

THIN
PLACES

LITERARY JOURNAL

Thin Places: a Literary Journal

*New Writing
on Thin Places and Sacred Spaces*

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Edited by
Sarah Law and Jane Liffen

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Introduction

The Editors

It's a pleasure to bring you the second issue of *Thin Places* Journal! Our reviewing process has been longer than anticipated, due to the high quantity, quality and thought-provoking range of pieces received in each genre. We know this to be a privilege, and we are most grateful to all our submitters.

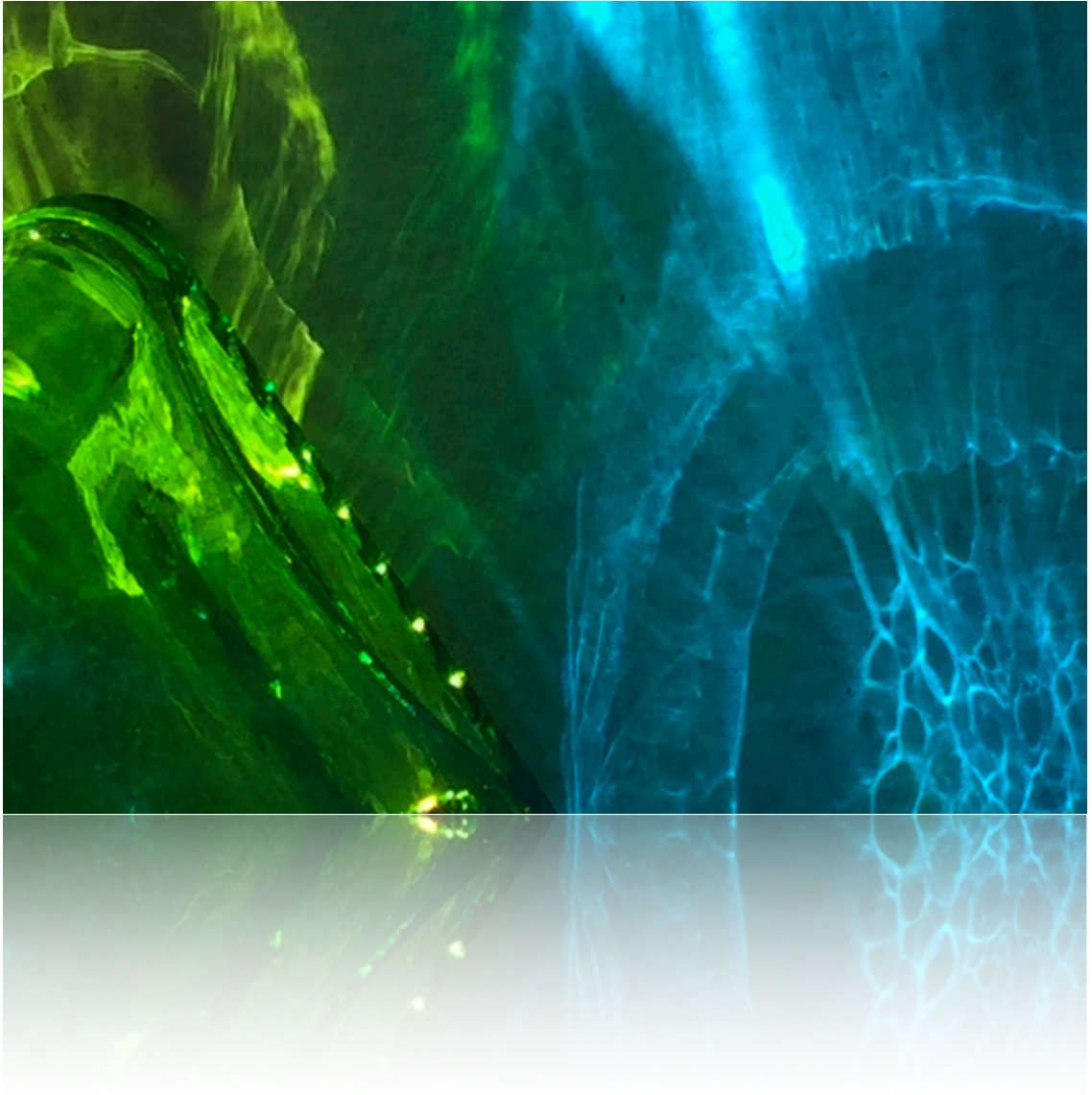
This issue finds thin places within history, myth, specific locations, and at the many borders of our human experience. The four elements are variously prominent in these encounters, as are the bodily senses, any of which can lead to glimpses of something beyond the veil of ordinary perception. Informative, mysterious, moving, lyrical and playful, these essays, poems and stories all provide such glimpses in their own way. Thin places and sacred spaces are more prevalent than many of us realise, and it's our hope that the writing published here will help us become increasingly aware of them.

Sarah Law, Editor

A variety of writing styles and approaches are reflected in the range of work included in this second issue of *Thin Places* and again the quality of submissions received has been high. I have been touched by the honesty and self-reflection in some of the pieces that share personal insights with the reader whilst opening out the possibility of negotiating the world and its intricacies in new and creative ways. Likewise, other work engaging with old traditions and storytelling methods embraces a sense of wonder and sheer delight in the natural world, demonstrating its richness as a source of inspiration, as well as a timelessness inherent in its capacity to enthuse. The nature of the eternal and boundless sometimes experienced in thin places continues to be explored creatively in a variety of ways in this issue. Thank you to all who contributed.

Jane Liffen, Editor

ESSAYS



What the Land Requires

Richard Hurst

'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly'
– Micah 6:8

The Gila does not announce itself as sacred. It presents as practical country. High desert light, rough roads, distances measured in time rather than miles. The air is thin enough to remind you where you are. Water is never assumed. Shade is earned.

The cliff dwellings sit above the canyon floor not to impress, but to endure. They are positioned with restraint. Close enough to water, far enough from flood and fire, oriented toward winter sun and summer shadow. Nothing about them suggests permanence. They were built by people who understood that staying too long in one place can be as dangerous as leaving too soon, and that wisdom often lies in limits freely accepted.

High desert teaches attentiveness. You learn to read clouds for intent rather than drama. You notice how juniper and piñon space themselves. How grass returns only when it is ready. How silence is never empty. This is a landscape that rewards patience and punishes assumption. It teaches watchfulness, the kind that grows from care rather than anxiety.

Ranger life here is not ceremonial, but it is ritualized. The radio check in the morning. The first walk through the visitor center before the doors open. The quiet correction of a sign turned sideways by wind or curiosity. The steady reminder, spoken gently, that walls are not furniture and rooms are not stages.

It includes administering Junior Ranger oaths, asking young visitors to promise care and attention in words simple enough to understand and serious enough to matter. The patch comes at the end, not as a prize, but as a sign that something has been accepted. These actions repeat because repetition is how care is practiced, and practice is how intention becomes real.

The dwellings are not ruins in the romantic sense. They are evidence of a long, competent conversation between people and place. What makes them powerful is not what is there, but what was intentionally left out. No excess. No dominance. No attempt to outlast the land itself.

In the Gila, holiness resides above all else in restraint. In choosing where not to build. In knowing when to move on. In maintaining without improving. The forest does not ask for belief or allegiance. It asks for behavior. Move slowly. Touch lightly. Remember that you are temporary, and that what you have been given is not yours to possess, only to tend.

Some landscapes demand awe. This one teaches responsibility. It teaches faithfulness in small things, attention over display, care offered quietly and without expectation of return.

You do not have to name it sacred. You only have to keep faith with it.

Memory Fields

Gail Tyson

‘They had to believe in something.’

Our guide, Cecile, speaks about Neolithic people who built this field of standing stones – a site that lured my restless spirit 6,000 miles. Planted in symmetrical rows a millennium before Stonehenge, the 3,000 granite menhirs stretch like tombstones four km along the southern coast of Brittany, France. Mystery shrouds the origin of these menhirs – a Breton word meaning ‘long stone.’ On this May morning in 2026, legends captivate me less than the empty space between the rocks, as if the ancient ones believed that souls laid to rest needed such voids to expand and grow.

Celtic tribes settled this French peninsula aeons ago, and their wanderers’ DNA pulses in my bloodline. After the Romans came and left, more Celts emigrated here from Cornwall, Devon, and Wales to escape Anglo-Saxon invaders. Brittany’s identity arises from homes abandoned, borders crossed, lives forged in new soil – exactly my story. The emptiness between the stones stirs up my in-between times, years that elapsed after one life ended and another one germinated.

My hand cradles the top of a massive boulder, reassuringly solid. Known as the Carnac alignments, these megaliths are the largest group of prehistoric stone monuments in the world. Quarried from the bedrock beneath our feet, the granite’s energy – steady, enduring – is muted by lacy crusts of lichen. Cecile describes how Saint Cornély asserted the stones were Roman legionaries, petrified while they pursued him. (In fact, the stones pre-dated the Romans by 3,000 years.) Later conjectures about the stones’ purpose – astronomical, magical – were also cast aside. Now, Cecile tells us, archaeologists suggest the alignments comprised a sacred site with burial mounds. Most tantalizing to me is the notion that these fields form liminal space, like the Celtic ‘thin space’ between this world and the next. The dying often linger there, as my husband did, choosing to make an Irish goodbye when I left the room, away from his deathbed.

Lately other silent withdrawals preoccupy me – friendships fissured by geographical distance, the ones I’ve outgrown or the people who have forgotten what kept us close. Seeking a place where I belonged has led me cross-country, and I’ve made a new life in California. Why some of us feel the deepest kinship with persons and habitats far from our birthplace mystifies me. Bone-deep, that knowing is. Still, I miss the bonds that once stitched me to a past with my husband, stitches that have, one by one, dissolved.

Unlike that quiet, natural unraveling, the distance between the massive rocks in front of me – six to nine feet – was chosen deliberately. Why, I wonder? For my fellow travelers, other questions prevail.

‘How did they raise these stones? Don’t you have any records?’ one woman asks fretfully.

Cecile shakes her head. ‘Historians suppose they dug out the rocks with handmade tools and moved them on wooden sledges, lifting them with the help of pulleys and perhaps animals.’

‘But what drove them to build this? Was it their religion?’

‘We don’t know.’ Our guide spreads her hands wide, apologetically. ‘But they must have believed in something.’

Closing my eyes, I imagine the thud of polished stone axes splitting soil, ropes rasping, the acrid sweat of humans and bellows of oxen hauling five to ten tonnes of stone. A recent memory overlaps, the evening four friends and I used drop cloths and gym-toned muscles to pull and push a piano and weighty oak furniture out of another friend's house, onto her porch. Ultimately, our success depended on one man's quiet authority – determining the sequence of the objects we moved, pivoting large items to fit them through doorframes, and hoisting others over thresholds to avoid damage.

Reading about Carnac has taught me that, to raise such monuments, Neolithic people required both brute strength and astute planning. They also needed time and space. Did a team of workers begin angling up the next stone in a row while others levered the previous one into place? Or did they use the open space before them to celebrate each placement, feasting as my friends and I did on the supper our grateful hostess offered? Even working in unison, it must have taken prehistoric clans years to construct these gently meandering alignments – years when the fields came to hold the memories of builders who had passed away before their great work was completed.

Cecile is right, I think to myself – some intrinsic conviction must have kept the ancient ones going in the gusty winds and cold rain that sweep inland from Brittany's 1,700 miles of coastline; sustained them, too, as their community grew and altered. Over time, did they have to overcome opposition from tribal members who preferred to spend time and energy trading tin, copper, and dolerite axes? To defy new leaders who preferred monuments hewn to themselves? To rise above their own doubts, persisting in a massive undertaking they could not complete in their lifetimes?

No answers blow my way down the wind, just the faint vibration of voices, the dim echo of tools singing on stone.

Water in the Wall

Seth Frame

The hummingbird was perched on the top of a dead yucca stalk.

I remember the contrast before anything else. The stalk was gray and brittle, rising from the desert floor, its season finished. Above it stretched a flat sky, pale and empty. Then there was the bird. A small flash of iridescent green against all that stillness, its long black bill pointed forward, its body perfectly balanced on a plant that appeared to have nothing left to offer.

It stayed there long enough for me to take a photograph.

I had driven down from Wyoming for a job interview in Aztec, New Mexico. A job here would have kept me in the Southwest. After the interview, before heading back north, I stopped at Aztec Ruins National Monument.

The air smelled of sage and dust.

That smell returns every time I walk through the great house. Dry earth. Sun-warmed stone. The sharp scent of desert plants. It is the smell of a place that has been exposed to the elements for centuries, but it is also the smell of a place that has been lived in.

The ruins are quiet in a way that feels different from ordinary silence.

Not empty. Held.

Aztec Ruins sits in the Animas River valley, a place named by settlers who assumed that a structure this large must have been built by the Aztecs. The builders were Ancestral Puebloans, whose descendants maintain relationships with this place that continue beyond the walls themselves. The word ruins suggests an ending, but the people who built these rooms did not disappear into the past.

The great house still carries evidence of the lives built inside it.

Original vigas remain overhead in places, dark beams that once held up roofs above rooms where people gathered, worked, stored food, and slept. Doorways connect rooms that were not meant to be seen from a distance. They were meant to be passed through.

Walking through the great house is not like looking at a monument. It is closer to moving through a trace that still holds shape, packed earth underfoot, narrow thresholds between rooms, the way light falls differently into enclosed spaces than it does outside.

The first time I entered the great kiva, the quiet arrived before anything else.

It is the one space at Aztec where a visitor can step inside something whole. White plastered walls curve around the room. A dark red band runs near the floor. Massive wooden columns rise toward a layered ceiling, with a square opening at the center where light enters. There is a fire pit. An altar. Niches cut into the walls. A staircase leading upward.

Outside, the desert moves constantly. Wind across the valley, cottonwoods along the river shifting in uneven sound. Inside the kiva, the air feels gathered. Sound does not travel the same way. Even footsteps feel absorbed rather than reflected.

The quiet I return to was made possible through interpretation.

The kiva was reconstructed in 1934 by archaeologist Earl Morris using archaeological evidence. The walls surrounding me are not untouched. They are a decision made from fragments, from absence, from interpretation of what once was here.

That is the strange gift of the reconstruction. It allows me to enter a space I otherwise could only imagine.

But the people whose ancestors built this place never needed reconstructed walls to maintain their connection to it.

Their relationship to Aztec exists through memory, tradition, prayer, and ceremony. Mine exists through visits. Through the feeling of standing here. Through the way a place can become part of a life without ever belonging to it.

Years later, when I was living in Montrose and driving south to Farmington to see someone, I would stop at the ruins on the way home.

Those drives had their own weather. Leaving Colorado in the morning light, the land opening gradually into New Mexico. The road flattening. The sky widening. By the time I reached Aztec, the day had already shifted into something looser, less defined.

It was the stop between places. The green chile at Blake's Lotaburger before turning north again. The sense of moving through a corridor of distance rather than arriving anywhere in particular.

The ruins were simply there, unchanged, while everything else moved.

At one point along the tour is a thin horizontal line of green siltstone built into the wall.

The builders placed it there deliberately and then covered it with plaster.

No one knows exactly why.

One interpretation is that they were marking the land itself. The layer of stone beneath the valley where water gathers and moves unseen. A visible line for something invisible below. A trace of water in the structure.

The meaning is uncertain.

The intention is not.

The green stone remains inside the wall.

So do the cottonwoods along the Animas River.

They rise beside the ruins, tall and green in the desert, their roots reaching toward what cannot be seen. They register water without showing it directly.

Before I left the West for New York, I came here with Mark.

I remember walking the rooms without saying much. There was no clear sense of departure in the moment itself. Only the awareness that the shape of my life was about to shift. The distance between what I was leaving and what I was entering had not yet taken form.

The mountains, the desert, the long roads between towns. All of it was becoming something I would carry rather than something I was living inside.

Years later, after visiting Chaco Canyon with Mark and his partner, we stopped at Aztec on the way back. After the openness of Chaco, Aztec felt enclosed again. Rooms instead of distances, walls instead of horizon.

On my most recent visit, I came back with Mark, his partner, and someone new.

I told her about the hummingbird.

I told her about the first time I saw it, after the interview, before I knew what direction my life would take. The yucca had been part of this landscape long before I arrived. Its fibers were woven into cordage. Its leaves were used for sandals and rope. Its seeds and flowers provided food.

Even after its season had passed, the stalk still stood.

The hummingbird was still there.

Still finding what I could not see.

The green stone is still inside the wall.

The cottonwoods still mark the water below.
Somewhere, a hummingbird lands on a dead yucca stalk.

The Mutability of the Stones

Nat Guest

Circling unanswered questions in Avebury

*Did all this happen, or didn't it?
I don't know, Matthew. I really don't know.*

Children of the Stones (1977)

I am staying in Avebury for the week with my mother, in an old red house on the edge of the southern stone circle. The house we are staying in is owned by exactly the sort of person you would think would own a house in a stone circle; three floors of bookshelves loaded with books on sacred geometry and the poetry of John Donne, a back garden full of fragmented sarsen stones, and a telescope in the attic window pointing up at the night sky.

We have spent the day tracing circles within circles, trying to select our favourite rocks – or at least, those that speak to us in some way. We find most of the stones strangely mute, though, despite my mum having brought along small beakers to listen to them like you would listen to the sea in a shell.

Eventually I choose a well-weathered individual shaped almost like a hexagon. My mum picks a lichen-clad, undulating option which she said ‘feels like a friend’. We also admire a sarsen only still barely standing because of the bolts pushed through it holding it together, which feels relatable to both of us with big milestone birthdays on the horizon – 40 for me, and for her, 70.

After our day spiralling in circles through the stones we wind ourselves back down by watching *Children of the Stones* (1977), and realise we’re in the house next to the house where astrophysicist Adam Brake and his son Matthew were staying. As we finish up and say goodnight, a dirty storm is beginning to blow outside; the wind is blustering down the chimney and the rain pattering at the window.

Now I am sneaking out into the night to see what the stones feel like in the darkness; if they are still mute or if they will speak after the sun has set. I get dressed as quietly as possible, my jumper and my coat rustling and rasping. I am sure my mother – currently in the room above my head – is entirely aware, in that way mothers often are, of everything I am doing.

The moment I close the garden gate behind me I regret my decision. The sky is suffused with an eerie, shifting orange light – workmen are resurfacing the road all week here, creating a constant high level hum that makes the air around the stones ring slightly. The rain is heavier than I thought, and attempts to dash my glasses off my face.

I enter the field opposite the house, navigating the over-complicated locking mechanism on the gate, and head towards two hulking shapes on the glowing orange horizon. These are the two remaining stones of three which together made what was called ‘the Cove’, a structure at the centre of Avebury’s southern inner circle.

Avebury’s complex shape is such that ‘stone circle’ does not really do it justice – it is more properly two inner circles, surrounded by one huge circle ‘as big as the O2 arena’. This is how its size is described by a local tour guide who we meet earlier in the day looking dispirited outside the National Trust shop, where no one has turned up for his 1 o’clock tour. When I cheekily ask

him for 'one free fact', he immediately infodumps at least fifty on us and then drags us half way across a field to show us his favourite polissoir – a stone which used to be used to polish and sharpen arrow heads. We wouldn't have noticed it on our own, and my mum is particularly taken by stroking the smooth patch on this jagged rock.

Outside of but attached to the outer circle, two snaking 'avenues' of trailing stones head off South and West, linking Avebury up with other ceremonial neolithic sites. The Southern Avenue (known as the West Kennet Avenue) is still partially in place, while the Western Avenue is now almost without visible trace. West Kennet Avenue weaves its way across Wiltshire's chalk hills and then joins up with a smaller 'circle within a circle' known as The Sanctuary, now marked by much-diminished, peggy little concrete placemakers. The original stones seem to have encircled a timber hut, which became a slightly larger hut, which became a slightly larger hut.

'And if anybody tells you they know what any of it was there for, they're having you on,' says our tour guide. 'We haven't got a clue.'

He also tells us that the largest remaining stone of the two making up The Cove – the one I am now making a torchless and footless beeline for in the dark – stretches a further 9 feet underground ('two mes!' I say – my schooling was post-imperial so my only frame of reference is ever that I know I am just over 5 feet). The soil around the base of the stone, he tells us, was tested as being 5000 years old, pushing the circle's creation back much earlier than previously thought.

I cannot confirm whether this is true: every pamphlet, every plaque, every lecture I have watched or read on Avebury contradicts the previous one. The narratives surrounding the site seem to have been so plastic since Alexander Keiller's excavations in the 1920s that any sign you might find, any book you might pick up, may already be out of date.

We ask the tour guide about the hut at the Sanctuary. He says there was no hut at the Sanctuary.

You can ask a lot of questions about Avebury but the answer you will get will depend on who you ask, when you ask them, and what time they answer from.

By the time I am halfway across the field, the rain is hitting me sideways. I can make out other shapes around me in the dark – the remains of the rest of the southern circle, and a line of stones within the circle which now point directly towards the Saxon church nearby – though of course the church is much newer, only dating back to around 1000 AD. Many churches were planted on top of stone circles at the same time as those circles were being purposefully buried and disassembled – presumably an attempt to cover over the unknown and steer would-be parishioners away from pagan temptations.

It is raining hard and I can no longer see through my glasses darkly, so I remove them and jam them into my pocket.

There is an inherent tension, I think, in the response to these spaces. At the same time as prior meanings were suppressed or covered over, these existing spaces of community, celebration or sublimity were often appropriated or incorporated into more modern uses or belief systems. The meaning of these places evolves over time, either naturally or by force, but the importance of Place remains. What we have repressed becomes part of our new landscapes. In nearby Alton Priors, two sarsen stones are stuck underneath the floorboards of the church, but can still be viewed by raising a trapdoor. Visitors place votive offerings through the hole, bringing scraps to prisoners that can no longer see the sky they were born under.

I have reached the largest of the stones, and am expecting to feel dwarfed or frightened by its presence – but the weather means my primary view of it is as shelter. The name of the 'Cove' in the centre of the circle is suddenly more understandable – this is refuge in the middle of the

great dark and great unknown; something which tethers you in place within this vast landscape with its unpredictable moods and weathers.

Rebecca Solnit writes that ‘That thing we call a place is the intersection of many changing forces passing through, whirling around, mixing, dissolving, and exploding in a fixed location.’ We might not know the first story of why Avebury was assembled – but there might not be just one first story. The monument was not built all at once but built in multiple steps, sometimes hundreds of years apart. There is nothing to say that what the place meant to the builders who propped together the cove was the same as what it meant to those that created the inner circles, or those who created the outer circles, or those who sketched the avenues leading outwards and away across the chalk.

There was something here – or something believed to be here – which was marked with a circle, which became a slightly larger circle, which became a slightly larger circle. We keep asking questions about it, but we end up spiralling.

I tuck myself into the shadow of the cove stone, out of the wind, and lay a hand on its huge and silent flank.

Silence

C. S. Magloire

The cruciform bulk of Charing Cross hospital looms over the Margravine cemetery. Circumnavigating gravestones and sunbathers, I head towards the scary. The lift shoots skywards to the ICU on the 11th floor. My friend John lies bloated, unresponsive, tubes flowing from head and arms. Behind him a young nurse keeps vigil, flanked by banks of winking lights.

A bleed on his brain. He was not found for two days.

*

I first met John in a shopping centre off the Finchley Road. A short middle-aged man limped towards me, startling blue eyes and close-cropped hair beneath a flat cap. A mutual friend in Alcoholics Anonymous had put us in touch. Over a cup of tea I told him that after ten years of sobriety I was feeling stuck.

A schoolboy grin: 'When you go to 'ospital you don't stay in the waiting room, do ya?'

John is London Irish. He has an uncanny habit of phoning out of the blue just when I most need to talk. He meets my dilemmas with, 'Now where 'ave you seen that before?' And when I look at him blankly he reminds me of some childhood trauma that I'd forgotten I'd mentioned. 'God shows us the places where we need to 'eal, see. Shall we say a quick prayer?' After which he flips back to cracking jokes and showing me his latest trophies from Portobello market – he has a passion for old prints, clocks and walking sticks.

Discovering a shared love of Indian food, we spend the next fifteen years delving the streets of North London for the best veg curry houses, sharing our experiences, strengths and hopes across formica tables.

'I tried to gas me family when I was eigh'teen.'

'Why did you do that, John?'

'I thought they'd stopped loving me. When I was a baby I stayed in 'ospital for a year. I couldn't walk till I was five, 'ad to wear a leg iron as they called them. Then they decided I 'ad cerebral palsy. But I thought me family left me there 'cos they didn't love me.'

'Drunk?'

'In blackout.'

'But you didn't kill them.'

'Nah. I went and sat down after leaving the gas on. But then I heard a gentle voice: "Turn the gas off, John."'

We load our plates with rice and dal. John closes his eyes: 'Farver, we'd like to thank you for our time together and we ask for blessings on Caroline and her family. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

'Even after I stopped drinking I felt empty,' he continues. 'Right up to when I did step three.'

Step three of the AA twelve step programme asks us to make a decision – in the form of a prayer – to hand our will and our lives over to the care of God.

‘As I was saying the prayer I heard a voice behind me. Full of love, it was. “Come home.” It was the same voice I heard the day I left the gas on. I burst into tears. For the first time in my life I felt wanted.’

John helps a lot of people, in AA and in his church. He speaks of God’s love to prisoners in Wandsworth jail. In his mid sixties now, he says he is getting tired and would like some time to himself. I tell him I mostly find God in silence.

‘I’ll maybe give it a try. Stay at ’ome for a coupla days. I’m still afraid of silence, see. Cos of the ’ospital.’

Next month he calls. ‘D’ya wanna meet up for a Ruby?’

Over masala dosas in Drummond Street I ask how the silence went. ‘Did you stay at home?’

‘Nah. I forgot.’

*

They operate. John has an infection. The doctors say if he does not respond by the weekend they will switch off life support. I rest a hand on his arm and recite the Psalm he loves best: ... *surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* The wires and machinery recede; the air grows thick with John’s presence.

Next day my husband calls from the hospital: ‘John squeezed my wrist. I felt pressure.’

Weeks pass. Another operation to drain his brain. In a general ward now. John opens his eyes and looks at me with the luminous gaze of a Fayum mummy portrait, those forerunners of icons – contemplatives who lived and died in the Egyptian desert almost two thousand years ago and who hold eternity in their eyes.

The 10th floor ward is wrapped in cloud. As my eyes follow a plane on its descent towards Heathrow I say a silent prayer of thanksgiving.

‘Did John recognise you?’ a friend asks later.

‘He saw right through me.’

But I get it wrong by thinking that now John is awakening, my task is to pull him back into this world. ‘We’ll go to Southall for a curry – when you’re better.’

He does not respond.

Sometimes he sleeps right through my visits; sometimes he awakens and turns his radiant face to meet mine. In silent whispers he tells me what he has seen, what he has learned in his travels back and forth across the border. He whispers intently for minutes on end, depthless Fayum eyes urging me to understand. But he has seen eternity and I have not.

Foolishly, I persist with mundane questions. Does he want a cup of tea? Does he know his birthday is next week? My words scarcely touch him. A quick yes or no thank you in full voice, as though impatient with my dullness. Once, I mention a struggle I am having with a friend. ‘You be you,’ he replies, before resuming his soundless earnest communication, which I lack the ears to hear.

And my attempts to rouse him hurt. When called back to this world he becomes restless, distracted. Tongue flicking from side to side, he strains to pull off the boxing glove mitts that prevent him from yanking out his catheter. Only when I recite the Lord’s Prayer or read from the Bible does he calm down and listen with full attention. As the weeks pass it becomes a tug of love. While we, his friends, try to pull John back into our world, he strives to bring us into his.

We remark to each other that after seeing John we feel full somehow.

On my next visit I find him seated in a bedside armchair. He presses my hand between his and looks steadily into my eyes.

This time I sit still and speak to him in silence.

'Where am I?' he asks.

A man in the next bed tells me that in the mornings John wakes up praying.

They move John to a side room. He has another infection. At reception a patient has collapsed to the floor and is roaring like a soul in hell. I am scared that his anguish will upset John as it does me. I pick up the Bible by his bedside and read aloud:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted...'

'It's good to hear that.' An African nurse enters. 'I'm Catholic too.'

In his thin hospital gown, unshaven, wispy grey hair fanning out against his pillow, John fixes us with the stern eyes of an Old Testament prophet:

'E pours 'is grace upon us.'

We stand transfixed, looking down at him.

'It's all we need.'

I burst through sliding doors, float across grey paving slabs and through the Margravine's wrought iron gates. John's words lift me above the stones, the chattering office workers and the man beneath a silver birch doing tai chi in his underpants.

*

Autumn sets in. Leaf-blowers swirl along cemetery paths. The doctors decide John is not a candidate for rehabilitation and he is moved to a care home outside London, half a day's journey away. We pray he might be moved back to the city so that we can visit him more often.

I travel out to the home just before Christmas. In silence, John tells me many things. For the first time since he was in the ICU it occurs to me that he might die. He looks forlorn here, shrunk. At lunchtime he wrests his head away as the carer extends a forkful of mashed potato. After she leaves, he accepts satsuma segments from my hand, lifting them to his mouth with slow intent. As dusk falls I take my leave. But something pushes me back into his room to see him one more time. I lean over his chair.

'Goodbye John.'

'See ya when I see ya.'

John died suddenly in the new year. His heart failed on Epiphany.

*

John enters to Bob Marley, his coffin draped in an Irish flag. The chapel is packed with his friends (he addressed everyone he met as 'my friend') of all ages and colours. After the service we disperse into February rain. Most head to the wake in a local pub; I walk to the tube in silence.

Night Swim

Joann Plockova

11 p.m. in the Peter Zumthor-designed thermal baths in Vals, Switzerland is deep hums, dark holes, shafts of light. The sensation of gliding, steam coming off the water, bodies appearing and disappearing.

I wasn't sure if I would be able to do it. Go down there in the dark. I was in bed in my pajamas upstairs in my hotel room lying there, lights off, just an hour before. I am an early to bed, early to rise person. Someone unsettled by the dark. But then unexpectedly a full moon came up over the Alps. The light caught my eye. I had to go.

Built in the nineties and attracting architecture enthusiasts from around the world ever since, the baths, carved in-between monolithic gray-green Vals quartzite walls, are cave-like. You find them. Or they find you. Their turquoise, highly mineralized waters from the local spring, beckon with their glow. Their promised warmth.

At all hours, the environment – gallery-like; our bodies the canvases – is a series of contrasts: darkness and light, cold and warm, cocoon-like and expansive, silent and echoing with sound.

I can't see around certain corners, in isolated areas. It adds to the allure. Sounds are heightened. Sensations. A person appears and then is gone. I'm alone and then not.

I enter the large inner pool. All four entry points are a set of steps sinking into the warm, 30° Celsius water. The ceiling is dotted with a series of small square lightwells covered in blue glass. The gray stone walls take on a darker color than during the day, their contrast with the glowing blue water, lit from within, is something I could stare at forever. I watch a man float, his head partially submerged. After he leaves, I do the same. Under the water, weightless, gazing up at the blue framed windows above, I'm like a plane floating in the clouds. There is an ocean sound. I feel like I am in my mother's womb. I let a subtle current take me where it wants to go.

I head into the Sound Bath. There is a narrow passage that only one person can pass through at a time. I don't like small spaces. I go through quickly. Inside, the ceiling opens up. Light reflections move all around. Echoes reverberate. One woman is looking up. I settle for a moment, but the walls are too close, I swim away and then out.

On the opposite side of the darkened expanse, I push through a massive copper-colored door. I am outside. The cool air hits me. After being in the former pool's cavernous enclosure, I welcome it. This is the bath I return to again and again during my brief, two-night stay. The contrast of the warmth on my skin after the cold is almost, sexual. I swim slowly through the water. Staring at my fingers as they come up through the surface with each stroke. There is steam trailing off the water. Bubbles emerge on the surface.

I'd like to return in winter, imagining walking out into falling snow.

I hear a disconcerting hum coming from a dark corner I swam into during the day, where the massive wall of glass just above it reflects the mountains. I don't know what the sound is. A gurgling. I won't go in. I imagine getting sucked inside. But I notice later a man is floating there. In the dark, only his head is visible. He appears as some kind of creature. Something unidentifiable.

I swim toward the moon. And with it. I notice a woman looking up. We both stare at the stars. Alone, but together. Aware of one another, but not. She leaves and I remain looking up at the galaxy. Me and the mountains, the silky water on my skin, darkness all around me. I don't feel afraid. Everything is open.

POETRY



Reflection by Sarah Voight

Wind

Joseph Geskey

A patch of Little bluestem
splits in a gust, like a sock drawer
parted by invisible hands,
or a child pulling muslin curtains
seeing whether it's sunny or cloudy.

Each year I climb a ladder
reattaching the shutters, hear them clack
against the siding – an impatient knock
then think of the dog, how it leans
into an open car window,
ears and furs bending with the rush.

Children build pinwheels, watch them spin,
language of science igniting
a small fire against not knowing –
no longer waiting on adults
to answer Why?

Gales carry a season's pollen,
scatter it past the edges
of a classroom window, where a child
learning metaphor writes:
the wind rushes through grass
and later learns to name it:
Common reed, Indiangrass,
Big and Little bluestem.

Table Rock

Bianca Ambrosino

Just before the dry crossing of Christmas Creek,
the Sun cast my eyes
down, down
down
a bank of clay, gravel and moss. There
the rains had dribbled into
tiny mushroom caps of sunset vibrance –
little fairy jewels of orange fire.

The Sun had wanted me to see what absence
grows. The life in the dampness.

The rocks line our path in every possible size,
they are painted in lichen finery,
standing at attention, as witness. And every flying
citizen of the forest has come to greet the exotic.
Bugs drawn to the nectar of our eyes.

Finally, we found the swimming hole of Big Mary –
the baptismal waters of Table Rock; and though I was
completely immersed in the bath of the woods already,
I scooped up some of that holy water four generations of
my line had splashed through, and I let it trickle
from above my head, onto my styled hair
and down my neck.

I had never felt so clean, so divine.

On this occasion, my mother plucked two smooth
mementos from the shallows and placed one in my palm.
She stuck the other into her pocket. Though when crossing
back over Christmas Creek, not quite through the veil,
she found her pocket
empty.
So I picked another stone from the silt and gave it to her.

We still have them, and as it turns out, you can take a piece of this place,
but can only keep it if it's given to you.

Marine Layer

Ramya Yandava

The world is wreathed and rolled in folds of fog.
Mist makes a mystery of all, a bog
where sand is mire and seas and skies are smog.
A fleet-footed god or someone's unleashed dog
might be the shape that menaces the haze,
that moves within it like an underblaze,
swelling and thickening the dark, then leaving sideways,
unseen, to join the ghosts where they liaise.
Might we be also of that spectral species?
We seem to float with disembodied ease
on Lethe's steaming shore and not the seas',
breathing oblivion, the shells released
of body, skin, bone, brain, and brawn. Souls
alone dwell here; divested of our roles,
beyond the world of glories, gains, and goals,
we lose ourselves within the loosening scrolls.

Onetime

Jonathan Memmert

Beside blue in the sky
does anyone ever escape?

The world erodes you.

Sinkholes you.

Fill hours.

Empty days.

Spin nights.

Hold space.

There's a fine filter film
to the atmosphere I embrace.

Unaware / aware.

Do enough
to squeeze by.

Under cloudy erasure

Watch circles
revolve circles.

Bottomed out

I await
slingshot pass
of a light year
not yet arrived.

Fern Brook

John Muro

The want to find something of motion
other than glittering air-born shards
that seem suspended in the confluence
of wind and light brought me to this out-
cropping of glacial stone – the muted
colors of lichen-green and gray that these
lowlands seem to spawn – only to find
a more intense stillness that has fallen
in upon itself as winter claims custody
of the land and ice levels the stream's
surface like a layer of candlewax that's
less opaque near its center where I can
see how the overhead boughs expand
this time of silence by casting shadows
over the leaden water further bonding
cold to ice, muting the stream's passage
as it presses against matted beds of fern,
the wreckage of leafless branches and
a motionless riverbed of brushed copper
fashioned from fallen needles of pine.

Way Back of the Lake

Jennifer Marysia Landretti

No ruts on this sunbaked
reach of road: just some dust
through the cranberries
that loud tires have left behind.
But the furrow to my right,
this canal of sky-dazzled water
dark as oolong or darjeeling
waist-high in wildflowers,
slow-going down there. . .

when I finally reach the swamp
birch a mile off
and start into the forest,
more than my striving
let this ditch sparkle
be the thing that I remember:
all these cups of tea
brightly serving themselves
to the soft applause
of monarch wings.

In summer, the violin teacher plays Bach Sonata No. 1 in G Minor *con affetto*

Rebecca D. Martin

While his students prepare
for their young lesson and the
day falls oh *triste* upon me a running
rill rising *adagio* falling a rivulated
river of fishlife filling
the bursting banks the stranded chords strung
taut into sweetly reverberating
cliffs of curve carved wood smooth
sides and fern furled neck
streaming unbound reversal into
the – ah – *piacere* version of me.

The verdance of years

floods *a tempo* while children with hot tumbled
hair sun-plastered to their flushed foreheads
unclasp, *sans presser*, black plastic instrument cases,
sweaty hands lifting ready to be wind blown warp and
string strung woof. The music before them
ascends and cascades and

oh God

I am made into and out of my [*animandosi*]self like
never before. Now
the teacher's song ends.

Now

the children begin to play.

Meramec River

Bethany Besteman

Meramec I.

Our nascent summers shed midwestern skin,
and sloughing off the salt-free waves, sand dunes
we slithered south past corn and silver gate
until we came to heavy air, thick moss, and mud.
Where trees creep up on houses unawares.
Where roots and rot are partners to undo
in weeks the human barricade of years.
Where river does not rest content despite
her lazy path, but slips beneath your door
or gnaws through window frames to slick your brow
and green the whitewashed walls. And damp the deck
and damp the cellar steps and damp the rope
bridge boards that sway and buck beneath the fear
free feet. The damp her bone-sunk siren song:
I'm here, still here and always here again.
We'd hear: Impatient rites of sunscreen, suits
and water shoes complete, we'd lurch our way
down lichen slick and steep stone steps, rough wedged
into the house-topped hill. We tugged and rolled
and bounced our tubes of black patched rubber – smooth
and sun baked – tossed into the shallow pool
where we learned again to slip and wriggle
into place, butt sunk with legs and arms flung
askance to dip or paddle, head lolled back
or straining up to see just where the rocks
and current are that catch and carry us
past camps and through thick woods across a stretch
of rapid shallows to a pebbly beach
where crayfish linger underneath the rocks.
At last we land and walk the dusty road,
unwinding river's slow descent as bug-
bit, waterlogged we creep home – never dry –
to eat a flame grilled chicken breast late, long
time after stars have opened up the sky
and night noise fills our ears: cacophony
of bug and bird and frog, her children all,
and when we sleep she's bunkbed's lullaby:
a rocking bob of waves behind our eyes,

and in our dreams her gold-flecked silt-
-rich stream, immerses and baptizes us again.

Meramec II.

Our summers south, fork-tongued familiarity
sung us the song that we belonged to river banks,
to mossy woods and ivied paths. Civility
from northern suburbs was encrusted by the clay,
enfeebled by the fighting fish on whirring lures,
and muffled by the twilight's calling whippoorwills.

On Saturdays the river filled with Coors-
can drunk and rafting locals, laughter spilled
and coarsely splashed across our inlet pools
of leisure, during which we'd pluck out hooks
from bloody jaws, pierce wriggling flesh, the spooling
costly line and high tech reels mistook
for promises of time enough: as though

our Mondays would never disturb the flow

of lazy living, cards and crossword games,
of marshmallows roasted by embers, glowing
fireflies sparking an echoing flame.
We wasted time. We never tried to cram
the sun into the weekend's span. We caught
the bluegills, dropped them back, our moment dammed
and swollen deep – or so we thought. Time's taut
line reeled us in so slow we didn't feel
a sting or fight its dragging pull across
the years. But now, I worry bloody steel
into my lips and cheeks and tongue, and toss
a coin in concrete ponds – I understand
why, drunk, they float the river's long expanse.

Meramec III.

When last I climbed the rocky lichened steps
and leaned a fishing pole against the cracking
vinyl chair, pulled off the sucking, soaked,
and gritty water shoes, and aloe rubbed
on sun-red, stretched and itchy arms and legs,
already then my childhood lay behind,
its murky edges fading, like the mist

in river valley mornings takes form only
when I look upstream, obscuring as
it does and smoothing currents, turns and rapids
underneath. I came alone, but yet not quite
alone. He came who coming then would soon
be always coming with. He came without
the ghosts of past trip trapping on the bridge;
without the sense of when the river curves
or how to cast the line so that the sunfish
strikes and lures don't catch in reeds and weeds.
With him it all was new and not quite dear:
Anemic AC never fully cooled, and lumpy beds
gave little rest or sleep. The quaint and quirky
qualities – the musty smells and sixties-
themed decor, the rusty tasting tap
and barely turn 'round bathroom space – I took
these as a piece and part of time spent south
(the lack of internet a feature, not
a bug). But as he paced the living room
and snagged his lures and tossed and turned his bony
hips and twitchy legs, I knew then even
as I smiled my yes and felt the circle
settle up against my palm – the end.
Because the springtime floods reshape
the banks and beds and and curves and course until
I know them not, nor am not known. Beloved
stranger, I will try to know you as
I knew the lady Meramec, my patron
saint of sunlight, mud, and minnow gold,
of kingfisher call and damselfly dreams.

Weathering

Katrinka Moore

I'm wild with this windy patch
of earth where the skin

of the pond scampers
bank to bank

where streams of foptails
bend rebound

I'm living with weather –
the grace of sun that fans

through clouds grey
with the coming storm flash

of silverback leaves Thunder
I linger – blown

about beneath the sky – just
a little while longer

Voices

Angela Arnold

Fallen. Untouched by the crack-chiselling of squirrels:
green and smooth and perfect, little hats of husks still
clinging. And so I must gather them up. Even just four.
Begin to roll them between my palms, hold them, feel
my palms' warmth and their untimely fall meld
into one extended life.

End of track cottage. And the man talks: so much
to say, his head has it pat, his heart can't stop babbling,
good enough stuff to hear, digging deep. But oh he goes on
and all the while trees outside sigh their questions,
swallows chitter-chatter over-and-gone
and every bit of past and hope and miracle recounted
snags the open air waiting at the door. We stand transfixed,
weight shifting from one foot to this leg to that rustle
of leaves as lax twigs crook their impatient fingers
and my palms keep rolling green nuts, my fingers
counting them left to right and then back: exchanging
their own memories and their split brethren's
spat all over the lane, my mind not sure which
to attend to: his intimate rambles; my own fractious
recollections; the birds' doorway taunting trajectories
of now, always and ages
or the flickering stories on each others' faces or else
the mystery of nuts cast to the ground before their full
ripening, unharmed in their significant roundness.
And so we stand for ever,
here, somewhere. Strangely tidal. Part of the turning all,
caught in this vial of twenty clockless minutes,
listening to a much wider us.

Like Alice in Wonder

Kara Dorris

I've always thought stairs a kind of beauty.

The stone, the zag, the craft. The pleasure of rising –

blue jays, monarchs, lost balloons. Diamond
kites tight within a child's hand. I have always wanted more
than one floor to fall through as if

a second story meant security. But I don't want
to be the chandelier. I want to be Alice in Wonder

sundowning into a new world rather than ascending
in this one. That up equals success is a myth
as if everything worth having requires strained

muscles & tendons as if the pain
of existing on even ground is not worth mentioning.

But the steps at my front & back doors deny entry.
Now, I know beauty

is access, the ramp,
the gradual incline, sleek extension of concrete
& wood. The tired elevator that jerks just before
stopping on your floor. I've grown weary

of roadblocks, of sharp edges, of the supposed beauty
of an abrupt, tragic end. Of being told what beauty is.

Most of us want to fly, not fall or drop or drill.

But I've fallen
& discovered excavating
can be a superpower.

Artifact

David Anson Lee

The MRI begins
with its iron litany.

A patient disappears
into the white bore
of the machine,
and for forty minutes
the room belongs
to magnets,
hydrogen,
and whatever waits
beneath measurement.

Images arrive
one after another:

gray river,
gray weather,
gray continent.

A technician points
to a bright fleck.

Artifact, she says.

Noise.

Yet sailors once named stars
visible only
at the edge of sight.

Every instrument,
perhaps,
possesses a border country.

The microscope.

The telescope.

The prayer.

Each travels outward
until certainty loosens
its grip on the dock.

The patient emerges.

We help him sit upright.
He thanks us
for nothing remarkable.
No miracle occurred.
No voice spoke
from the machine.
Still,
after he leaves,
the room feels inhabited.
As if the air itself
has been listening.
The magnets cool.
The monitor darkens.
Silence returns.
And in that silence,
something lingers:
not evidence,
not a god,
but the faint sensation
of a doorway
swinging shut
very slowly.

A Cappella

Constance Brewer

In the innermost room of the house,
someone is singing, words dulled by doors
and walls but sweet baritone reverberating,
a shower of light against the lingering gray,
a hand sweeping back the clouds
so that one radiant beam of gold falls
on the roof of the home where we live.
You sing, voice a votive, a choir, a hallelujah.
Daylight fades to dusk, and the song, unhurried,
softens, decreasing in volume until
the world outside the window strains to hear,
longing for a last vocal sigh as the streetlights
pop on, one by one, little harmonies in the dark.

Praise Song for the Perseids

Carol Boston

Because you are tiny and regular in your flares
Dust- or sand-size when you clash with the atmosphere
Incinerating upon contact each August

Because you burst, flower, fall in a moment
Because you enter and cross skies already starry saying *Notice me*
Because you are the faithful remnants of something old and far away
Floating dustily in space waiting for our transit, our trip around the sun each year
We praise you.

At 50 or 100 an hour in dark sky
We cannot fail to notice this incarnation.

Sure it's dust to dust, but what radiance in between!
And what radiant—that point from which you would seem to emanate
if only we could draw lines in the sky
That point which would take us back to the constellation Perseus.

So much brightness in the dark, and dark in the brightness
It staggers
Our minds cannot help but connect the dots.

One August I lay on my back on a blanket
in a cornfield outside a small town in Minnesota
With friends and beer to watch this very same event and now it's 45 years later
Here in Washington where it doesn't get dark and we're told you'll be compromised by the moon
As if that's even a thing
As if our seeing matters more than your being

Forgive us.
Illuminate us.
Amen.

In New York for a Wedding

Alan Toltzis

You text me: *It's snowing!* ❄

I look down
from the curated atmosphere
of our 18th floor hotel room.

I imagine home –
In the valley. Driving east. Through a flurry
of tears. An astonishment of white
graces the second ridge of mountains,
floating between ragged peaks
and heaven's lowest reaches.
I always wonder how to attain
the mountains' crests.

Without map or compass,
I try to feel my way.

Bad Weather

Jim Zola

Again, they cancel everything.
Rain all day.

Only the weathermen
count their blessings –

bless the kits in their burrows,

bless tennis courts
pocked with water,

bless the sky soup
gone mute with clouds.

The birds
return to their branches.

White Sheet

Marso

White sheet on a clothesline
unfurls an argument with noon heat.

It flaps the air
as if to change the wind's direction.

Far from any ocean,
a child lies on a blanket in the grass,
imagining sails, seas, and whitecaps.

Tied to his prairie-land harbor,
anchored like grass resisting erosion,
he can't imagine change.

His horizon line is along a green field
that'll turn gold, then black, then white –
a life cycle in four colors.

He doesn't yet know
he'll leave this landlocked blanket
to set sail into that field
row by row,
year by year,
until his own season of white.

The Norfolk Giant

George Yatchisin

Every afternoon's last light seems
to emanate from the boughs
of our neighborhood's towering Norfolk

pine, all of its surprisingly supple
fingers singing golden *Glorias* back
at the setting sun. I always consider

the Norfolk as hyperbole disguised as tree,
something sure to shame us humans
so many feet below on mere ground.

Despite how much open air its articulated
branches expose, the tree still offers hidden
havens to hawks by day and owls marking

the darkening sky with inquisitives calling
down evening. But still then the pine finds
a way to light, holding as many of the heaven's

stars for those who spend the sweet time to slow
and stare and see and remember all of wonder.

Reading for World Peace

Allison Burris

in the library, a man furrows his green glasses
down at a jigsaw puzzle, patiently hunched,
reaching to pat the next piece into place

you can do this in a room filled with books
go quiet for long enough to find a talisman,
a key in the stacks, a doorway

I know of no reliable formula,
everyone must find their own mouse hole,
porthole, or puncture – their own way

into the book that changes
how you understand yourself, your neighbors,
a multiverse beyond yourself

it may take diligence, necessity, reverence
you may have to reread the same passage
to find exactly what you're looking for

Two boats halfway up the street

Isi Unikowski

Head up the street from here and you'll see two sailboats
parked on either side of a neighbour's house.
As age took the strength from his arms
he no longer went out alone onto the lakes of the south coast.
From time to time strangers knocked on his door
with a fair offer for the boats on the off-chance
which he'd quietly decline; even when his wife lost her patience
and his kids pleaded. So the two little sloops have crested
these asphalt currents for years, into chilly snow-fledged winds
that come off the Brindabellas; or found themselves
becalmed in summer's baking skillet,
the bigger one's bright orange hull fading as it follows
its walleyed compass forever west; while the other –
once white and blue – has become grimy
with woodsmoke and dust's high water mark,
its companionway overgrown with mirror bush.
He hears the soft chink and chime
of eyelets moving in the breeze; night hauls
its vast map up the streetlight's distant mast,
hours lift like black ducks from water –
Why do they call him back when he is still sailing out there?

Dream of the House of Clouds

Andrea Watson

Neighbors across the lane ask why
My house has grown this tall:
I tell them clouds live underneath it.

What is there to hide? Floorboards float
and walls bleed cloud plaster, stair-
cases of clouds obscure the halo moon.

Now, clouds flow in through the night
window, take forms I know to be ghosts:

sometimes they are eye of rain.
wedding veil. rainbow serpent.
white bell. newborn star. mirror
painted with fog. camellias in
a blue jug. swan's throat just as
it is bowed. immaculate shroud.

At dawn, in pods of cut-glass milkweed,
even the bees are buzzing honey clouds.

Shecheyanu

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Shecheyanu for bringing us into this
green light filling every window
with vertical truths, each leaf
a platter of light singing back to the sun.

Shebecheyanu for the woman singing
the wrong note but with so much intent
that she's waved in anyway.

Shecheyanu for the lost ones calling
as well as the ones hard pressed to ask
for help. For the dogs left alone too long,
and the cats who missed the big jump
to the washing machine. Also for all
who wake lonely, even when life is all
blossoming dogwoods and hyacinths.

Shecheyanu for those not allowed
to go on and for those who do,
rumbling up hills, down roads
in a hurry, seeking relief or home,
which are sometimes the same.

This morning and the next, we get up,
heat water for tea, draw a bath,
shake off the bad dream, even sing
Shebecheyanu, aiming the heart
toward something that catches.

awakening to Presence

Sister Lou Ella Hickman

What was the sleep
a walking dream
that was once my life
when i thought i breathed
when i thought my heart and mind
danced together to unseen music
until
Wholeness breathed open
my unknown windows
pouring in
its light of kindness
and with such giving
i heard the Unspoken
reveal

here I am

The Middle of Somewhere

Jennifer Griggs

4°49'58.5"N – 83°37'46.4"W
a walking poem

Four-hundred-and-something steps from our mailbox
to the corner where the fast-car road meets unpaved Morocco
I can't finish counting because every time, distraction takes hold

Now the rooster cries, indignant
Now the downy woodpecker ascends, irregular
Now the field thistle wears her tiny snow cap
Now the neighbors pass, waving

Here's where the egret stands beside Lockwood Drain
Here, on the right, is where we rescued the milk-colored kitten, a grape vine wrapped around her neck
Here's where I pick up garbage from the roadside, some peculiar trash-Santa
Here's the corner of Norm and Kim's where I suck in the scent of their lilacs

This is a walking poem

Soon the geese will circle the thick eternally gray sky
Soon the starlings, contemptible when solo, will swirlwave, holy and rapturous
Soon the spring peepers will rejoice from their vernal pools between the trees
Soon the un-flocked crane will stand alone across the corn-stubbed field

After we leave, the deer will trace their way between saplings and brambles
After we leave, a possum will wander across this unpaved road
After we leave, the ferns will unfold, over and over
After we leave, a new bottle of peppermint schnapps will lie empty
beside the crushed cans of cheap beer
the empty snuff tins
the fast food wrappers
along the hollows of the roadways

This is a leaving poem

This is the place where a good neighbor is the one
who moves the possum from the road
(was that with tenderness?)
while drivers stop and wait
(did I see them lower their heads?)

This is the place where a good neighbor is the one
who plows your drive the week you move in

before the exchange of names and niceties
cuts down the boughs that fall while you're out of town
expects nothing from you other than the connective tissue,
light intimacies, of being human
in a place where the houses are few and far apart

This is the place where the spring peepers cry out –
we are here, we are here, we are here, we are all in the middle of somewhere!

Oh I love you I love you I love you I can't help but love you

This is a love poem

FICTION



The Weaver

Julie Green

Jeremy let fly a drop spindle in a perfect arc over the classroom. It landed in the vat of indigo dye and splashed across four kids, the teacher, and the dry erase board. The airborne droplets caught light from the studio windows like a hundred blue Tinkerbells. Rosemary quieted the laughter from the ten-year-olds who, like children everywhere, could giggle and shriek at the same time.

Outside the museum, a few college students trailed by, heads down, scrolling through their cell phones. A ravine washed in native azaleas and rhododendron offered a quiet respite visible from the workshop. Rosemary blinked as a cloud shifted to let the June sun blaze through the floor to ceiling windows. She turned from the outdoors, gathered rags and Jeremy and together they mopped up dye. The kids knew to drop the wet aprons in a *to go* basket and put on dry ones. Rosemary was prepared. *You don't grow up in the north Georgia mountains without a handle on your bucket.* In 45 years of working with all ages, she knew what to expect. Although, a projectile spindle was a new one.

On the first day, the kids arrived unsure of what their parents had signed them up for, convinced that weaving is boring or only for girls. They tried to be cool in their flip flops, vintage overalls, and slogan tees. Rosemary was patient knowing that by the afternoon, they would be grabbed by the range of the weaving process: taking raw cotton, spinning it, creating dye, dyeing the thread, and weaving it into something beautiful – or at least useful. Curiosity inevitably tugged open the window to suppressed wonder. Being stopped in your tracks by surprise is a gift. Like the owl that sailed low across the road this morning as she walked the dog.

Rosemary surveyed the workshop: vats of dye, clothes lines hung with yarn, a pile of tennis shoes, the box of spindles, and stacks of bamboo and belts for the back-strap looms. She watched the kids slouched around 6-foot tables working on their projects. The indigo, madder, and larkspur produced beautifully stained threads. She hoped the kids would get beyond themselves this week into the flow of creative energy. Something is nurtured when people make art together.

At five minutes to 12:00 she told the kids to clean up for lunch. They charged off with college counselors to play kickball on the quad and Rosemary had some down time. She opened her reusable pouch and laid out the roast beef sandwich, sliced cucumber and Fanta Pineapple on a bright orange woven placemat brought from home. She thought of Harold, probably happily working in the garden. Tomatoes and peppers, beans and squash are coming along. She always planted extra herbs to use in the dyeing process.

She stretched out her legs and moved her head around in a circle, rubbing her neck and shifting to see the azaleas behind the museum. She stretched out her arms, strong from working the loom and hauling supplies from one workshop to the next. Her eyes landed on her feet. Those Birkenstocks were tired but they still held her up. The reflection from the window showed a few wisps of gray hair airborne beside the quick twist kept in place by a chop stick.

Rosemary loved her work as a teaching artist for museums and art centers. Public schools had been her favorite contracts until the state's arts funding collapsed. She occasionally takes groups of women weavers to New Mexico to a ranch that breeds delaine merino sheep; specialty

wool for weavers and connoisseurs. Rosemary has a standing order with them for raw wool. The highlight is a workshop with her friend Enola Bylilly. Enola has a way with dye and is a master of the Burntwater style of Navajo weaving. Rosemary was thinking about Enola and traveling west with Harold when the museum conservator walked into the workshop.

‘Hey, Rosemary, I heard you were here this week. Got a minute to see a new textile?’ Sheila Cooper led the way through the locked door and down the corridor off limits to the public. They passed the design studio, kitchen, registrar’s office, a wall of old file cabinets, and walked up three steps to the conservation lab. In the past, she had consulted on several pieces needing structural repairs. On the table was a textile pinned to a board. ‘It’s Chancay, maybe eight hundred years old. An open work headcloth. The cotton is consistent with the long-staple variety found in western Peru.’

Rosemary bent over the gauzy thirty-inch square weaving built of delicate white threads mounted against a dark board. ‘It’s like a cat’s cradle. How in the world...’ Rosemary’s voice faded as she moved the magnifying glass for a close look at the cobweb-like construction. ‘It’s a type of embroidery; square mesh openwork. The grid squares carry the repeated images down diagonally. They look like... animals? But you’ll have to tell me what I’m looking at.’

‘The curator believes they alternate pelicans and felines. They’re power animals associated with shamanism. The cloth was woven to be worn on the head with the animals encoded or caught in the net to hover over the place of visions.’

Rosemary continued exploring the piece under the lighted magnifying glass. ‘It looks like single threads. Good golly. This is the most delicate piece I’ve ever seen. I can’t imagine working this. But...it doesn’t make sense. The elasticity of the single threads would cause the cloth to bunch...to just ball up when it’s not under tension.’ Her hands came together as she stood by the table. ‘That’s just crazy. The weaver creates this complex piece, then when it’s removed from the loom, no one’s able to tell what it is.’

‘Apparently, it’s not unusual for this culture. They play with the idea of beauty and power being in plain sight, but never entirely seen.’ She handed Rosemary a draft of the label copy. ‘The headcloth was a concealed offering to a parallel world. The Andeans valued the duality of seen/not seen, the invisible, over appearance. The wearer may never have seen the totality of the piece but accepted the power contained within and the connection with the other, parallel world.’

*

Rosemary sat on the MARTA train heading for her connection home. It was filled with commuters, a mom with a couple of tired toddlers, a man mumbling softly to himself while rocking on the blue, plastic seat. Running along the top of the car were the usual ads for lawyers, dental implants, and the map of the east-west line. The train looked like Rosemary felt, a little worse for wear. She was looking forward to getting home to Harold and having a quiet dinner outside on their deck by the goldfish pond.

Across the aisle, a young man with ear buds and short dreads stared at her. Rosemary shifted in her seat, adjusting her bag. She looked straight ahead and tried to think about what she would make for dinner. Maybe pasta primavera with fresh tomatoes and squash. She blinked when the train passed a row of telephone poles and slowed into the station. The young man was still staring at her. She could get off here. Her foot tapped to an urgent beat no one else heard. Maybe out of an abundance of caution she would step off. It would be inconvenient. Harold might worry if she didn’t get home at the expected time. She sat up and heard the plastic seat belch beneath her.

The train pulled out of the station, moved above the street towards downtown with an expansive view of the skyline embraced by the lush tree canopy. Below the tracks the roofs of a neighborhood flashed by. Communities, families, unknown to her; a reminder of unseen lives, hidden from view with their beauty, difficulties, and triumphs.

The young man leaned forward. Rosemary stole a glance over her shoulder to the construction worker behind her. The lights flickered and one of the kids started to cry. As the wheels shrieked on a curve the young man reached down into his backpack. Rosemary jammed her purse under her elbow. Slowly, the young man's face rose, smiling towards her. 'Excuse me, but did you ever do a weaving workshop at Glen Lake elementary?'

Rosemary shifted and released the practiced code of looking through people. She saw the young man. *You have to look, to see.* He was young, maybe 20 in skinny jeans and a gray Van's pocket tee. Real and in plain sight he was buzzing with energy. She relaxed. It didn't take a Shaman to tell her that his perceived threat and invisibility arose from her. His race, his age had concealed him. She smiled and the mask came down.

'I've done work in a lot of schools in the city. Yes, I believe I might have been there eight or ten years ago as an artist in residence. Were you a student there?'

The young man opened his hand. There was a woven pouch of faded cotton threads and beads.

'I thought I recognized you. I made this and use it to store my mouthpiece. I'm a trumpet student at Georgia State. I use it every day.'

Rosemary's smile followed him as he got off at the Five Points station. She turned her gaze to the signs flashing by as the train closed in on her parallel life.

The Blessing of the Fields

A. Allan Chibi

[22 April 1598 – Rural Limerick]

‘**G**rey’s faith but it’s still cold out there, *a ghrá*’
Cathal O’Neil shut the heavy door behind him, rubbing his hands briskly together as he stepped into the warmth of the hearth. The morning frost clung stubbornly to the hills, and the air still carried the sharp teeth of winter despite the calendar’s promise of spring. He’d just come in from walking the furrows, and the news wasn’t good.

The past two seasons had been cruel to the land. Where once barley thrived and wheat whispered golden in the breeze, now the shoots were hesitant, the ground reluctant. Cathal, once a brehon respected in Cork, had put all he had into this farmstead. He’d bought the land with old coin and clever speech, and with Catherine’s brewing and his own willingness to try new things – like those odd, starchy tubers from across the sea – they’d made something fine of it.

But the late frosts had returned again.

He moved to the table where the boys sat with their slates and stories, gave each a brief rustle of the hair, and shared a tired smile with his wife as she brought out the evening meal. Thick bread, rich butter, beef slow-cooked with carrots and turnip – Catherine had a gift with simple food, the kind that made a man feel rich no matter the purse.

He lingered a moment longer by her side, whispering softly, ‘If this season breaks us, love, at least we’ll break together.’ Catherine answered only with a quiet kiss to his temple, but her eyes carried the same weight of worry and stubborn hope.

None of them knew that just beyond the back door, Catherine had left out a small offering. She always did. A crust of bread with honey, a finger of ale, a smear of butter on a bit of bark. She was a good Christian, went to Mass with the family and crossed herself at all the right times. But she still whispered the old words under her breath. Her grandmother had been a healer, a *Daughter of Feidlimid*, though few would say such things aloud anymore.

That night, as the household settled to sleep, Catherine stood briefly at the kitchen door and hummed softly:

*Sleep now, my seedling, under the stone,
Dream where the barley bends to the bone.
Stars on the milk-pail, frost on the yew,
A silver king watches and whispers for you.*

The wind caught the last line and carried it out into the chill.

*

At the stroke of midnight, moonlight silvered the O’Neil fields. Two figures stood just outside the property line, where the cultivated land gave way to wild hedgerow.

'Is this the place?' The voice was quick, high-pitched – not speech as mortals know it, more like the sound of insects chittering in rhythm.

The *pooka* stood tall and lean in her true form, skin the color of lichen, eyes like jet. She was old, and had seen many such nights. Yet something about this field stirred in her memory – not from her own past, but as though she walked through someone else's dream.

'It is. The frost shouldn't be here. He sent us to see it done right.'

Beside her was a *leprechaun*, shorter than her shoulder, bright-eyed and smug. 'Strange business, though. The king meddling in mortal crops.'

'He always meddles, when it's one of the lines,' she said. 'The woman – Catherine – she's of the *Daughters*. The king's people made the match years ago, when O'Neil was still counting coins in Cork.'

The *leprechaun* chuckled. 'Ah, I thought I smelled legacy in the air.'

'No time for giggling. You take the right, I'll go left.'

'Deis and cleé then,' he said with a wink. 'Fair enough.'

The *pooka* moved first, her steps light upon the soil. As she spun slowly in a spiral, a low chant hummed through her throat, a language older than even the first oak. Frost hissed and pulled away from the furrows as though scolded. The soil below stirred, warm and ready. She traced signs in the air with her fingers, silver runes that faded only after pulsing briefly with light.

The *leprechaun* tossed grains of barley as he skipped, each seed landing with a tiny glow before sinking into the thawed earth. He muttered promises and threats under his breath, charms that twisted the ears of foxes and lulled worms to slumber. He snapped a twig from a blackthorn and buried it at a crossroads with a toothpick's care.

He passed by the tenants' homes as he worked, and at each threshold he dropped a coin. Not evenly. One widow got three. A young couple none. A man who'd spoken harshly to his horse received two.

He grinned to himself. Tomorrow would be amusing.

When they returned to the main house, the *leprechaun* paused by the back door, sniffing. 'She left good butter. And a note.'

The *pooka* raised a brow. 'A note?'

'See for yourself.'

On a scrap of birch bark beside the offering was a line scrawled in neat, unfamiliar hand:

We remember your line. Tend your roots.

The *pooka* frowned. 'That's not Catherine's hand.'

'No,' said the *leprechaun*, suddenly sober. 'That's the king.'

The *pooka* looked out toward the east, where the first line of dawn was beginning to pale the stars. 'He's still watching. Still planting seeds. But the harvest... I wonder who it's meant for.'

*

Morning brought warmth. The frost was gone, and a strange richness hung in the air. The fields seemed to lean toward the sun.

Cathal rose early and found the soil soft and dry enough for planting. He called to the boys and roused the tenants. Work began with a hope none had felt in weeks.

But soon murmurs started. Coins were found. Too many. Too few. Not minted anywhere in Christendom.

Catherine said nothing. She took one coin found at their own door and tucked it into the hem of her apron, her fingers brushing the smooth, unfamiliar etching of knotwork and a barley stalk.

She looked to the fields, then toward the hedgerow.

And she whispered, 'Thank you.'

The wind stirred, and far away, in a place no map marked, a king of neither court nor cradle closed his eyes and remembered the warmth of bread fresh from a mortal oven, and the lullaby of a mother who had not borne him, but had loved him just the same.

The Bear & The Children

Shannon Wood Rothenberg

Rosemunde entered the forest before she could persuade herself not to. Snow had fallen again during the night, and the fields beyond the village lay smooth and white beneath a colorless sky. No smoke moved among the trees. No footsteps crossed the boundary where the last field ended and the forest began. Even the search parties had avoided that part of the woods since some men began returning with strange stories and frightened eyes.

Ahead of her, the forest waited. She thought of Elsbeth's red mittens, her pockets full of beetles, the marigold color burning unevenly in her hair. She thought of the small footprints beside the enormous bear tracks, both moving steadily into the woods, neither hurried nor dragged. She recalled her dream.

Then Rosemunde stepped beneath the trees.



At first, the forest seemed no different from any other winter forest. Snow lay heavy upon old oak branches. Dead leaves showed in dark patches beneath the drifts. Here and there, animal tracks crossed one another before disappearing beneath new snowfall. A squirrel scolded her once from high above, then vanished into the branches.

As she wandered further into the woods, the village sounds slowly faded, as though each tree took one sound from her and kept it. The chopping of wood disappeared first. Then the faint clatter of wheels on frozen road. Then the dogs. Soon Rosemunde could hear only her own breathing, the soft break of snow beneath her boots, and the occasional shifting of branches overhead.

The damaged skin on her cheek ached in the cold.

She walked without knowing precisely what she followed. Once or twice she thought she saw a piece of ribbon tied to a branch, but when she drew nearer, it proved to be only a strip of bark peeled back by weather. A dark knot in a tree became, for one startled moment, the eye of an animal watching her. A leaning pine looked almost like a figure bending beneath a burden.

The forest did not frighten her exactly, but it made her feel oddly observed.

After some time, she found the first true sign. A length of red ribbon had been tied around a low branch, almost hidden beneath snow. Below it, a hollow in the roots of a beech tree held three small pinecones arranged carefully in a row with a small white bone lying crosswise on top.

Rosemunde crouched slowly. The bone was the size of her thumb. A bird bone, perhaps. It had been wrapped once around the middle with yellow yarn.

Farther on, she found another ribbon, a blue one. Then another, green and nearly black with age. Each led her not along a path exactly, but deeper into a pattern of trees that seemed to know where it was taking her.

Rosemunde stood beneath the green ribbon for a long moment. Something moved behind her, and she turned quickly.

The same small wolf who had visited her in the night stood several paces away between two pine trunks, his half-missing ear cocked. He watched her without lowering his head or showing his teeth.

'You,' Rosemunde whispered. The wolf turned and walked deeper into the forest, as though expecting her to follow.



The trees thickened, and Rosemunde followed the wolf as best she could, though more than once she lost sight of him entirely. Each time she stopped, uncertain, he appeared again farther ahead, glancing back with yellow eyes before vanishing between trunks. Once, he led her across a frozen creek so narrow she might have easily stepped over it in youth, but now she crossed carefully, one mittened hand grasping a snow-covered branch.

Beyond the creek, the forest changed. The trees grew larger there, older, with roots rising through snow like the backs of sleeping animals. The air seemed warmer beneath them, although no sunlight reached the ground. Rosemunde began noticing things she might have simply missed before. Scratches in bark too high for fox or hare, bundles of dried herbs hanging beneath branches, shells of nuts split neatly and gathered into piles, a strip of rose-colored cloth caught upon a thorn.

Then came the sound of laughter, very near, but then gone. Rosemunde stopped. For several breaths, she heard nothing but the faint settling of snow from one branch to another. Then the laughter came again, high above her. Children's laughter. Just as she had dreamed.

She looked up so sharply that pain moved through the scarred side of her face. At first, she saw only branches, dark limbs crossing and recrossing beneath the white sky. Then small things started appearing between them. The side profile of a face, then a flash of pale hair.

A child crossed silently from one branch to another nearly four meters overhead, balancing with startling ease despite the snow. Rosemunde saw only fragments clearly. Tangled long hair, a gray cloak too large for the body inside it, bare feet and blue-white ankles. The child paused once, looked down directly at her, then vanished deeper into the trees.

Rosemunde remained perfectly still. Another child whistled somewhere ahead. Three notes, then two. A second whistle answered from farther away.

The wolf had disappeared.



She nearly turned back then. There was no shame in turning back, she told herself. She was an old woman alone in winter woods, following animals and ribbons and noises no sensible person would trust. The village would have called such wandering madness. Her husband would have called it foolishness. Even Adam, if he had been there, might have hummed anxiously and pulled at her sleeve until she returned.

Yet the thought of returning to the village brought no relief. Only the image of Elsbeth standing at the edge of the burial ground, listening toward the trees.

So Rosemunde went on. The whistles continued, always just beyond sight. Now and then she heard movement overhead, the soft scrape of small bodies among branches. Once something fell into the snow near her feet. A pine cone. It had been decorated in tiny black beetle shells pressed into its open scales.

Rosemunde picked it up carefully. A voice above her said, 'That is not for you.' She looked up.

A girl no older than nine hung upside down from a branch with her legs hooked over the thick branch, her knees peeking from torn trouser legs, and her dark brown hair dangling like a curtain toward the snow.

Rosemunde held up the pine cone at once.

'I beg your pardon.'

The child dropped lightly to a lower branch, snatched the pine cone from Rosemunde's hand, and disappeared upward again without another word.

For the first time in a long time, Rosemunde laughed aloud. Then, from somewhere ahead, a different sound answered. A low, full huff from a ways off.

Rosemunde stopped smiling.



The trees opened all at once. One moment, Rosemunde stood among dense trunks and hanging branches. The next, she had reached the edge of a snow-covered clearing hidden so deeply within the forest that no smoke from the village could possibly reach it.

Children were everywhere. Some sat high among the branches overhead while others moved quietly between trees below. A little girl crouched beside the wolf with the torn ear, feeding it scraps from her palm. A boy balanced barefoot atop a fallen log while another struck at him with a stick as though the two were soldiers in some ancient war. Near the roots of an enormous pine, several small children slept together beneath heaps of fur and wool. Ravens hopped among them without fear, stealing crumbs from the snow. From somewhere unseen came the smell of smoke, berries, and wet animal fur.

No child screamed at the sight of Rosemunde or ran for an adult. Several children did look toward her briefly, then returned to whatever they had been doing, as though strange women emerged from the woods often enough to cause no particular concern.

Rosemunde stood at the edge of the clearing with her heart beating hard enough to hurt.

Then she saw Elsbeth. The girl sat high upon a broad wooden platform built among the lower branches of a cedar tree. Her fading copper-colored hair burned softly against the snow around her. Beetles crawled slowly across the backs of her red mittens while she whispered something too quietly for Rosemunde to hear.

She looked wilder than Rosemunde remembered but, for one moment, such relief moved through Rosemunde that she nearly called the child's name aloud. She did not.

Then, as she surveyed the scene newly laid before her eyes, a girl passed carrying an armful of sticks. Rosemunde frowned. She knew that face. Not well. Only in the way villagers know one another's children.

The baker's niece. Rosemunde had last seen her nearly two years earlier, standing outside the bakery with flour on her cheek and a dead sparrow tucked carefully into her apron pocket.

People had said she wandered. People had said she talked too much to animals. People had said several things. Now she crossed the clearing, belonging.

The sight of her stirred an unexpected memory. Adam had once spent an entire afternoon following a snail across the village green. He had wept bitterly when someone accidentally stepped on it. Rosemunde found herself smiling before she realized why.

Then the clearing changed. Every child became still. The wolf lifted its head. The ravens stopped hopping.

In the center of the clearing, a great dark shape stirred upon a huge, flat stone half-buried in snow. It huffed again. Then snow slid from thick fur. A massive foreleg shifted over the stone's edge. A scarred muzzle lifted slowly into the cold air.

The Bear opened its eyes. Rosemunde could not breathe. It was larger than any bear had any right to be. Scars crossed the dark thickness of its shoulders and face, some old and silvered, others newer. An iron cuff circled one hind ankle, half-hidden in matted fur, and a broken chain trailed from it into the snow.

For several long moments, the creature only watched her. She witnessed him, registering immediately that there was no hunger or animal rage in its gaze. What she saw on his face was more akin to exhaustion and something perhaps like sorrow.

From high above, clearly and unabashedly loudly, Elsbeth spoke. 'She brought the beetle back.'

Rosemunde looked up sharply. Elsbeth peered down from the cedar platform, one cheek streaked with dirt and pine resin.

'The upside-down one,' Elsbeth clarified softly. A strange silence followed. Rosemunde removed one mitten and reached into her pocket with trembling fingers. She found the curled beetle there, just as she had left it. Its legs flickered weakly against her palm, still somehow alive.

Several children nearby nodded solemnly, as though this explained something important.

Slowly, Rosemunde bent and set the beetle on a nearby branch.

The Bear continued watching her. Then, at last, the creature lowered its enormous head onto its forelegs. Only then did the children begin moving again.

Rosemunde understood, though no one had said so aloud, that she had been permitted to remain.



She did not stay long that first day. The sight of Elsbeth alive, the children in branches, the wolf, the ravens, the Bear upon the stone, all of it entered her too quickly. Her mind could not arrange the pieces into any story she understood.

When she turned to leave, no one stopped her. Elsbeth had already returned to whispering over the beetles on her mittens. The wolf had closed its eyes with soft animal certainty, laying close to a boy who was breaking the smaller branches off of one large branch.

At the edge of the clearing, Rosemunde looked back once. The Bear had risen and was watching her depart. He appeared to be simply acknowledging her visit.

Wide Enough for Two

Marilyn Horn

The girl walked through the woods on her way to school on a path wide enough for two, her father beside her. She was 10 now and big enough to go alone, and the path, shaded and quiet, was well-enough traveled by other children, some with their parents, so she was perfectly safe, but her father preferred to walk alongside her, just for the chance to hear what she might say, even though she barely spoke to him anymore, and only when no one else was near.

Today, like most days, at least lately, when the girl spoke, she spoke of her mother. His wife. ‘Mom’s always so tired.’

Tired from a late night, her eyes in a squint. Tired from worry, her face in a frown. He knew all about it.

‘But it’s a *different* tired now,’ the girl said. She waited for a boy on a bike to pass before continuing. ‘She’s tired now because she works so much. Not because – you know.’

He knew. All that worry he’d put his wife through. It was his fault, her being so tired for so long.

‘But you couldn’t help being sick,’ the girl said, something she often said, and something his wife had said too. Many times. Or something similar – *You can’t help being sick* is what his wife used to say. All those late nights, his head in a bowl. All those early mornings, his clothes soiled and needing a change. All that worry he’d put her through. Making her tired.

Quite suddenly a silver-haired woman in a long blue dress appeared up ahead. The man saw her; his daughter didn’t. The woman drifted off the path and disappeared into the thicket. He had seen others do the same. Floating off into the mist to rest in peace.

His daughter cleared her throat as if to gain his attention. Or maybe to soften a blow. ‘Tonight when Mom gets home’ – another small ahem – ‘we’re planting tomatoes.’

Tomatoes? He had never liked tomatoes. Too bitter. Or was it the texture he hated? He had forgotten.

Two girls sprinted past, backpacks flapping against their backs. His daughter waited until they were well ahead before she continued. ‘Mom says we’ll plant beefsteak tomatoes. Whatever those are.’

Those were the biggest kind of tomatoes. He remembered that much.

They had come to the end of the woods. His daughter skipped down the narrow lane to the crosswalk, leaving him in his usual spot, the place where he waited for her to return. Today for the very first time she didn’t look back. Not that she ever waved, but he looked forward to that last glance over the shoulder. Today she hadn’t looked and that meant something. And that thing about the tomatoes. That meant something too.

Tonight his wife and his daughter would plant tomatoes. And why not? He was no longer there to complain. They were making a new life for themselves. One filled with tomatoes.

His daughter hurried across the street and passed through the gate into the school yard. He watched as long as he could, until she disappeared into the crowd, and then he turned back into the woods. He didn’t need to wait for her any longer. Didn’t need to hear what she might say. She had said it. The thing about tomatoes. His wife and daughter were making a new life. One without him. He could rest now.

Up ahead in the dim of the woods he saw a new path, branching off from the old. Thick with mist. Wide enough for one.

Where the Stones Give Way

Casey Harvey

A trio of magpies battle ahead, lunging and snapping at one another's wings. Their cries split the morning air. I flinch, startled by their fury, then lower my head and keep going. The dirt crunches under my boots as I follow the overgrown track toward London Arch. I'm going to meet my brother, one last time.

Mynahs circle for crumbs I don't have. Kangaroos freeze and stare. The sky presses low, the wind needling through my jacket. I hug my arms tight. At least I'm not entirely alone.

I've been walking since sunrise and now the sun-bleached trail mark tells me the Arch is only a kilometre away. My pack holds what's left of my life: stale bread, ration bars, my metal cup, a cracked radio, an old blanket, and Jenny's jumper, thin as gauze but still smelling faintly of her. I take sips from an old bottle that tastes of plastic and fake strawberry.

Half a kilometre on, the mynahs give up. The roos bound off into the grass, and the magpies, usually wary of the Arch, settle in the bare trees above me. Today they're closer than ever.

Tree roots knot across the trail, forcing me to watch my step. I catch myself biting the inside of my cheek, and only when the metallic taste blooms do I realise I've chewed it raw. A fallen trunk blocks the path; its branches snap under my weight as I clamber over. My hands tremble, but I make it over and stop short.

The Arch startles me every time. Pale limestone piled in a great curve, sunlight flickering through its hollow even on dull days, still bearing the bore holes from when the colonists tried to widen it. The edges have softened, the shape weathered and crumbled, yet it still holds.

I drop my pack beside the rusty lookout bench. Anthills, wombat holes, and slick stones create an obstacle course to the Arch. My boots feel weighted, legs unsteady. I test each step so I don't slip and wreck my ankle. Gnats cling to the sweat on my face as I steady myself against the stones.

A low crack splits the air. Dust drifts from the Arch. I freeze, heart stuttering. I force myself forward.

The track dips into a stream just before the Arch, and I wade in. Cold bites through my socks, the current tugging at my ankles. I edge forward, the water deepening. I keep going, the chill climbing my legs, until the Arch swallows me in shadow. I duck beneath the Arch's rise and pass into a fog of slow spreading heat that coaxes the cold from my skin. Above me, the sky holds an impossible stillness, peach clouds swirling without wind. Before me, a sheer curtain of violet light flickers.

I step up onto a rock, draw a breath and leap. The world folds, and I land on a floating platform. The silence thickens around me. Cam is usually here first. I wait, bracing for the words I need to say, wishing it were already done.

His form flickers in, dressed in colours too vivid to name. The beard I remember as red now glistens like gold thread, and his eyes remain the brighter version of mine.

I've learned not to flinch at the contrast: his clean skin, mine greyed and rough; his steady gaze, my left eye that droops from nerve decay, like everyone who's lasted this long. Once I joked with Cam that we looked like different species. He didn't laugh.

His form stays faint this time, half-transparent. He's still god-like, but thinner. He tugs at his hair, and I see the strain before he speaks. He reaches out – a reflex we can't complete – and I match the motion, palm to the empty air. His hand looks smooth, untouched.

He wrinkles his nose, maybe catching the rank air from my side of the link. A trace of his world drifts through, vanilla and something floral.

'Hey, brother. How are you getting on?' Behind him, sunrise glances off Hungerford Bridge, the light seems too clean to be real.

'One day at a time.'

He huffs out a quiet laugh. 'That sounds like something Dad would've said.' He tilts his head – Dad's old habit. 'Remember how Mum used to tease Dad? Said if he ever showed up in London, they'd toss him straight back out. She thought this place was too fancy for our kind.'

I smile despite myself. 'Yeah, I remember. You were worried you wouldn't fit in.' I gesture toward him. 'Look at you now.'

He glances off-screen, a flicker of shame. 'It took a while. But you – ' He hesitates, eyes flicking up again. 'You, with your theatre and your books, you'd fit right in here.'

The old ache rises. I shove my hands deep into my pockets, bounce once on my heels. 'Now listen – '

He cuts in fast. 'There's a way you can get here.'

'Cam, please.'

He leans forward, eyes bright. 'I've been writing letters, petitions. The Minister's listening this time – '

'Stop.' The word comes out harsh. 'We've been over this. Smuggling, crossings, whatever plan you've got, it's not going to work.'

He starts to protest. I talk over him. 'You need to tell me why you look like hell.'

Behind me, rocks shift under the Arch. A dull crack. I flinch but hold his gaze.

'What was that?' Cam's voice jumps, sharper now. His British accent still catches me off guard – there it is again, all posh and incredulous.

'Nothing. Just the birds. You remember how they used to scream down here.' I try to laugh, but it dies in my throat. 'I came to tell you something. It's been amazing seeing you. I wouldn't trade it for the world but – '

'Thank God you convinced me. You're such a genius.'

I blink at him, then realize he's talking about his first visit to Hungerford Bridge – how I'd convinced him to go to the underpass while I went to the Arch, just to see if the stories were true. We were desperate to try anything once the borders closed and the networks went dark. Grandpa always said there was something strange about London Arch, how the birds wouldn't go near it. He'd heard about the colonists hundreds of years ago, the story that they could send messages back to London – straight through to the underpass beneath Hungerford Bridge. We never knew what *send messages* meant. We thought, at best, it might work like a signal, or a telephone. Not this.

'They found the seam,' Cam was saying, 'the colonists. They just had to break through. And they did it, all those years ago.' He shook his head in amazement, about to say more.

'Cam.' I cut him off. 'Lou's pregnant. Her folks are upriver. She's set on going there, together.' I didn't like lying. Not about Lou. Not after what happened.

He draws in a sharp breath. 'Is she with you? We can get her here too.'

A rumble. The stones shifting. His voice breaks up, words cutting in and out.

'What?'

Cam shakes his head hard, both hands raking through his hair. 'You can come on a real ship. Or a plane. Whatever the Minister decides.' His words tumble faster. 'He read my letters, finally. He wants to see the Arch, to talk to you. One meeting, that's all. Then he'll open the border for you. You'll be safe. We'll all be together.'

His face flickers, desperate and half-lit.

'One meeting?' I feel my breath coming harder, faster. Could there really be a way?

Cam's eyes flare. 'We have everything here, food, water, air so clean it stings. You could direct again. Write. Tell our story. Tell what the borders took from us. The Minister will listen to you.' His voice climbs. 'You'll do a world of good.'

The hazy wall of air that connects us crackles and sparks and the electricity hits me on my arms, my cheek. It burns. I put my hand to my cheek and see Cam do the same. I hear an almighty crash behind me, and I don't want to turn, so I don't. 'Cam...' I step forward, shaking my head. 'It's crumbling.'

'What is?'

'The Arch. Every time we talk, more falls away. You think these meetings are saving us, but they're tearing the place apart.'

He opens his mouth, but I push on. 'I kept coming because I wanted you to see I was still alive, still trying. But this – ' I swallow hard. 'This isn't right. The Arch won't last.'

Cam exhales slowly, as if dragging time out, afraid of what comes next. 'It happens here too,' he says.

'What does?'

'At first, people just got hurt, sharp pain if they came too close while I was linked with you.' He rubs his chest. 'Now they drop. Heart attacks.'

I see the boy he used to be, the one who threw me against the wall so hard it made a dent, then broke down crying. All that aggression he couldn't contain. It sits between us again, humming.

'And you kept coming?'

Cam was looking off to his left, his face pinched.

'Is someone dying right now?'

'You gave up your ticket, your chance. I have to make this right. How much longer can you last out there? The Minister will bring you through. Then we can stop using the Arch. Just once more.'

'Cam, did someone just have a heart attack?' But he couldn't hear me over the crack behind me, quieter than last time, but not by much. His image flares, collapses, returns.

'Promise me,' he says, voice breaking. 'One week. Bring Lou.'

'Lou's dead.' The lie is gone before I can stop it.

His face falls. I taste bile. Lou saw the damage first, almost a year ago. I laughed it off.

'What?' he says softly. 'I'm sorry.' He looks down. 'You should have come. Before the borders. After Jenny died.'

I shake my head. Back then, no one believed the closures would hold, just another bluff that would fade like the rest.

'The Minister wants a good story,' Cam insists. 'He'll be here. He'll grant you passage. I promise.'

I could wait. Take one last step under the Arch. Hear his voice again.

But right now I can't even meet his eyes. Below me, a new crack veins the limestone near the base. Every step toward Cam pulls something loose. The colonists split it open once. I won't take any more. I pick up a fallen stone and set it aside.

‘Remember those hikes?’ I say. ‘We’d pretend to call Uncle Rohan, but really we were talking to each other. We’d make the phone with our hands, thumb to ear, pinky to mouth, saying what we never could face to face.’

Cam’s mouth twists in anger.

‘Just take a walk somewhere quiet, put your hand to your ear and tell me everything. I’ll do the same.’

I lift my hand to my ear, thumb and pinky out, the way we used to. For a second, neither of us speaks. ‘I love you, brother.’

‘Wait – don’t go! This link only works because of our history! You think they tore it open just for you to walk away?’

I shake my head, standing there while Cam glitches, hard, disappears for minutes and then reappears, his voice coming through in angry bursts, talking about London’s power, how only a fool would walk away.

His voice follows me as I leap from the platform and scramble across the rocks. They’re slick, edges sharper now. Tears blur everything. At the lookout bench, magpies and mynahs scatter from my shredded pack. They’ve come this far. That must mean something.

I turn to the Arch one last time. It’s slumped and ravaged, nearly sunken in, but still standing. I kept it that way, at least.

The birds wheel above, their cries spinning through the wind. I start upriver.

Public Access

Lauren Kelley

'Permission is not the same as care.'

The road is plowed when Bay turns onto it, and the snow is pushed high, compacted into walls that hold their shape. Dawn comes slowly here, not always in color but in definition – the mountains loosening from silhouettes, the shoulder widening just enough to see where the gravel ends and the forest begins.

The color holds in the sky, packed into the clouds – night thinning into bands of pink and orange that settle over the trees without changing what they touch.

She slows automatically at the entrance, easing off the accelerator without thinking. The truck responds as it always does. The sign stands back from the road, mounted on posts dulled by weather, its lettering still crisp enough to read at speed: *National Forests. America's Playground. Targhee National Forest.* It looks like it always has, untouched. The paint chips, and the wood is worn.

Bay checks the rearview mirror out of habit, though no one is ever behind her. She signals and turns in, tires crunching once before settling back onto the packed surface. There's nothing to indicate a restriction at the entrance – no gate, no barrier, no warning that the roads ahead are closed, except to those who already know how to read the conditions. Snow continues uninterrupted beyond the sign, smooth where it hasn't been disturbed, broken only by plow tracks and the occasional animal crossing that disappears into trees.

Bay keeps the truck steady, hands loose on the wheel, letting the engine warm as the road climbs. This stretch is familiar enough that she doesn't need to watch closely; the bends announce themselves in advance, and the grades are predictable even in winter. Whatever happens further up, the entrance remains open.

The sign doesn't move. Anyone can turn in.

A line of trucks crowds the lot at the main building – maintenance, field crews, rangers – parked nose-in and idling in the cold. Monday mornings mean assignments. The plows are already out, their radios crackling as they try to make headway on the packed trails. The park is closed to the public, but that hasn't stopped people from finding their way in.

'Bay. A moment.'

Orion catches her before she reaches the door, already turning toward the map on the wall. He taps a section with his knuckle.

'Section G today.'

She looks at the map instead of at him. The upper switchbacks. The long climb.

'I need a full pass. Up and down. Make sure it's clear,' he adds. 'That's avalanche territory.'

She nods once, then steps away before he finishes speaking.

The coffee pots in the back are still steaming. Bay empties the first pot, then the second, into her tall thermos, screwing the lid on tight before anyone else can reach for them.

She's the first out the door, the first to her truck, and the first to leave the parking lot. Her warm truck welcomes her. She locks her hubs and puts it in 4WD before turning off the paved road and onto the start of her climb.

The truck bounces out of a pothole at the trail's entrance. A metal gate blocks the way, padlocked. She parks. Her boots crunch through the snow. Her nose reddens in the cold, and she picks up the pace, shaking the right key loose to unlock the gate. She can't be sure, but it looks like tire tracks were here before she arrived. The snow has blown into them; they must be at least a day old.

She gallops back to the truck. The door slams shut, and heat floods her hands. She exhales sharply, takes a drink from the thermos, and lets the heat settle before pulling back onto the trail.

She looks in her mirror. A coworker – someone she should know by now – honks twice and waves. She climbs in and shifts into drive.

The fluffy snow is less disturbed the higher she climbs. The climb isn't easy. Even with 4WD, the ice-packed snow offers little to grip. Almost lazily, Bay swings the wheel back and forth, staying perfectly centered. She skillfully fishtails around a sharp corner, then pulls the truck back under control.

Sagebrush gives way to pines and firs dusted with white, frozen crystals. Game trails are scattered about – rabbit and deer mostly, with some squirrels here and there. A marten runs across the trail. Bay slows to allow the little creature passage.

Crackles and voices come over the radio – Orion's distinct tone can be made out as two or three people respond to whatever he said. They start laughing, and more people join the radio chat. Bay turns the volume down.

The climb up the trail was quiet, save for what wasn't. The radio buzzes in the background, the heat roars, and the engine whines. This part of the trail curves for about three miles. S-bend after S-bend, Bay rounds her truck. The shoulder disappears, and each left turn leaves her looking out over the tops of trees.

A scenic overlook is just up ahead, past the next bend. Bay plans to stop there. The trees break the wind, and the view opens up to the park.

At least, that's what Bay expected.

An old, rusty red car sits at the viewpoint. Snow has barricaded it. Bay slows and rolls down her window. She creeps up to the car, careful not to sink too deep into the snow.

She parks her truck, making sure to engage the emergency brake before rounding the nose. Her feet stop her before she reaches the driver's door. The thought of calling this in crosses her mind, but she decides to check if anyone is there first.

She taps on the window once, twice, three times.

'Hello?' she asks. 'Anyone in there?'

Bay jumps back in shock as someone bangs on the window from the inside. Her feet slip on the icy snow beneath her, and she falls. The person keeps banging on the door, harder and harder.

The snow has blown and drifted up against the car door, freezing it shut.

Bay goes to the bed of her truck, pulls out an emergency shovel from her kit, and starts shoveling the snow over the cliff's edge. Sweat beads on her forehead and under her coat. She clears all the snow blocking the door, then puts her shovel back in the truck.

'Kick when I pull,' she says.

Bay wraps her fingers around the handle. 'One.'

She braces her feet against a few chunks of ice. 'Two.'

'Three!' Bay throws her weight back, tightening her shoulders and pulling the handle with all her might. The person in the car kicks the door a few times before it finally opens. The ice clings as it falls from the seam.

The man crawls out of the car. His skin looks sallow and dry, and his eyes are rimmed red.

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome,’ she says dryly. ‘The park’s been closed for a month. You’ll find your way out if you follow my tracks along this path.’

‘My car is dead,’ he says, almost ashamed.

She looks him up and down, then grabs her jumper cables. She hooks them up and gets his car started with no problem. The entire time, he’s apologetic and grateful in the same breath.

‘Stay in my tracks.’ With that, she sends him down the hill.

Back in her truck, Bay keys the radio and reports the car approaching. She waits for Orion’s acknowledgment before turning the volume down again.

She idles at the viewpoint long enough for the engine to settle. The treetops below shift in the wind, their motion outlining the darker band of cloud advancing from the west. She checks the time and fuel gauge – enough for a full pass.

The truck clicks into reverse, then drive.

Beyond the overlook, the road narrows. Plow tracks thin and vanish, replaced by packed snow and drifts where the forest presses in. What had been two lanes becomes one. In places, it’s only a path Bay is extending as she goes. Branches scrape the doors and mirrors. She doesn’t slow for it.

The road climbs higher. Her fingers drum on the steering wheel. Her brows lift as she sees a roadside sign: *National Forests. America’s Playground. Targhee National Forest.* The sign looks identical to the one at the park’s entrance. The wood is weatherworn and chipped. The paint is thin and cracked.

Bay slows to a stop by the sign. She looks at it, the green paint barely visible. The path veers right. She doesn’t know this part of the forest. She didn’t know there were any structures this high.

Let alone a playground.

Bay pulls the truck forward. She leans over the steering wheel as if it gives her a better vantage point.

The trees form a perfect clearing, just enough room for the small structure and a picnic bench. A swing set sits off to the side – one seat swings in the breeze, while the other hangs by a single chain.

The site’s condition requires inspection. She grabs a notepad and tosses on some gloves. The door slams shut; it’s her and the forest.

She walks the perimeter. Ten by ten feet. Bay kicks her toe into the snow until she reaches the ground. Rotted wood frames the area. She lists the wood perimeter as deficient.

The swings are in poor condition. One clearly needs new chains, and both need new seats. The joints are rusted beyond repair. Not only that, but the swings face the set of slides off the playground. This configuration is noncompliant.

The playground is constructed of the same rotted wood. The slides are metal. Deficiencies. There are no warning signs present. There are multiple points of failure across the site.

She returns to her truck. In the back, she digs around until she finds caution tape. She marks a ten-foot perimeter and boxes in the deficiencies. She also wraps the swing set, the playground, and the picnic table.

Snow begins to fall just as she ties off the last of the tape. Thick, heavy flakes that promise more. She gathers her things and slips inside the truck.

She doesn’t have the correct paperwork on hand to complete a full incident report, but she knows enough of the details by heart to jot them down. The snow continues to fall, coating her windshield as she flags the playground as closed and unsafe.

The sign still stands there. *America's Playground*.

The drive down the mountain is far less eventful than the drive up. The truck swings on the curves, making her stomach flip, but she guides it back into place. The ice wants to dictate her speed, but she won't allow it. Her foot taps the brake in perfect succession.

The parking spot was waiting for her, right in front of the office. Only a few others were parked here, most still on duty. Orion wasn't there. She didn't need him. Her notes from the day were clutched in her fist. She left them on his desk.

The road is plowed again as she leaves the park. It crunches under her tires as she rolls slowly past the entrance. She checks the rearview mirror, then signals her turn. The road ahead has no gate, no warnings.

Contributors

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