mrs. Gale. My mother apologized, and she told Mrs. Gale that she could leave now, that she didn't need to stay. Then, my mother placed the key to the house on the table, near the scattered woodland things and partial final scenes, and she left too.

*

On the other side of the stone wall that ran the length of our property was the lot my friends and I would go through to sneak into Lizzie's house. Mrs. Gale and her husband purchased it at the beginning of World War Two. Wanting to do their part, they envisioned this parcel as being an ideal place for a Victory Garden. After checking with the town, they discovered that the owners hadn't paid any taxes on it in years. It went up for auction and the Gales got it for $50.

After Mr. Gale died, Mrs. Gale asked my parents if they wanted to take over the garden. My mother's family were farmers, and my father 'wanted to be one' my mother often said. The only stipulation from Mrs. Gale was that she could come pick whatever she wanted.

There were two fenced-in areas, one large, about 100' x 100', and a smaller one. There was an irrigation well, powered by a gasoline engine housed under a wooden boxlike structure. Near our stone wall was a patch of blackberry bushes, a large asparagus bed, and a red shed filled with old hand tools, a rototiller, straw baskets, metal pails, mud-crusted work gloves and thick leather cushions that you could sit or kneel on when you did weeding. There was a pair of Mr. Gale's eyeglasses in a black, mildewed case. Of particular interest to me and my brother were the rusted

leg traps and smoke bombs that were used against the woodchucks that would invariably scale or burrow under the fence.

After Mrs. Gale died twenty years or so later, the garden lot was inherited by the oldest among her five grandchildren, Peter, who worked for the State Department and other agencies in 'international development.' Because of where his travels took him, hot-spot countries in Central America in the late seventies and early eighties, my parents would speculate about whether or not he really worked for the CIA. He initially rented out Mrs. Gale's house, with my parents as de facto landlords. In exchange they continued to have use of the garden lot, and that was the case until my parents moved away themselves.

When I drive the two towns over, it's not just my old house that's changed. Eventually, Peter came back to the States and moved into his grandmother's house, where he still lives. He built an addition, expanding out on the side where the porch originally was, doubling the house in size and eliminating the tiny yard I used to mow for a dollar fifty.

From the road, the red shed is barely visible because the garden lot is now overgrown. Also obscured is the path that Mrs. Gale used to take to come pick her peas, asparagus, beans and squash, or find materials for her scenes. If the path was still there, I might have already parked somewhere nearby and gone in to see what it looks like in the garden lot now. But it's not just the unappealing idea of bushwhacking that's stopped me. What if CIA Peter has set up tripwires, surveillance cameras, and other high-tech deterrents, and my yearning for a bit of nostalgia would trigger a bevy of drones and a pack of robotic dogs?

A few years ago, after my parents died, both gone within two weeks of each other – not surprising with both in their early nineties and respective health conditions, but still tough – my brother and I discussed what to do with their ashes. They'd left no written instructions, barely said anything about arrangements. They had never spoken about it to me except for once when the topic came up, my mother said, 'I want to be cremated,' and my father said, 'You do?'

I suggested to my brother that we sneak into the garden lot, and spread their ashes there.

'Or maybe we ask Peter first.'

'I like sneaking in better,' my brother said.

But we didn't. The cemetery where they are is in another part of the state, a lot more than two towns over. It's near where my mother grew up, about a half mile from the farm her older brother started, that my cousin runs now. My relatives grow less in the way of crops these days; instead they've built a big pavilion that they book for weddings and other events. Likewise, the fields surrounding the nearby cemetery and the family plot have changed. Where there used to be corn, squash, melons, and hay – people plant Monster Homes, McMansions, and What-Have-Yous now.

Where Silence and Solace meet

Alison Lock

I have arrived late in the day at a cottage on the island of Ynys Môn. I am here to seek solitude, and to write. My larder contains a few tins, a packet of rice, breakfast cereal, some vegetables, bread, and milk – simple comestibles. Here, I will have no distractions, or so I believe: I know nobody, I have no WiFi, and my phone signal is reduced to a single bar. I intend to relax while the gentle seascape flows by, and to read from the pile of books I have brought with me and to write in my journal.

I sink into the sole armchair and gaze out of the window. Out in the mid-stream, the current is visible and moving swiftly. There is a single rock protruding from the water with a crown of black weed that is lifted by the wind. As I look more closely, I realise it's a cormorant, and the rock is hardly any larger than the size of its body. Firmly balanced, the great seabird preens its feathers with the opening and flapping of wings, airing them in the wind, blow-drying each black gleaming plume. As if my presence behind the glass is noticed, the bird stops to study a whorl in the water that swirls below the islet.

It is dusk, and through the low-light I see a white egret testing a strip of newly uncovered sand, a flock of black-headed gulls swoop overhead, shelducks rock on the outgoing tide, a curlew with its long hook-of-a-beak is primed about to stab an edible morsel. The call of the oystercatcher draws my eye further along the foreshore.

We are heading towards the Winter Solstice, the time of year when daylight diminishes, shrinking the hours of light each day until we reach that pivotal point when the sun begins to bare bright again, broadening out the days minute by minute. I close the curtains as darkness swiftly follows dusk. The living room is the only warm space in this sparse cottage and that is only because of a single convector heater. With no-one with whom to share the dark, the evening stretches ahead of me, and for a moment I believe I might regret my decision to be alone.

But just as the cormorant fully inhabits its tiny island so I intend to fill this time and place. My chamber of habitation will be my sacred space, just as this island is known as the Holy Island. Not far from here is Llandwyn, a tidal island accessible from the mainland by a rib of sand at each retreat of the tide and many make a pilgrimage to this place every year. It was here that St. Dwynwen sought solitude in her chapel on the tiny island. The legend, from the 5th Century, tells us that when her lover Maelon had drunk the potion that turned him to ice, she too wished to be frozen in time and she remained in isolation until her death in 465AD, all the while praying that all true lovers everywhere would be blessed, but she would remain unmarried. In Wales, she is the patron saint of lovers, celebrated and remembered on the 25th day of January each year. I am just a little way up the coast from her shrine, to where many make their pilgrimage each year.

As I write in my journal, I wonder if Dwynwen found the peace and solace she sought at the edge of the Irish Sea. But, if I assumed I would find quietness of body and soul on this island in this borrowed chamber, I was wrong. In the early hours of the morning, at 3:00 AM, I am wide awake. A fierce wind has arrived with the incoming tide. It rattles the letterbox and rustles the salt-crisp leaves of the bush outside my window. The house creaks, I hear a scratch from the skirting board which sets me on edge, then there's a crashing sound from outside. I

cannot bring myself to open the front door for fear that the darkness will enter my cocoon. There is no solace here in this lone cottage, neither within it or without, or even in the pause between each billow of the wind or the anxious hesitation before the rush and flow of the waves. On this first night, I find no peace, just fear.

I had assumed that solitude would lead to inner solace. At times, in the busyness of life, I have found that inner peace only comes best when it is unlooked for, like those transient slips, the in-between times more like daydreams. To strive to empty the mind has always felt like reaching for a feather as it drifts in the wind forever eluding the grasp of my hand. Solitude can, of course, be found in a crowd, within a cacophony of noise and it can also be accompanied by loneliness. I seek what I think of as silence, but really it is just a quiet place to think and be. I am not lonely; I just wish for the silence of an unpeopled place.

Curiously, I remember reading about an experiment to manufacture silence, where a room was built that contained a lining that would deaden all sound. The idea of such a chamber is that all noise will be absorbed. When tested, it was found that the background noise had a negative reading. How can that be possible? More anechoic chambers have since been built and are used in the testing for decibel output of engines or industrial machinery. They are also places to prepare aeronauts before they travel into space – that ultimate place of silence.

It is said that a person can only endure being in such a chamber for a maximum of forty-five minutes, and that the silence unbalances them so much they must be seated, or they will fall, and begin to hallucinate. I suppose that is where madness lies. I try to imagine the near silence of an anechoic chamber, and I immediately feel suffocated and claustrophobic. But, even so, there are always sounds; tiny noises that come from inside the human body: the beat of the heart, the gurgling of the digestive system, the rush of air in and out of the lungs – all the involuntary internal movements we take for granted. Ironically, despite our best attempts to be silent, we are the embodiment of sound.

Morning has arrived, and the restless motion of the previous night has given way to serenity. The estuary is calm, and I eat my breakfast and prepare to go outside. I intend to send the day walking and following the track along the edge of the estuary. The access to the coastal path is by means of a small kissing gate a little way along the road, and here by the bridge is a small group of birdwatchers. I am relieved they show no interest in my passing; they are pointing across the water and tilting their binoculars towards the longed-for sighting of a migrating bird.

The footpath almost peters away in places but widens out in a well-worn track at others. I pass through the ends of the gardens of houses that overlook the estuary. They are mostly empty – second homes I assume – vast and silent, unblinking carcasses that stare out to sea. Soon the path takes a sharp turn to the right and up a steep cutting towards the village. I ignore the signs and stride down through the reeds towards the muddy edge. From here, the estuarine landscape opens out, and I can see for miles – flooded fields, rivers, water courses, swaddled bushes, and reedy undergrowth. When I look up, I see beyond the straits of the Afon Menai to the mountains of Snowdonia. Wearing snow-white caps, they seem to travel through the clouds as if blowing smoke rings before them. There is a thick band of evergreen, a forest that divides my world from these craggy heights. It is flickering with tiny black spots above the trees – the rooks that roost in their tops.

Later, at dusk, I watch the murmuration, following the starlings in their swooping, arcing waves. It is the season of migration, and the geese, with their astounding symmetry of flight, claim the dusk with their characteristic honk. I am reminded of the tale of The Seven Swans, and I wonder if the geese are their raucous cousins, those who changed into brothers once their

sister had woven them jackets from fine-spun nettles – a transmogrification turning grief to hope.

Perhaps, it is only in my imagination, but as I observe this estuarine landscape, I have a sense that transformation is occurring with each moment. The night is closing in, and I am still not sure I have found solitude, but I have seen a kind of faith in the acceptance of the endeavours of the natural world. I gaze at the cockleshell in the palm of my hand, one that I collected from the estuary floor, gathered for its perfection.

‘To Know Fully Even One Field’ – Reflections on Home and Belonging

Lesley Taylor

These thin places and sacred places wait for us to remember.
– Kerri Ní Dochartaigh, *Thin Places*

‘*To know fully even one field or land is a lifetime's experience*,’ wrote the poet Patrick Kavanagh in his essay ‘The Parish and the Universe’. As I walked along the edges of Scully’s Hill, the furthest field on my parents’ farm, in the summer after my father’s death, I thought about these words over and over. What does it mean to truly know a place? Kavanagh was a poet farmer so his knowing came from working the land where he was born but it also came from his poetic way of seeing, experiencing and sensing the world. If we can know a place fully, can it know us fully too?

This *knowing* of Kavanagh’s, this *lifetime’s experience* as he calls it, is far more than mere factual knowledge, though it might start with that. It might start with knowing the name of a place and the names of the plants and animals that live there too. It’s a *lifetime’s experience*, but it is also about more than how long you spend somewhere. Being there isn’t enough on its own. Knowing a place’s history and its present and caring about its future must be part of this full picture, but it is still, I think, about more than any of these things. We need to bear in mind that a field or a land is living. When we truly know something living, what does that actually mean?

*

Walking the dog in Scully’s Hill, on an afternoon in late summer three years later, I take in what is all around me. Bracken – tall as me in places – blackberries, hazel trees, one of the yellowhammers perched in a hawthorn tree, making itself known. Beech trees, the gate into the little grove, ash tree, sallys, mountain ash. The split rock, in the middle of the field. The curve of the land. The expansive view as I stand in the middle on the split rock and do a 360 degree turn: The Orchard, Little Hill Field, the farm house, the neighbours, the Slieve Bloom Mountains. Badger pathways. House martins. I know this place…this field. It knows me too, from childhood. I’ve played here, I’ve worked here, I walk here now whenever I’m home. I see it in all its seasons. But I don’t live here anymore and haven’t for a long, long time.

I’ve lived in Chippenham, Wiltshire, England for the last twenty-five years. I’ve been in England for thirty-five. But home is where the heart is, and my heart – as the song goes – has more often than not been in Ireland. This has increased over the years, and never more so than in the time following two significant bereavements in our family: the sudden death of my youngest sister and, less than four years later, the death of my father. In the aftermath of each of these huge losses, I wished fervently that I had never left. Some of this was natural grief of course, and wanting to be with family more often than I could be in the wake of such loss. But I also found myself wondering, especially after my father’s death, if the leaving of the place I’m

from, all those years ago, meant that I'd thrown away the chance to be rooted down somewhere and really know it, like my father did. I'd left behind the land, the people, and a clear connection to the past which is so rooted to place. It broke my heart to think that I'd squandered riches, perhaps, and it was too late to do anything about it.

Where I'm from is a small farm in the Republic of Ireland, in County Laois. My father was born here and farmed here all of his life. My granny spent her childhood and married life here too, keeping hens while grandad ran the farm. But only Mum lives here now. The bulk of the farmland has been let to a neighbouring farmer, and part of it has been sold. The place I come from has changed, as places do. And yet to walk through the fields here is to step back in time, or to feel the timelessness of a place that you are deeply connected to. There have been changes over the years – new trees, fences shifted, trees that have come down, different animals, different crops, improvements to the house – but this place is much the same as it was when I was a child, when my father was a child and when my granny was a child. The gate in the yard that opens onto the track that leads down to the fields where the air, the smells, the feel and the spirit of the place are familiar and unchanged. But my father's absence is obvious and it's most keenly felt here, walking through the now quiet yard and out this gate where the only tractor that might pass by will belong to the neighbour who rents the land. When someone in a family dies there is a change in the whole family unit, a shift in dynamics, and I don't think it's a stretch to believe that my father and this land were family to each other: kin. It's not far-fetched to say that the change in family dynamics can be felt out in the fields as well as in the home. My father is *of* these fields, he belonged to them more than they belonged to him.

*

It's the summer of 2022 when I stumble upon old maps online, from the late 1700s, that show where I'm from. They're basic maps – just line sketches marking out fields and giving details of ownership or tenancy – but I can't stop staring at them. This is in the months after my father's death where I'm constantly researching things both online and offline: land registers, maps, birth and death certificates, title deeds, old newspapers articles, photographs. It's a way to go back in time, to trace roots and connection. The maps are a connection from the past to the now and I study them carefully as though they will take me somewhere. Maps show us the shape of a place, its boundaries and borders, its geography and its names. I love the litany of familiar place names threaded through these old maps of this area: Shanbeg, Rosenallis, Camira Glebe, Rinn, Cappabeg, Avoley, Meelick – names that join the past to the present and provide continuity. These maps also show me that some of the field boundaries haven't changed in at least 200 years. The line of the hedge in Scully's Hill is the same shape now as it was back then. Its shape is how a small child might draw a hill – a kind of bowler hat on the top of the other fields that are part of our farm. You can see this shape so clearly in aerial photos and on this old sketched map too. I love this. And as I trace the borders of Scully's Hill on the map, I wonder who was walking and working those fields back then before we came to this place. What they could see? Did they sense the spirit of the land in the same way that I always feel it, particularly in Scully's Hill? What birds were here? Did earlier generations of the house martins that come here each year flit over the fields then too? Did they also *know* and love this place? Sadly, the maps can't tell me the things that I really want to find out about the land and its spirit, in the same way that the census information tells me nothing of the spirit of the people I came from. Neither reveals what is

hidden between the lines and behind the names, though sometimes I think I can almost glimpse this out of the corner of my eye.

The full quotation from Patrick Kavanagh is: '*To know fully even one field or land is a lifetime's experience. In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts, not breadth. A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of a woody meadow, the stream at the junction of four small fields – these are as much as a man can fully experience.'* It was only after his death that I really understood how richly my father had lived out these lines. He knew this land intimately, he knew its every detail and he knew it with more depth than I ever appreciated while he was alive. He had lived here birth to death and didn't leave the place often. He knew the fields, the townlands, the people and the nature of this place so deeply because he was part of it. He was *of* this place. He was part of its rhyme, rhythm and history.

I saw this reflected in the fields themselves during what I can only describe as a 'thin' time after my father's death. A threshold time. The land seemed to glow with the gold of my father's life and I saw this as treasure in way I never had before. Each walk in the fields was something like how a place looks at dusk, where everything is lit up in such a way that it's easier to see its beauty. It seemed as if the land was showing us something of my father and my father was showing us something of the land. I realised that I hadn't fully understood how deep his love for this place was, but those twilight, in-between-days out in the fields revealed it in a way that is hard to put into words. 'What will survive of us is love', and his love for the fields was tangible in this time. His love for us was tangible out there also. He'd worked hard in these fields for his family and of course it made sense that this was where we'd find him.

On each walk I found my understanding of him growing deeper. The fields were ministering to me – to us – showing us truths and helping us to see. The poet John Clare believed that the place he lived and loved knew him as much as he knew the place and I wondered if this was what was happening in the fields here. Was this place reflecting love for my father because it knew him as much as he knew it? He belonged fully to this place where he lived because he'd given it his time and attention. He knew it well. Robin Wall Kimmerer calls it placing both feet 'on the shore' of where you live. And he had both feet firmly planted here. When I came back again later that same summer the threshold time had passed but the mystical experience had left me with a keener sense of the land, a fresh love for it and a deeper understanding of my father.

*

It's an evening in late August, three years later, and I'm out in the fields again, just after the sun has set. The land is glowing. There is pink behind the Slieve Bloom mountains, lying low to the northwest. The trees of Scully's Hill, straight ahead, are silhouetted against a pink and blue sky. Behind me to the east, the sky is a luminous grey blue with huge paintstrokes of cloud streaked through it. Trees are growing darker all around me. Shapes are less distinct. There is such strange beauty in the threshold time between day and night. In thin, liminal times. And I wonder, standing here, if the true beauty of a place – or a life – is what is fully revealed to us when we stand on these thresholds? Is this what knowing means, in the end?

In Place With Dog

Linda H.Y. Hegland

Our place in the natural world is a lost thing. We have forgotten, for the most part, how to feel the natural world, how to experience it solely with our senses. How to remember - like muscle memory, sense memory.

My own experience is that of, camera in hand, muddling along with an aging dog. Our pace is slow, convoluted, measured. . . astonished.

A dog knows the thin places. A dog inhabits the thin places. The places that speak differently of sound and light and physics. And time. Because a dog knows the passage of time – more keenly, and differently than do we. They can tell from the strength of a scent whether an animal came by here hours ago, or days ago. They know the weave, and the tuning, and the turning of seasons; when to expect geese nesting in the grasses and when the turtles will rise to the surface after a winter sheathed in frigid mud.

Conversely, walking into place with a dog stops all time. The scents pull her like the fingered aromas from a bakery shop. She finds berries dropped by birds and perceives whether they were dropped by a crow or a mourning dove. She knows where the skunk slept last night; she can follow the skip and leap of a hunting coyote. She alerts me to the swaying tails of salmon under the sheen of the water in spawning season – mesmerizing, spellbinding. She knows the branch on the ground is newly fallen.

Being in place with dog means that a walk in the woods is determined by circumstance, not the route or the pace. Circumstances create irregularity, doubling back, stopping so suddenly one gasps. Acknowledging those special, thin places.

Counselled by the dog, I notice that there is a new pile of leaves, and that the air has moistened with a lifting fog. It means that sometimes I have to get down to ground level to see the infant geese hidden at the riverside; that sometimes I have to look up to see the heron bizarrely in the tree; that sometimes I should turn and see what made that small, barely-there sound. To look closely where the shimmer is, that wavering light that is not the wind. That thinness between here . . . and there. When her ears go up, I should look to what is rustling in the bush. As she sniffs intently at a circular, swirled indentation in the long grasses, I realize the sleeping places of deer in the night. Those small, wondrous things I would have missed in my human hurry and distraction.

If we feel that we are the 'other' in place/nature, it can close us. Dog, in her exuberant 'rolling' in the world, in her generous sharing of her understanding of place, shows us how to open. Thin places do not reveal themselves unless you are open. Those thin, reverent places, and the dog, teach us *haecceity* (the 'this-ness' of beings or things, the property of being unique). Merely that.

Sharing place with animals is sharing in the original language of nature/place. Those relationships emphasize our need to remember, remember the language in place. All of the other species are fluent, it is concealed within them, and their days and nights are aligned with it. Whether four-legged, finned or winged, this sacred language shapes their songs, utters their

stories, patterns their movements, migrations, and seasons. They move freely between the corporal and the spiritual. We can remember. Our famished souls want to remember.

Slow walks with a slow dog, learning to speak chickadee.

POETRY

Platforms

Frank William Finney

Every station
has its hallowed moments –

sights that serve
to coalesce

some hint of joy
or sudden sadness.

A piece of luggage
left behind.

A sparrow
hopping on the rail.

Thoughts that splinter
over time

like the planks
first built in Heighington

when hope, like steam,
was in the air.

Avenue B, Quiet Afternoon Celebration / Light

Daniel A. Rabuzzi

Avenue B, Near Houston Street, New York City

Monet's Rouen Cathedral had nothing on this:

The facade lining Avenue B,
    quiet homes
on a day of early winter.

Celebrants within, not waiting in mere acceptance
of a paradise to come, nor celebrating only on a Sunday.

Holiness found on fire-escapes and among tangled wires,
dining-sheds, pedestrian vigor,
sage cat arched smooth under a car,
super-charged air illuminates gilt-edged graffiti
(our sacred manuscripts)
with light mellow in tracks cool current, oblique
oblation, obliged to one another
crisp and sharp along the edges.

Warm formality casting long shadows,
    maybe they're the fingers of interested angels
caressing the buildings to indicate grace.
Light pointing to neighbors, home wards
as solstice nears, sunfall encroaching
more heavily by day.

Lavish of long-light promised each waning hour,
shadows cross-hatch light to hallow life
daily along a street, could be most any street,
in our city.

Afternoon at the Science Museum

Matthew Pullar

Before the Planetarium's final show for the day,
we wander through the labyrinthine upstairs exhibit,
'Beyond Perception', where subsonic

vibrations thrum through a space of thick dark,
children making poly-styrene balls dance
in invisible wind force and walls

are scrawled in unparseable equations
and quotes about electromagnetic force.
We are tired; day is drooping and I

must monitor these invisible forces that thrum
in my children's brains, and mine.
And mine. I am learning how they buzz

with a million vibrations I cannot see. My youngest
could not stand to stay in church on Christmas Day,
so distraught at the amplifiers'

silent hum. I have grown accustomed to my own
body's dissonance, must learn myself to parse
the invisible scrawl in my genes,

and theirs. The slow crystal drip that passes
unperceived until it is night and we are dark.
Time's up. I gather them

in the bundle of myself, hurry them downstairs
to recline beneath a domed screen and watch
supernovae explode. I fight

the urge to sleep. We rush billions of years
into Earth's burning future, our sun collapsing into
its overheated core. I cannot tell

if this is why my youngest squirms, begs to leave.
I long to pass to him some subsonic calm
through the squeeze of his palm,

long to impart how vastly well all manner
of cosmic things shall be. Though my own
mind still sometimes spins

out of orbit at the seeming senselessness of these
vast intergalactic wastes and all the loss.
I am caught between one

son's anxious hand and my second buzzing
in wonder at the majestic spray
of colours that dance in gas clouds

like ribbons in calisthenic weft around
a dying star. Betelgeuse augurs where our
most certain solar things will go.

Heaven will show things more certain than these.
For now its music warps and weaves, its light
penumbral, infrasonic in comfort

its eternal wave.

The Bremerton Ferry

Eric Benjaminson

On the Bremerton ferry, my father's old shapeless blazer was warm,
And her hunched shoulders relaxed a bit when she draped it over them.
And yet, all this time, I've never had a clear understanding of how
Some windswept segments from forty-six years ago
Stay tied to an increasingly dusky present, while others
Fly freely, untethered by time or recollection.
In a country where I lived, there are the trunks of trees
That grew up through flattened sand dunes.
And in another place, where I grew up and knew her beauty,
Fog frequently descended and covered the boughs of the fir trees.
Having moved from the desert to the fir forests as I age, I find
A growing saddened calm, surrounding me with scudding clouds
That carry with them occasional gaps for the old sunbeams.

Here Too

J.M. Summers

Here too the breath through the
tree-tops that carries with it
the memory of the far-flung shore
from which it too has travelled,
bearing with it a hiraeth for
the wash of waves on a shingled
shore defined by the tide that
draws from its depths the shape
of an azure moon full in a fuller
sky, the caw of gulls mourning the
sea to which they too will never
return, like us estranged, the one
from the other, thirsting for an
air salted by the brine of deeper
waters, the stone walls of a chapel
in which their breaking resounds,
a shadowed recess, and the flicker
of a candle, guttering, bearing
with it our hopes and salted cares.

Citrinitas

Adam Flint

between the low night and morning · light placed faint-wise through the coppiced · lays white apostrophes over waterleaf scars · a head-spent day depends in tall grass · dribbles hidden ground dusk grey · blunts gloss · within cold kernels · wishes the shallows of rapture rescale · to their original colour · scenes ultra vivid · fifth century forms · in haze that drifts as the head moves upwards · from stippled streamsides where light skaters · dimple the water · the powder of mountains · distal · flows on ·

the morning spinning motion books describe · makes glade and hillside scrub hard to follow · I keep the moss-faced trunks as compass pointing the way true north · until a break in the lichen · the bald bark stoss-side halt in the open · then looked back to the path to here is strewn with wanton omens · that nothing has to be bad · though torpid the tide swum against is sun-thick · blossom-slowed eddies · rich with lavender-milk and mixed with blown pollen · saturant catkins · press against the lake shore just out of reach ·

just out of reach is where those from the midst near · clothed in the grains of light through the sea · of seven spheres · each planet oceaning · vestments to emerge · blue-pearled · shade-freed · a glint of web one sees is gone ·

I told myself without vision attached words breed walls · quizzical dawns · all form phosphene · like the longview cavefish have · or those petally gaps in the light-hit · so the light closed lids let in · looks like blossoming ghosts · with the quiet · and the hosts gone · and the summons over one can process · sun-loss · serene cool of curfew · to a glossed scene · a fond stigmata · and dance · with light leaf · in slow turns

Cherry Tree

Kellie Brown

Blossom clusters drape
your coarse branch wood,
a full pink array, palest blush
to brightest fuchsia,
cotton candy of the natural world.

I envy the birds that flutter
and nest in your opulence –
Yet sense the burden
such joy bears, note your
weighted boughs scraping
the ground, watch your
'Weeping.'

It isn't easy to bloom,
to expose your beauty to the world,
to be bared open, to unmask
your truest essence.
It isn't easy to face the turning of
seasons, the wind that jostles and
scatters, the fallow times.

Whisper your secrets.
Let me lean into your strength.
Invite me to borrow hope.

Electric North

Andrea E. Johnson

You know which direction Lake
Superior lies by the light in the sky.

You stop the car at a ribbon of beach and shed
your outer garments. Soft,

matronly, dimpled in places, you stand
in a blue one-piece swimsuit, your spine
bared in the keyhole back. A small
replica of the Statue of Liberty

rises in the distance at the end
of a dock, and a yellow backhoe
gleams in the sun, at rest
from scooping rocky debris. You watch

a tiny girl at play with her older
sister. She puts her tongue to the froth
that sweeps over the beach, as if
to taste its texture. Now, inch

by inch, you move into water chilled
like whiskey mixed with glacial
ice. You see the lake bottom. The smooth
pebbles and your blanched toes

waver under the ripples. The freezing
elixir licks up your legs, swallows
your waist, ascends your vertebral
ladder. Suddenly, you plunge

below the surface, hold your breath,
swim until you gasp. Quasi-

delirious, rising, floating, you drift
on your back. Buoyed

by waves, blinded
by sun, dazzled by blurring

edges, you dissolve. You become
atomic particles. You become

electric in the lake-bright sky.

Where Does the Wind Hide?

Steve Pollack

Where does the wind hide
when it's not blowing?

In flaxen fields, motionless
the day hot, still

as stationary sails moored at a dock,
not a ripple on dilute reflections?

When flags wilt, colors meld
stripes lost, identity a mystery,

is wind asleep in a green glen, serene
beneath a canopy of upturned leaves?

Which of Creation's first days awakened
wind, to rest on the seventh,

waiting patiently, parched
in a remote sandstone canyon?

And what moody forces trigger tempest
or calm, willing the great sphere of sky

to inhale wind like blue nimbus lungs
set to fill Earth with breath?

Tigh na Cailleach

David C. Weinczok

The veiled mother lives
in a house of turf and bone
by the burn deep-pooling
in the crooked glen of stones

We go to her yet
we are not her children

They are
the first snow in the corrie
the deer that sheds blood-velvet
the night as it opens the sky

Death is here
and it is hers

It wears a mask of
three deer skulls aligned
two gravel tracks for titled killers
one willow wind-felled
Life is here
and it is hers

It wears a coat of
one offering of oats and quartz
two arms of the stream enfolded
three flowers grown in skull's dark orbit

Her weathered hands
hold both in balance

We dare only now to whisper,
this day we watched them tremble

Note: Tigh na Cailleach is a a shieling dedicated to Scotland's goddess of winter, the Cailleach, deep in the hills of the Perthshire Highlands. It is alleged to be the oldest continually used site of pre-Christian worship in Britain

I'm walking in Montana under the Yellowstone Ridge

Julie Sampson

– thinking of Emily – no Prison she – yet *she* couldn't take off
on the Treadmill Youtube
escape to the Exotics, or the opening mountain vistas, across The Alps,
on her virtual walk –

the regions she held instead, glittering galaxies
in the interior reaches of her head.

I rage inside where the past has died.

My dreams are peopled with the ones who've passed me by.
Walking dream's edge, they glide low voiced along labyrinthine Devon lanes
scenting primroses wild garlic drifting white anemones
up in the western wood.

I had lost the way with words I mean
and other real-life tracks stopped at the Atropos gate –

That morning over in Switzerland
I hiked the Mannlichen Panorama Trail, Jungfrau towering above…

Now I see the newest paths are there
over behind those darkening hills those paths I didn't take
forking away
into time's blue folds and over white hill ridges

and *bliss o bliss* words begin to rise again like mist
from the deepest reflecting pools when I was young trapped
between high hedges in the cosseting lane

wrapped in the warm oak wooded copses woodpeckers tap
and in the liminal dusk those tricks of light snapping twigs suggest
lost spirits rising for air…

I'm nobody! Who are you?

Note: after Emily Dickinson (with the final line from 'I'm Nobody! Who are you?')

Angels are in the trees in Galisteo

Katherine DiBella Seluja

And they are full of plums.
They've been purple snacking all day.

The plums that I covet from my neighbor's tree. Those small purple-blue ovals
with a seam running lengthwise down the fruit.

The kind that can be split in half so easily,
the flat stone releasing its prize with just the slightest tug.

The angels hoard the pits in stacks at their feet, waiting
for the unsuspecting to pass beneath their branches.

Twittering amongst themselves, the angels know they are
deriving far too much pleasure from this sly arboreal act.

To be just a little bit bad, perhaps their deepest desire.
After several good hits and only a few misses,

the angels settle themselves for sleep.
There, among the ripe and ready fruit.

Outback

Patricia Farrell

This great basin –
more sky than land. Here,

it's hard to tell mirage from truth –
hot playa shimmers. Here,

distance should not be underestimated.

Winter Rim shears off to Summer Lake
and everything tries to survive

inside this greasewood kettle
of either scorch or snow. Out here

extravagant wind does the talking,

funnels our scant words,
into chalky spirals, as we loll

still as lizards, until wind snaps
the tent like buckshot,

and we catch a distant view to a beckoning

dark cave mouth, open below rimrock –
and we wonder if we will make it

across this vast silence we inhabit.

The Republic of Ann

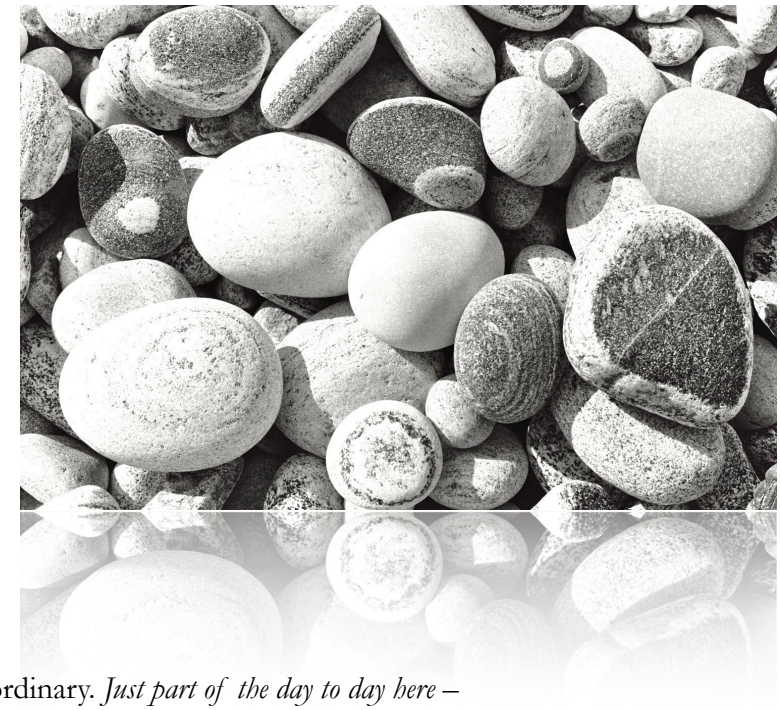
Ann Cefola

Love must be incarnated in the smallest pore of the skin, the smallest cell of the body, to make them intelligent, so they can collaborate with all the other ones, in the big republic of the body.
– BKS Iyengar

Legs up wall, in pose *Viparita Karani*, I travel muscles, tendons, nerves,
ligaments. Brain, lungs, heart, stomach, spleen.
Bladder, kidneys, liver. Large colon and small.
Elbows, wrists, knuckles, hips, knees, ankles. Toes.
Cilia, bone, cartilage, nail, enamel. Blood, breath, saliva.
Each eye an orb, saltwater mouth, lightless nasal canals, aural caves;
pores tending green-blue veins and auburn contours of freckles and moles.
My extended stay in this perfect resort. Green lights and blinking train gates,
easy expressways and steep dirt drives, rope bridges and sturdy ladders.
A decade ago the odeon of my body yielded ovaries to a robotic arm;
after a brief squall, we commended the new traffic pattern.
Oh! this floating island, this abundant Dubai, no tourist I
but supplicant. Citizen. Patriot.

Extraordinary Ordinary

Tracy Chipman



She said it was ordinary. *Just part of the day to day here* –
To wake each morning, greeted by the long shining waters of the sea.
Ordinary, to sync one's breath ebbing, flowing, heaving, slapping,
Becoming unfathomable salt liquid singing.
To echo such a tidal spell would never be *my ordinary*.
At nightfall, I slip from the warmth of wool, of wild dreaming and smorred
peats in the hearth walking out into the language of blue-biting wind
The taste of Talisker hot in my wet mouth.

Treading barefoot, soft toes along the hard shingle bones of
Lewisian Gneiss to pray with that ordinary, always miraculous.
Bending, choosing, placing a pebble, sparkling with mica into my mouth –
tasting truth, a liberation bound in deep time. i forget my name.
They're just ordinary rocks, she said later, the stub of a glowing fag clamped
between her pruned lips. *Just ordinary, you know.*
Years later looking out through the window of another difficult day,
my index finger worrying the dry tail of a hangnail on my thumb,
flashes of extraordinary flood my weary heart – remembering me.

Reminding me all this is god.

Concessional

Jamie H. Cowan

Top floor, after escalators gave up trying
to explain themselves, and you arrive by lift instead –
not *quite* at a destination, exactly, but a pause.
Waiting as the sky darkens.
Suspended
over the city's bright insistence.

Here, Glasgow rearranges into something legible:
rivers of headlights, soft constellations of flats,
the suggestion that all those separate lives
might, from a distance, almost mean something.

You wait then for a film you've already half-forgotten the name of.
Popcorn cooling in your hands,
trailers bleeding into one another –
worlds within worlds, none quite holding,
for you remain upon that view, upon the space that held you,
showing before the showing.

The stretched carpet that soon no one will claim.
The hum of the ceiling lights.
No plaque explains: here, precisely here,
is where the ordinary thins.

Still, you feel it –
in the hesitation before the doors open,
in the brief reflection of your face in the glass,
layered over whatever story waits inside,
but more importantly, upon those outside.
No one calls it sacred.

A certainty, a fixed point
you could return to without question.
A congregation of strangers holding tickets
to different versions of the same escape.

A city spread below like a map
you cannot quite finish reading.
You realise, standing there,

amidst the towering multiplex,
that belief might be less about answers
and more about vantage.

Finding a place
where everything almost fits,
where the world gestures toward meaning
without ever settling.

The doors open. You go in.
You end up done with this space.
But sometimes, your mind dwells
on that top floor,
hovering just above the lights,
watching the lights of the city.

The flights that flicker,
like something trying, patiently,
to be understood.
The daytime sky returns.

Tracks

Kristine Rae Anderson

erased by the rain or
dissolved in the coming thaw

sharp-edged marks of racoons and squirrels
the rounded pads of dogs alongside human soles
or coyotes alone
little dots for mice
the straight stick lines of wild turkeys' toes

in the air this morning, flurries
swirling and landing softly
(mother, father, sister)
footprints preserved

in old snow

On Blackbird Song

Darrell Petska

He says the lofty lark's,
she the sweet-sweet-sweet
warbler, but to paradise
I'd ride on blackbird's
homey dissonance
that flits from reed
to reed in its revel
of oh-bother joy –

then ascend my perch
above paradisical mud's
rampant green profusion
and celebrate my christening
with fluty melodies and
made-up trills I'd practice
for all eternity and blissfully
never quite perfect.

Buoyancy

Alison Hicks

I.

I was thrown in a foreign sea.
Bay of jellyfish.

They bobbed and floated. I thrashed.
When I brushed up against them, they stung.

Swimming through, the only way.
They did not understand my protestations.

Over time, I came to understand
their underwater sounds.

II.

My mother bought a geology book,
said we might find an ammonite.

I didn't dare think we would,
but what if we did?

Coiled shell a maze
we could find our way through.

When ready, the animal moves
into a new apartment

seals the door of the previous residence
rides on its air.

III.

Water moves through limestone,
memory carrying pieces of the past

sculpting the present, carving valleys,
trickling through cracks.

Calanques were formed
when sea levels rose

roofs of caves collapsed,
steep cliffs, sea open to the sky.

There are ammonites here,
crinoids, brachiopods, bivalves.

We didn't know how to find them,
but they spoke to me

in my distress, of floating,
a language I wouldn't decode until much later.

Take-offs

Sharon E. Svendsen

Everything is flying today
the lamp trailing its cord,
the sofa –

large, bulky, heavy.
The sofa is dangerous,
a brown leather
sectional,
a mammoth
maniacal
Boomerang.

Tea cups spin
from cupboards
to form a hurricane.
Oven mitts hover near the floor.
The newspaper flutters

its pages apart,
they glide
like unstrung
parachutes
not meant to
light on earth.

Our substantial beige drapes
rise and tug
at unforgiving rings.
Knives, forks, and spoons
clatter
out of their drawer –
then flit back and forth
glinting silver
then white
like a flock of
shore birds.

I do not duck.
I do not sidle.
I do not scream.
Perhaps I too
am cheating
gravity.

Counting Praise

Deborah Bussewitz

The moon yields to dawn.
Praise be this waking land.

To the morning –
early sky at the horizon's edge.

Praise be my body in assent,
tendons stretching upward.

The incline asks for grit.
Praise for the focus.

Count to one hundred, then rest –
a fellow pilgrim's advice.

To laughter
as I hear the coo-coo.

To pueblo doors and stone walls –
both opening, both holding.

Praise be to vespers chanted
by monks in Rabanal.

Sacrament received, my heart opened.
Love, everywhere.

FICTION

Returning to Little Saigon

Robyn Bashaw

'Mom, don't forget your coat,' the ten-year-old handed the anniversary overcoat to the woman. Ten years ago, on the woman's first anniversary, the husband had swept her away to Vegas for a weekend of luxurious enjoyment. At its closure, they stopped at a small town on the way back to California and window-shopped, because he knew how much trinkets pleased her. In the back of one house-turned-shop, there was a wardrobe of ratty clothes. He groaned and teased when she made a beeline towards it, but, when she pulled the door open, he had been the one to push the hangers aside to reveal the long clean-cut overcoat. He held it against her short body a moment before declaring it perfect and bringing out his wallet. Snuggled in the new overcoat, she couldn't even begin to doubt her decision to leave the family she knew to form a new one with him. They had gone to the car, arm in arm, before driving back through the night to retrieve their infant daughter from the babysitter.

'Thank you, dear.' Kanona took the coat from Lindsey and slipped her arms into the khaki sleeves, adjusting the tattered lapels so the buttons would line up with the holes opposite. Lindsey had been an unexpected surprise, but she had cemented the blooming family, and they had been happy. Together they had raised the beautiful girl, but accepting a surprise was not the same as hoping for a plan. Kissing her husband's pale cheek, Kanona tried to withhold her thoughts from that other pale form, the one that had slipped out from her a few weeks past. Outside, the January breeze pulled at her overcoat, revealing a flash of her red silk blouse as she yanked open the taxi door; she jerked the worn khaki folds close and slipped inside.

'Windy day,' offered the driver, pulling his gloves on tighter, 'Where to?'

'Hai Ba Trung and Bolsa Avenue.' She slipped her hands in her pocket and felt the rough paper of the obituary she had cut out from the newspaper. She'd read about the funeral a few days late and she'd made that her excuse to not tell the man with whom she lived, but the truth was the worlds had always been kept separate. She'd let the knowledge seep to the back of her mind and carried on in her household as though it wasn't hidden there, festering. When she found the obituary cutting while cleaning her dresser, she'd finally convinced herself to dial her father's old number. It had been eleven years since she had last heard her father's voice.

It had been a Thursday – the day she got off work early and usually met her knight in shining armor at the coffee shop – her father had dragged her home and screamed at her about her selfishness and stupidity. She would dishonor the family name, marrying outside both their religion and race. When his words didn't sway her, he announced over dinner that she was not welcome back to his house. Her mother, her aunt, and her cousins turned their heads away as she rose slowly to pack a bag. Late that night, she slipped out the back door into the car where the man of her dreams waited to dry her tears.

The cab driver glanced back in his mirror at the dark hair falling on khaki then pulled into traffic. 'Headed to work?'

She nodded, her thin eyes closing up for a moment. The tiny blue fingernails, the little lips she'd tried to kiss red, and the curved white shape – a shape, nothing more without that fatal heartbeat – flashed on the insides of her eyelids. She tore them open. After Lindsey's fit at her in-laws' fiftieth anniversary party two months ago, Kanona had been praying for that baby

growing within her. She had never intended to raise a child who would interrupt a celebration with screams about having to stay and miss movies with friends. Though she wasn't sure where exactly she had gone wrong, she had wanted that second chance to do it right.

He turned onto the street and slowed, 'Which building?'

'Here,' she said, letting him skid to a stop before she handed him cash and stepped out. The corners of her overcoat flapping behind her, she walked slowly towards the tall building ahead. The taxi driver pulled up to the next streetlight and turned on his signal. As he sat there, traffic filling in around him in the Little Saigon area, he glanced into the rearview mirror and saw the petite form turn suddenly and hurry across the street. Adjusting his mirror, he watched the khaki coat disappear into one of the small shops with foreign characters painted over the doorway.

Kanona passed behind the counter, nodding at the young Vietnamese woman dusting the shelves. The woman turned her back and stretched to reach the female figurines up higher. Kanona's mother had used to be the one who dusted the shop, pulling each delicate piece down to gently wipe it with a cloth before replacing it precisely. Her father must have hired this speedy woman, ignorant of the figures' personalities and stories, after her mother's death in October. Kanona slipped into the backroom where she hung the long khaki coat on a hook before passing through the waterfall of beads. They bounced together and apart behind her. A shriveled man lay on a cot against the wall across from her; he looked her way but waited for the beads to settle on their strings before speaking.

'Kanona.'

She stepped forward and knelt beside the cot. 'Father.'

'It is good of you to have returned.'

'Forgive me my transgression.' She echoed the words of her childhood.

'Come. Sit with me and listen.'

She lowered her body to sit cross-legged on the floor. Hours passed as his voice washed over her and spread throughout the room. He reminded her of her culture and its traditions. He spoke of his wife, her mother, who had longed to see her daughter in her dying days, and his stubborn refusal to allow the reunion. He told her of the years she had missed, of the families he'd seen America pull apart, of the parents who had lost their children to the culture of freedoms, and he told her how happy he was when she called and how glad he was to see her face now.

He touched her cheek from time to time as he spoke, and she could see the love in his eyes. Outside, the sun fell, and stars lit the sky. Through a small crack in the door, a light glow fell upon the old khaki overcoat. Her back to the entrance, Kanona waited for her father to nod before she began to speak. Though her mind thought of her husband, she couldn't bring herself to mention him, so she told her father of Lindsey, the mostly white girl immersed in American ways.

He nodded, 'Children today have forgotten the values that matter.'

Kanona bowed her head and whispered, 'Forgive me my transgressions.'

He set his hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

'Please, father. I want to bring Lindsey here. I want her to know our culture too, to know of her ancestors and the respect she owes them.'

'You've chosen your path, child,' he gazed down upon her. 'I wanted to see you once more to assure myself of that.'

'Father,' she whispered, her throat clenching together.

'Your cousin Daisuke will be here tomorrow to take me home.'

'But Father, you are – '

He shook his head. 'I will return to my homeland until the end of my days. And you, my child, should return to yours.'

She straightened her back, 'I cannot – '

'Go.' He withdrew his hand.

Eyes stinging, she rose and stepped through the beads, picking up the old coat and resting it on her arm. She turned back to see her father's form through the swaying colors. He lay his head on the cot and faced the ceiling. When she opened the door to the shop, she watched but his head did not turn. She stepped out and into the street then looked about at the many Vietnamese shops, all closed up for the night. Reaching the corner, she saw a glowing yellow arch in the distance. Glancing back, she swallowed down her sorrow, lifted the khaki overcoat, slipped her arms inside, and stepped out of Little Saigon. She pulled out her phone and ordered an Uber when she grew tired of walking. When she stepped out on her own sidewalk and saw her neighbor, Angie, emerging from her red car, Kanona lifted her khaki-covered arm in welcome. Angie glanced her way then pulled her mink coat tight around her, hurrying to her front door.

'What are you doing?' Lindsey demanded the next week, following Kanona into the spare bedroom. She stopped in the doorway; Kanona had built an altar out of an old table covered in a nice tablecloth. Two brass candleholders held the cloth in place so the photos displayed in between couldn't be pulled from their shrine.

'Come.' Kanona invited Lindsey closer, directing her attention. 'Meet your family.'

Kanona pointed first to a black and white portrait.

'These are my grandparents. They lived all their life on Vietnamese soil. I have only known them here, on the altar.'

Lindsey tugged the newspaper free from under the picture beside her great-grandparents, frowning at the fine print.

'My mother has joined them now,' Kanona explained, fingers resting on the only colored photo. 'And there is my father, your grandfather. I should have brought you here long ago, to introduce you, so stand still and let me do so now.'

Lindsey eyed her mother as she spoke to the pictures, telling them about Lindsey, who liked to read, who was kind to others, who had the most beautiful, sleek dark hair. The frame on the far right caught Lindsey's attention. Inside was a drawing in her mother's hand of a round baby face with a single dark lock. She reached for it, but Kanona caught her hand. Lindsey arced an eyebrow. 'Is that me?'

'Ong manh,' Kanona said, translating for her daughter who could not even say hello in her native tongue. 'Those who die young. Their souls live here too.'

'In our house?' Lindsey asked skeptically, but Kanona nodded solemnly, gesturing to the next picture to continue her introductions. This time, Lindsey stood still, letting her mother's voice wash over her.

Rumschpringe

Shannon Frost Greenstein

The denim chafed against his thighs like a million microscopic needles; in the musky room, lit only by an LED disco ball, Daniel felt as exposed as Christ upon the cross.

'You cool, dude?'

He wiped his sweaty palms against his starched jeans. The bass line from the hip hop track pounded in his eardrums and his molars and the pit of his chest. Vaguely, he thought of Liesl down the road, perhaps giggling with girlfriends as they paged through fashion magazines, perhaps riding in Richard's buggy with her hair streaming in the wind.

'Yeah,' Daniel affirmed, politely averting his eyes from the dilapidated sofa in the corner and the partially-exposed breasts of the beautiful girl wrapped in some blonde man's embrace. 'Thanks for inviting me.'

It had been only a few weekends, and Daniel was still self-conscious whenever he dressed English. His shirt was plain cotton and unbranded; his shoes were sensible and discreet; but still he imagined every eye at the party upon the zipper of his sweatshirt, his bare head, the phone resting in his pocket.

Daniel's hand crept unconsciously to the rectangle of glass and titanium cloaked behind the stiff denim. He longed to bring it to his eyes, stare into the glow, read every newspaper he could bring up in that miraculous search window. The phone was new, and it excited and terrified him in equal parts; it felt like a dirty secret, something in which he should only indulge under cover of darkness and solitude.

'Here,' said Michael, a student from the local high school, cracking a beer with an angry hiss and pressing it into Daniel's palm. 'Drink up.'

As it had before, as he was hoping it would again, the beer warmed Daniel's marrow and loosened his lips. He and Michael discussed soccer and the abnormally-warm spring and the recent fire at the Lancaster Marriott; he stopped compulsively adjusting the jeans at his waist. Daniel drank another beer and realized Michael was even funnier than previously assumed, warmth from the alcohol emanating from his pores like Madonna imbued with the Holy Spirit.

'Hang on,' Michael informed him. 'I'll be right back.'

Daniel was now alone in a sea of strangers in a random basement, but wasn't that really nothing new? Being Plain, at the end of the day, was essentially to be *separate* from the machinations of a world that spins merrily around everyone else, to be a bastion of faith in a turmoil of temptation and sin. He had spent his whole life feeling *separate*…not just from the English world, but from the entire New Order, from the family and friends and enemies with whom he had been cloistered since birth.

The alcohol helped, he found. After the first drink, he cared less about being *separate*, about the discomfort of his anxiety, which dwelt perpetually beneath his skin like a hive of fire ants. And right now, cruising on beer and rule-breaking and the thought of the You Tube videos to which Michael had introduced him yesterday on the iPhone, Daniel was pleased to notice he didn't feel nearly as self-conscious as he had earlier in the night.

He watched the beautiful girl disentangle herself from the blonde man's embrace, and his brain turned to Liesl once again. They had been seated side-by-side at the singing last Sunday;

they spoke of the baby lambs and *Gelassenheit* and the future. She had permitted him to drive her home in his carriage…but at that memory, Daniel's brain angrily shut down, refusing to agonize any longer over the ultimatum Liesl had delivered from the porch of her house at the end of the ride.

His brain then turned to Richard, however, and he understood that to be worse. Thinking of Richard made Daniel's hands ball into involuntary fists, the fire of jealousy burning deep in his core like a cancer; thinking of Richard made the seductive voice of Satan much more audible, made Daniel's thoughts blurry and red and rife with vengeance, thoughts that were anathema to the entire point of living Plain.

Daniel grabbed another beer from the icy cooler for lack of anything else to do, his eyes flitting over the students and townies and unnamed visitors crowding the room. He pulled the tab, opened the seal, brought the can to his lips; unbidden, Liesl's soft voice drifted through his forebrain like a lullaby, and he chugged the bitter liquid as if to chase it away.

He finished the beer; opened another; dissociated for several minutes, lost in memories of all he had seen over the past week on Google Earth and Facebook and the website for the Library of Congress.

'Hi. Do you toke?' inquired a soft soprano, somewhere off in the periphery of a visual field he no longer fully trusted.

Daniel turned, somewhat unsteadily. He glimpsed Michael first, sporting a knowing grin, before spotting the waifish companion at Michael's elbow – a young woman clad in Barbie pink, offering a pungent rolled cylinder with smoke wafting from the tip.

'This is Anabelle,' Michael announced. 'I told her about you and your rumspringa and she wanted to meet you.'

Michael reached around the girl to clap Daniel on the bicep, then turned abruptly and darted away, favoring Daniel with a wink over his shoulder before disappearing into the shadows.

'Um, hi,' Daniel managed awkwardly. 'It's nice to meet you.'

Anabelle smiled, a light behind her eyes and warmth upon her face. She was pretty and sweet and guileless; she gazed at Daniel like he was a prize. Anabelle reached out to shake his hand, then offered the smoking paper roll once again, eyebrows raised in a silent inquiry.

'Oh! Uh…no, thanks. I don't…I'm ok, though, I'm actually ok. No thanks, but…thanks, though.'

Daniel had heard about marijuana – first from the pulpit, with the scent of brimstone; then from the older *brudren*, with an air of mystery and legend; and most recently from Michael, with several memes currently residing in Daniel's inbox. In the weeks since the start of his reprieve from the *Ordnung*, Daniel had come to regard drugs as he regarded sex, or ghosts, or ordination – something scintillating, something loaded, something he was not yet fit to understand at this point in his life but which might someday hold relevance.

'Are you sure?' Anabelle questioned. 'I mean, it's totally cool either way, but…you might just like it.' She grinned and shifted, a lacy strap from her shirt falling down onto her shoulder, the sight of bare collarbone drawing Daniel's intoxicated eye like a target.

He inhaled, the scent of cannabis tickling his nostrils, and was not altogether surprised to discover he *wasn't* sure. He wasn't sure he didn't want to get high; he wasn't sure he didn't want to forget Liesl entirely, to instead learn from Anabelle things he'd never even dreamed of exploring. He wasn't sure he didn't want to just take the next step, and the next, and the next, marijuana and cigarettes and fast cars and women, just for the sake of women.

It was a moment of acrid honesty borne from beer and group psychology and the proximity of female pheromones (*English* female hormones, if he was going to be *painfully* honest, because isn't the illicit always that much more alluring than the Plain?) Reeling slightly at the insight, Daniel found he wasn't even sure about his baptism, or his future, or his ability to live Plain for the rest of his life, in perfect accordance with the *Ordnung*. With God.

'Well…'Daniel hedged, staring at her fingers. His mind danced between the warnings of the deacons and the testimony of Michael's friends, half of his amygdala convinced one puff would equal certain death, the other half tempted to believe he might inhale and actually feel brave enough to lay his hands upon Anabelle's body. And then…what might happen then? Might it even be enough to quiet the grating white noise of his hyperactive brain, an omnipresent companion determined to mark him as *separate,* even as he ached to belong?

Rumschpringe, after all, was all about running around; and now that he had started running, he didn't feel ready to stop. And…deep down…wasn't he also beginning to worry he wouldn't know how to do so when the time finally came, one way or the other?

'You're cute when you're conflicted,' Anabelle chimed brightly, leaning closer to deliver this observation directly into Daniel's right ear, holding out the smoldering joint once more.

I want to get married, Liesl reminded him again, directly into his other ear. *My* rumschpringe *is over. I'm ready to be baptized.*

Through an empirical haze, Daniel saw his arm extending, hand stretching into the ether as if seeking to touch something precious. But of the two quantum choices at his fingertips – each path stiff and disjointed and lined with thorns, both repelling apart like magnets whenever they threatened to meet – even Daniel did not know for which future he was reaching.

What the Sea Leaves

Andrei Romanov

On the third morning after the storm, the sea left a child's shoe on the chapel step.

Inês found it before sunrise, when the cape was still blue with night, and the lighthouse beam made its slow turn over rock and water. The shoe was very small, red once, though the salt had taken most of that, leaving only a stubborn seam of color along the heel. She stood looking at it with the chapel keys in her hand and the wind pressing her skirt hard against her knees.

At that hour, there was no one else about. By ten, the tour buses would come with their careful shoes and bottled water, with their photographs of the end of Europe, their delight at standing where there was no more land left to stand on. But before dawn, the cape belonged to the gulls and the wind and the old chapel crouched low against the weather, as if prayer itself had learned to keep its head down.

Inês bent and picked up the shoe. It was heavier than it should have been. Wet things always were.

She unlocked the chapel and went inside.

The place was small enough that two families praying together felt like a crowd. The stone floor held the cold the way stone holds everything, without opinion, without end. The walls smelled of salt, candle wax, and the faint mineral damp that old buildings kept in their bones. There was a narrow window above the altar through which you could see only a strip of sea and sky, and because the sea and sky were often the same color here, it sometimes looked like the window opened onto nothing at all, or onto somewhere that refused to be named.

Inês set the shoe on the back pew. Then she lit the first candle of the morning and began her work.

She had been opening the chapel for eleven years, ever since the parish priest decided he was too old to drive out to the cape every day, and the younger priests regarded the place as picturesque but inconvenient. Inês swept, aired the linens, replaced the votive candles, and wiped the salt that gathered on the window glass. She straightened the flowers if there were flowers. She locked up at dusk. She had not intended to become the keeper of things the sea would not keep.

The first had been a wristwatch, six winters earlier, silver-faced and cracked. Then a comb with three missing teeth. Then a key on a blue string. After that, a child's mitten, a passport swollen shut with water, a photograph fused into white at the edges so that the people in it looked like they were disappearing into light.

The coast guard took what was official. But not everything official survived the water. Sometimes what the sea gave back was only a little plastic barrette, or a single earring, or a spoon. Inês had learned not to throw such things away.

At first, she put them in a tin biscuit box in the sacristy. Then, when the box was full, she moved them to the back pew. Then she began placing one or two on the side altar under the statue of the Virgin, not as decoration exactly, and not as offerings, but because it seemed wrong to hide them. The sea had brought them to a chapel. It felt arrogant to argue.

Father Tomás objected the first time he noticed.

'This is not a museum,' he said, standing with his hands tucked into the sleeves of his coat. 'And it is certainly not a lost-property office.'

Inês dusted the brass candle stand. 'No.'

'No,' he repeated, waiting for more.

'No,' she said again. 'It isn't.'

He looked at the objects: the watch, the key, the barrette, the little row of unclaimed things laid out on the linen cloth. Father Tomás was a kind man in all the ways priests are expected to be kind. He visited the sick. He remembered names. He spoke gently at funerals and did not speak overlong at weddings. But he liked proper categories. There were places, in his mind, for the sacred and the secular, the liturgical and the accidental.

'These are not relics,' he said.

Inês looked at the shoe she had just brought in from the step.

'No,' she said. 'But they belonged to people.'

Father Tomás frowned at that, not because he disagreed, but because he heard the trap in the sentence. Everything in a church had once belonged to people. The saints' medals. The rosaries left behind in grief. The flowers bought from market stalls and placed before statues by women asking God for one more year, one more surgery, one more chance.

He sighed. 'Only until the end of the week.'

The week became six years.

*

By noon, the light had changed. Tourists came and went. A woman from Germany cried quietly in the third pew for reasons that belonged to Germany, or to her mother, or to no place at all. A cyclist came in only long enough to escape the wind and left a two-euro coin in the donation box as if paying for shelter. Two children whispered that the side altar looked haunted. Inês swept the dust they brought in and wiped the wax from the candle trays.

At three, Joana arrived.

She worked with one of the organizations in Lagos, the ones who met the boats when the coast guard brought them in, and knew how to find blankets, translators, medicine, the right forms, and the less-wrong forms. She came to the chapel on her days off, not because she was particularly religious, as she had once told Inês, but because some places were quieter than a body knew it needed.

She came in now, followed by a young man.

He was perhaps nineteen. Perhaps younger. Thin in the face, the way people become thin when they have spent too many weeks being afraid. He wore a borrowed sweatshirt despite the warmth and paused at the threshold with the caution of someone entering a room where he did not know the rules.

'Boa tarde,' Joana said softly.

Inês nodded. 'You brought someone.'

'I told him about the chapel.'

The young man looked from Joana to Inês and then to the side altar. His eyes stopped there. Inês had added the shoe to the collection that morning. It sat near the watch, the key, and the spoon. Up close, the salt had crusted white in the stitching.

'This is Idris,' Joana said. 'His brother was on one of the boats last month.'

Idris stepped closer to the altar. He did not touch anything. His hands hung at his sides, opening and closing once, as if remembering some work they had not done in a while.

'My brother,' he said carefully, in Portuguese shaped by other languages, 'they did not find.'

Inês waited. Joana had told her once that waiting was the most useful thing a person could offer the grieving. Not answers. Not hope. Just a room.

Idris pointed to the blue string threaded through the key.

'He had…' He looked at Joana for the word.

'A cord?' she offered.

He nodded. 'A cord like this. My mother made. For his neck.' He touched his own collarbone. 'For luck.'

Inês looked at the key. It had been there for two winters. She had no idea where it came from. It might have opened a locker, a drawer, a bicycle chain, or a front door. It might have belonged to Idris's brother. It might not. The world was full of keys on blue strings.

Idris did not say: this is his.

He said only: like this.

That was harder to bear.

'Would you like a candle?' Inês asked.

He nodded. She brought him one and struck a match. He cupped the flame with both hands while the wick took. Then he stood before the altar and said something too low to hear. A name, perhaps. Or a promise. Or the kind of sentence that has no use in any language except the one spoken toward the dead.

When he was finished, he turned to Inês.

'In my village,' he said slowly, 'if there is no body, the mother says the name to the door. So the house knows to wait.'

The chapel was very still.

Inês looked at the red shoe, the key, the watch, the little congregation of objects the sea had refused and the land had not claimed. She thought of all the doors that had not heard the right names. All the houses waiting without knowing they were waiting.

'What was his name?' she asked.

'Youssef.'

She found a pencil in the drawer by the candles, tore a small strip from the brown paper wrapped around the votives, and wrote it down in her neat church hand.

Youssef.

She placed the paper beneath the key with the blue string. Idris saw her do it and closed his eyes once, briefly. Not relief. Something smaller and more honest. Something that would do in place of relief until something better arrived, which it might not.

When they had gone, the chapel seemed altered, though nothing visible had changed except the slip of brown paper beneath the key.

*

Near dusk, Father Tomás came by to lock the donation box and collect the envelopes left for Mass intentions. He noticed the paper immediately.

'What is that?' he asked.

'A name,' Inês said.

He leaned closer. 'Do we know it is the name?'

‘No,’ she said. ‘We know it is a name.’

He was silent. Outside, the wind was rising again. Through the narrow window, the sea had turned the color of old pewter. A gull struck sideways across the light and vanished.

Father Tomás looked at the altar. The shoe. The key. The watch. The candle still burning in front of them, doing what candles do in the dark, which is the only thing there is to do.

Then, with the weariness of an old man surrendering to a better theology than his own, he took a pin from his pocket and fixed the paper more securely beneath the cord.

He said nothing. Neither did she.

After he left, Inês stood alone in the chapel until the candle burned low. The wind worried the walls. The sea kept to its old work. Night gathered at the edges of the window. She thought, not for the first time, that some places are made holy not by what is promised in them but by what they are willing to hold.

In the morning, there might be nothing on the step but gull droppings and blown sand. Or there might be another object, a button, a comb, a photograph washed pale at the edges where the people used to be.

Whatever the sea left, she would bring it inside.

The bodies had their water.

The names needed somewhere dry.

Feathers of the Phoenix

Bobby Sorensen

None of us knew what the Boy's crime was. They hauled him sobbing into the yard on the first day of summer. Beautiful or interesting people are always guilty of something.

We knew he was different by the tattoos on his back. He shivered and tried to cover his nakedness as they unspooled the hoses. We watched in glum silence behind cordons. They turned the nozzle and unleashed the jets on him, battered his frail body mercilessly, took him off his feet, rolled him over, crumpled him against the wall. One man among us chortled. Porfiry – hulking, hirsute, cranky as a starving bear – collared the laugher and shoved him back against concrete. At last they killed the jets.

The Boy was sputtering, coughing and choking in fits, clutching his knees. Over and down his back were pinions of flame, reds and oranges and whites drawn in foreign inks. Porfiry told us that the Boy was a fire-worshipper, a fledgling disciple of the Sacred Phoenix. The tattoos gave it away.

So we had a young fire-cultist in our prison, half-dead and freezing fast. Ours is the Northernmost prison in the Empire – a bad spot for a warm-blooded Southerner in love with flame. But all kinds come through here, all kinds.

Our lives are full of labor and our labor is firewood. They whistle us awake and we trudge out into the taiga and chop and carry and chop and carry until we can barely close our fingers around our axehandles. We chop and chop through the depressingly short summer months, set by our store in the yard, and spend the long winter season burning up what we chopped so we don't freeze to death. In woeful silence we initiate the new prisoners to this endless, pointless cycle of chopping, carrying, burning, existing.

The Boy was so weak that he struggled against even the smallest saplings. Porfiry helped him along at first, glaring at anyone who came by to protest, and in time others helped too. Even I chopped on the Boy's behalf one day. He was weak but persistent. We made his quotas for him but never did he rest so long as we were also chopping. He kept at it from dawn to dusk, sure enough.

I can't say why we took to him. We tacitly came together towards a single purpose that summer. He was a non-entity, insubstantial. Frail, trembling, afraid of everything, always a lump in his throat, always babbling in his strange tongue for his Mother. For some reason we intestate thieves and murderers closed ranks around him, bore his beatings and were glad to do it.

Porfiry never smiled but he loved burning things for the Boy. Scraps of paper or a handful of straw, anything he could find. They'd stand in a corner of the bunkhouse and Porfiry would produce hidden flint and the Boy's eyes would light up. The meager light of a few burning straws was sufficient to infuse the Boy's little body with great power, terrible power, power that dispelled the Northern chill and made our bunkhouse into a temple of secret fire.

Then the guards would storm in and stamp it out and flog Porfiry and anyone else they could grab. They would flog the Boy too, and his whimpering was an infamy. A sin against the Universe itself.

When Winter arrived, the Magistrate announced that the Boy had been sentenced and would be executed in the yard. They were killing our Boy of fire as Winter was right on our doorstep, gathering up its winds.

They took him while we slept and in the morning they forced us into the yard to see it done. Some of us wept openly. Porfiry, who had taken the news without comment, couldn't be found. He was gone. Maybe he couldn't face it and had hidden under his bunk during roll.

The Boy was stripped to the waist for the occasion. He was shaking, mad with fear, overwhelmed. To be executed by firing squad in a freezing concrete climate, a trillion miles from home, for unclear reasons. This would be his fate.

They stood him in front of the firewood stockpile. Completed, it was thirty cubits high and fifty across. God knows how many hours of chopping for the sake of that pile. This is what we'd burn to survive the winter and they'd christen it with his blood.

They were fixing their sights and ramming musketballs home when Porfiry appeared behind them unseen. He'd stolen into the yard from the stables and crept over to the firewood. It was splitting and dry. None of us spoke a word. We held our breaths as Porfiry quietly took out his hidden flint and set it all ablaze. The musketeers didn't notice until it was too late.

The blaze went up higher than the highest battlements, higher than even the Warden's tower. It must've been visible for miles, the biggest conflagration ever set on the taiga. The Boy whooped, jeered, danced, flew in the chaos, shouted triumphant hymns in his tongue which we understood at last. They cowered behind their guns, shrank and fired wildly towards him. It took twenty shots to bring down our Boy, twenty at least. He died proud and free, kissing the Earth, tattooed wings facing the sky.

Porfiry was gone, as was the firewood. More than a few of us would freeze in the coming season but we laughed ourselves silly watching the guards struggle to put out the fire. They'd flog us all but we sang our own hymns for Porfiry and the Boy as they led us back to the bunkhouse. On the way back, I noticed hairline cracks in the outer walls, uncovered by the light of the fire that burned and burned.

That night the sentries reported a Southbound ribbon of dancing fire in the sky above the prison. A covenant of flame, the blessing of the Sacred Phoenix.

What Follows Winter

Jennifer Keith

The first time I saw the ice cream truck, I was four. It was my first secret.

I was staying at my grandmother's and had awakened in the middle of the night. The house was mostly quiet, but I could hear the big clock ticking downstairs and my grandmother snoring down the hall.

On my way to the bathroom I looked out the window. It was spring. The big hemlocks in the front yard were still. Pale petals from the cherry trees drifted down like ash from something burning.

That's when I saw the truck, moving up the street so quietly it looked like it was floating. Its music box was broken; the tune garbled and dirty. I couldn't see the driver, but I saw an arm, scooping the air in slow motion.

Come out, come out.

Something in me knew better.

I went to the bathroom and then back to bed. The old chimes distorted in the distance as the truck turned the corner.

I lay still, listening to my breathing and the breeze through the hemlocks outside until it got light and my grandmother was downstairs turning the lights on and brewing tea.

I didn't tell her about the ice cream truck. I didn't tell anyone, when I saw it for the second time and all the times after that.

It's always the same time of year, when the trees are in bloom and everything is jittering, blurry.

One night I wake up at around 4:45 and feel like I know I need to be somewhere. Maybe it's more like sleepwalking, and I'm really not awake at all. But I get up and walk. And I'm aware of a feeling of dread, but it's never bad enough to make me wake anyone up, not my mother, or later, my college roommate, or later, my husband Glenn.

When I was 26 I told a doctor about it. I'd been seeing her for panic attacks, awful spells that struck me with no warning in restaurants and movie theaters. I'd get this weird feeling of dizziness that crawled up the backs of my legs and within minutes I would feel for all the world like I was going to puke or have a hard attack or some sort of catastrophe was happening that I couldn't stop. I'd sweat like crazy. A couple of times I went to the emergency room. They ran tests but couldn't find anything wrong with me, so they suggested a psychiatrist.

After a few sessions, I told her about the ice cream truck, more or less in passing; I didn't think it was anything important. She listened carefully. She asked me if I'd ever seen or heard anything else unusual like that. I told her I hadn't, which is the truth. I wasn't crazy then, and I'm not crazy now.

After that, I didn't see it for a long time – maybe three or four years. I figured maybe telling someone about it made it stop appearing. I moved to the city and got a job. The panic attacks started easing up. My work friends introduced me to Glenn and we hit it off right away.

One night when we'd been going out for about a year, Glenn was staying over in my apartment. I sat up in bed. I heard the breeze outside, a distant siren, and an engine, idling very quietly. I knew if I'd look out the window I'd see the ice cream truck. I think I started to cry

then. I knew it was there, right under my window. What do you want, I said out loud. Glenn rolled over with a sound.

Finally, I got up and looked.

It was older now. In fact, it looked like it had been hauled from the bottom of a lake. It was so covered with dirt and rust it was hard to tell what kind of truck it was. Some sort of moss or weeds hung from the doors and window. Its music was little more than a metallic rattle; there was hardly any tune left at all. Something was moving around inside.

I went into the kitchen and poured myself a big glass of vodka and drank it. I went back to bed and hung on to Glenn as tightly as I could.

Glenn never knew about the ice cream truck. It seemed awkward to tell him when we were first going out, and as more and more time passed, I never felt like it was a good time. After we got married, one time he said that he noticed I changed a little in the spring. He said I'd have nightmares, thrash around and wake him up, but I never remembered. He'd bought me a box of melatonin pills at the drug store. I never took them.

I'm looking at the box of pills right now. It's 4:41.

The window is open, and the breeze coming in is almost warm and I can smell spring and something else, too – the dead stuff new life always blooms out of. Everything is waking up in the night. The trees are covered with tiny yellow-green leaves and pale blossoms that almost glow in the dark. A few blocks away in the park, I can hear tiny tree frogs. And I can hear something else, something that might have been a song years before I was born.

I can't imagine what it looks like by now. I throw a raincoat over my nightgown. Glenn is sleeping. I will leave the door open; if I try to close it, he might wake up.

I am running down the stairs and out the front door. I have no money. I haven't chased an ice cream truck in 30 years.

I don't have to hurry. I know it will wait.

I am running, making a sound almost like a giggle, but too afraid. It is spring at last. I am running and my feet don't touch the ground.

Contributors

Kristine Rae Anderson is a Pushcart-nominated poet and author of the chapbook *Field of Everlasting* (Main Street Rag) whose work has appeared in *SALT*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Literary Mama*, *Anacapa Review*, and elsewhere. She recently moved from California to Massachusetts, where she lives with her husband and their three-legged rescue dog.

Robyn Bashaw has a BFA in Creative Writing, and has previously been published in *Gabby and Min's Literary Review*, *Writers Resist*, and *NUNUM*. She is committed to revitalizing the world for the next generation. You can join the conversation at: https://robynbashaw.wordpress.com/.

Eric Benjaminson is a retired diplomat and Ambassador now living in Chicago. He worked and lived for many years in Africa and Northern Europe. He has consistently been attracted to quiet and lyrical poetry. Eric published several poems in the University of Oregon's literary magazine, *Glyphs*, many years ago.

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Deborah Bussewitz is a retired educator and writer whose poetry traces the inner and outer landscapes of the Camino de Santiago. Her work reflects a deep attention to place, presence, and the evolving journey of the spirit. Her work has appeared in *The Healing Muse*, *Silver Birch Press*, and Syracuse Cultural Workers calendars.

Kellie Brown is a violinist, conductor, and music educator. As a writer and poet, she explores themes of place, material culture, and healing journeys. Her words have appeared in *Writerly*, *Amethyst Review*, *Psaltery & Lyre*, *Galway Review*, and others.

Ann Cefola's latest work includes the translation *Alparegho, like nothing else* (Beautiful Days Press, 2025) and poetry collection *When the Pilotless Plane Arrives* (Trainwreck Press, 2021); she is also the recipient of a Witter Bynner Poetry Translation Residency and the Robert Penn Warren Award selected by John Ashbery.

Tracy Chipman, she/they is a language & healing artist exploring spoken & written language through solo & collective engagement, and body-based practices inviting folx into sensorial aliveness & deeper connections with life. She lives in northern Wisconsin. Currently their work engages with cyclicity, loss & feminine power. www.tracychipman.net

Jamie H. Cowan (he/they) was born in Scotland, and like any other person, he feels and reacts. Usually in writing. Cowan has written for several publications including *Overmorrow Publishing*, *Arcbeatle Press* and *fifth wheel press*.

Frank William Finney is the author of the chapbooks *Birds in a Boneyard* (Bainbridge Island Press, 2025), *The Folding of the Wings* (Finishing Line Press, 2022) and two collections published in Thailand. His collections *Wormwood Punch* (Bridge House Publishing) and *Preludes to Lethe* (Kelsay Books) are forthcoming.

Jon Fain's publications include short stories in *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Feign*, and *King Ludd's Rag*; flash fictions in *Shooter*, *The Airgonaut* and *Hawkeye*; micro fictions in *Blink-Ink* and *Molecule* and essays in *Lit Mag News*, *Atlantic Northeast* and *Sport Literate*. He lives in Massachusetts.

Patricia Farrell is a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet who lives in rural western Oregon. Formerly a biologist and landscape architect, she received a Certificate of Creative Writing from Linfield University. Her poems have been published in journals such as *Verseweavers*, *The Clackamas Literary Review*, *Cirque*, and *Eclectica*, among others.

Adam Flint was born in North London and is currently based in Berlin. Recent poems have appeared in/been published by *Shearsman magazine*, *Pamenar Press*, *Amethyst Review*, *Littoral journal* and *Black Box Manifold* among others. An album, *Seen Through Cirrus*, made in collaboration with The Cube of Unknowing, was released on the Irish label Fort Evil Fruit in 2022.

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Linda H.Y. Hegland is an award-winning poetry, lyric essay, and non-fiction writer who lives in Nova Scotia, Canada. Her writing reflects the influence of place, and one's complex and many-layered relationship with it. She has published extensively in literary journals and has had five books published.

Alison Hicks' fourth collection of poems is *Homing* (Sheila-Na-Gig Editions, 2024). Her previous book, *Knowing Is a Branching Trail*, received the 2021 Birdy Prize (Meadowlark Press) Her work has appeared in *Permafrost*, *Poet Lore* and *Smartish Pace*. She is founder of Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio, which offers community-based writing workshops.

Andrea E. Johnson is retired from a long career in public health. She participates now in several writers groups, both poetry and memoir. Her love of the natural world, music, cultural heritage and history makes its way onto the page. She lives on the edge of the Twin Cities in Lake Elmo, Minnesota.

Jennifer Keith majored in film and plays bass for the rock band Batworth Stone. Her poems and fiction have appeared in *City Paper*, *The Patuxent Review*, and B*est American Poetry 2015*. Her first full-length book of poems, *Terminarch*, won the 2023 Able Muse Book Award. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Alison Lock connects an inner world with a love of nature through poetry and prose. She trained as a facilitator of Life Writing for Transformation after studying for an MA in Literary Studies and Creative Writing. She lives in North Wales and leads regular Poetry for Wellbeing sessions.

Darrell Petska is a retired university engineering editor and three-time Pushcart Prize nominee. His poems appear in *Amethyst Review*, *3rd Wednesday Magazine*, *Verse-Virtual* and widely elsewhere (conservancies.wordpress.com). Father of five and grandfather of seven, he lives near Madison, Wisconsin, with his wife of more than 50 years.

Matthew Pullar is a poet and teacher based in Melbourne, Australia. His poetry and prose have been published at *Amethyst Review*, *Ekstasis*, *Heart of Flesh* and *Unspoken Words*. His latest collection, *This Teeming Mess of Glory* (Wipf & Stock, 2025), was shortlisted for Australian Christian Book of the Year.

Steve Pollack, 2025 Poet Laureate of Montgomery County (PA), advised local governments, built hospitals, science labs and public schools. His poetry appears in *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Mukoli-the Magazine for Peace*, and *Keystone: Contemporary Poets on Pennsylvania*. He sings bass with Nashirah- the Jewish Chorale of Philadelphia.

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Andrei Romanov is an award-winning independent historian and writer based in Portugal. He is the author of Masters of the Ocean Sea, winner of the 2026 London Book Festival for General Nonfiction. His fiction and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Wordpeace*, *Gordon Square Review*, and *Twisted Vine*.

Julie Sampson's work is widely published in magazines and anthologies, and has been shortlisted, or highly commended in a variety of competitions (including the Survision James Tate Memorial Prize and Geoff Steven's Memorial Prize). She edited *Mary Lady Chudleigh; Selected Poems* (Shearsman, 2009) and has three collections: *Tessitura* (Shearsman, 2011); *It was when it was when it was* (Dempsey and Windle, 2018); and *Fivestones* (Lapwing publications, 2022).

Katherine DiBella Seluja is a nurse practitioner and a poet. Author of three books of poetry, most recently *Point of Entry* (UNM Press, 2023). Katherine co-edited with Dale Wisely an anthology of grief poems, *Memento* (Ambidextrous Bloodhound Press, 2025). She is a poetry editor at *Unbroken Journal*.

Bobby Sorensen's stories have appeared in *Hedge Apple Magazine* and *Half and One* and he has upcoming work in *Bristol Noir* and *Brussels Review*. He's a finalist in LMNL Art's Patty Friedmann award and second place in SLO Nightwriter's Golden Quill contest. He lives in Virginia with his family.

Nell Starr is a poet and priest in New Zealand, trained at Iowa (MA) and Duke (MDiv). She writes poems and prayers, and while in Iowa City, helped Windhover Press print poetry by hand, a letter and word at a time.

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Sharon E. Svendsen has published fiction, articles, and poems in many literary magazines, periodicals and anthologies; lately, in *Manic Swirl*, *Lyric*, *Plainsongs*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Feathertale*, *Spank the Carp*, and *Descap*. She has a BA in English with a Creative Writing Emphasis from the University of Washington.

Lesley Taylor is an Irish writer living in the UK. She facilitates writing workshops and teaches English. She recently completed a Granta nature writing course and is working on creative non-fiction, poetry and personal essays which explore place, belonging and our relationship with the natural world. Her work has appeared in *Mslexia* and *E-Magazine*.

David C. Weinczok is a historian, writer, and poet in Edinburgh originally from Nova Scotia. His poems have been published by the *Edinburgh School of Poets*, *Scottish Mountaineering Press*, *Scottish Wildlife Trust*, and the *Dark Poets Club*. All his works concern themes of place, history, nature, identity, and storytelling.