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A Letter From the Editor

First and foremost, I couldn't be more thankful that you are reading these words and supporting a brand new literary journal. Thank you for taking the time to read the beautiful pieces written by our thirty-five contributors.

Starting Ghost Light Lit was a journey born out of grief. For a very long time, I had wanted to start a literary journal of my own. I could never find the right time or the right name or the strength to get my dream off of the ground. That was until early 2023, when I went through a divorce and lost my grandfather.

From that moment, I knew that I wanted to create a literary journal to light the way for others and to provide a space for people to share their work. And alongside that, I needed something to pour my heart into, to help me heal on my own journey.

A ghost light, commonly used in theater, is a light left on a dark stage when it's not in use. To me, the ghost light was exactly what this journal was: a way to light an otherwise dark place.

GRIEF MACHINE came from the idea that our bodies are expected to process grief in a mechanical way— though we all know that's far from the truth. We are expected to persevere, to keep the wheels turning, when all we wish to do is slow down. And sometimes, we can't escape the compounding grief, as my therapist called it, when one thing after another stops us in our tracks.

I've learned, especially through reading the submissions and publishing the pieces that you will soon read, that grief is complex. In reading these stories, of lending a comforting hand and creating a community, we can persevere and heal together.

Thank you, from the very bottom of my heart, for supporting Ghost Light Lit. Welcome to the family. We're so glad you're here.

Love,
Rachael Lord

Editor-in-Chief, Ghost Light Lit

Please be advised that the pieces in this journal contain trigger warnings for: death of a child, pet loss, miscarriage, and death.

The Grief Machine

By: Paul atten Ash

in loving memory of my mother—for Lilian

I choose to grieve,
joining a long grey line: cold, bereft,
shuffling my way towards
the Grief Machine.

I see winter trees,
their limbs trembling, the dark hours
frozen like lightning; words left
tangled in tight knots.

Sorrow shadows me,
and I drag happiness to the well,
see your face ghosting up
from its black water.

This sveven ends,
cut short by a raven's kraa, its call
answered by the bell tower's
cruel vow of silence.

Head down, in line,
I wait to be ushered forward, lost
in the binary-blue hum
of eschatology.

The machine spits
out verse at me, the morient song
of its algorithm parsing
my loss neatly:

these exact words,
these lines staring back blankly.
And I am all machine—
I choose not to grieve.

Kiki's Backpack

By: Sally Simon

After some out-of-towner pinched her ass while she poured him coffee, after a police officer tracked her down to ask, Do you know where your daughter is, after she grabbed her pocketbook from behind the register, after she found her house empty, she got back in her car and sped to the bus stop.

Behind a boulder, surrounded by knee-high weeds, beside the covered-bridge, up a knoll from Lenape Creek, a unicorn keychain dangled from a black canvas backpack.

After throwing it into the back seat, after flipping through a People magazine, after waiting for the sheriff to return to the station, after the medical examiner pulled back the sheet, after saying her final goodbyes, she drove back home.

Accompanied by the hum of the fridge and the tick-tick-tick of the clock, she unzipped the backpack. One by one, she removed each item, placing them in a line across the table as if they were photographs being arranged to hang on the wall in the living room, the one that had remained blank for so long.

*One two-pocket folder, red, the word Homework scrawled in black marker.

Inside: A graded writing assignment entitled, "Riding the Ferris Wheel at Dutchess County Fair," grade A-, one math worksheet on dividing fractions, half completed, a science article with comprehension questions attached, topic: planetary orbits, and One permission slip for a field trip to Franklin Roosevelt National Historic Site, May, 20, 2022, unsigned.

*A three-subject notebook, green.

*A black and white marble composition book, WRITER'S NOTEBOOK printed in the subject area. A picture of a beach scene taped beneath.

*A paperback copy of *They Cage the Animals at Night* by Jennings Michael Burch, one Bookmark decorated with a popsicle and the words "Chill out and enjoy your birthday" Wedged between pages 128 and 129

*One fabric pencil case, turquoise

Inside: Three Ticonderoga pencils, No. 2, two sharpened, one unsharpened, one yellow highlighter, one Bic pen, blue ink, one rectangular pink eraser, and one wallet-sized school photo of a young girl with blond hair, pulled back in two braids, crinkled.

*One brown paper bag, partially folded, Kiki written in fine black marker, hearts for dotted i's

Inside: one Nature Valley granola bar, Oats and Honey, unopened, and a note

Folded into a triangle, Have a great day, Love you, Mom.

*Four jumbo paper clips

*A tuft of gray woolen fuzz, likely from winter gloves or mittens

*One cherry Chapstick, used

*One wire-bound Strathmore sketch pad, 5.5" x 8.5," 100 sheets, containing several drawings, the last one, the most recent, a drawing of the same girl in the school photo. The words "To Jesse" in the top right corner.

*One pink Tamagotchi digital toy, ball chain attached, battery dead

She replaced the battery, turned it on, and set the clock. An egg wiggled on the screen...

The Rescue

By: Aaron Sandberg

When you hurt her heart, she kept the dog—a second love lost. As a boy, a stray walked at your heels. You told him, *Go home* hoping he had one. You scratched his ears and fed him scraps—assuming the other's best. Now your kill-quiet winter is weathered with two hours a week walking rescues at the shelter. You help them from backs of closed kennels and let them stretch legs away from ceaseless yelps as they sniff dead earth for signs of something like life. It's you who walk at their heels as they pull forward—straining soft necks back out into the world. You slow and kneel, offer gloved hands, palms in mercy. A snout digs into your chest warming him, warming you—defying frozen air. You whisper, *Good boy. Good boy* and try to make him—and make you—believe it.

Somewhere, Somewhere

By: Brandon Shane

On the long road home, I felt myself dying
for the first time in my wounded yet optimistic life,
the future was no more than a mirage, vanishing
as soon as my fingers dug sand in a barren oasis
that promised to quench a stained-glass thirst.
I was thirteen, lying on a bed that wasn't mine
gazing at clouds like slumbering whales & birdsong
when kitchen plates shattered as porcelain dolls.

"He's in excellent shape, nothing like this has ever happened before,"
my mother said to the doctor, who'd read this novel many times.
It was only hours in that sterile hospital room, where the initiation
ritual is tears instead of booze, and no one ever fails to win.
"Is my dad really going to die?" I asked to the reflection of glum eyes,
and they all carried answers, but were tongueless in their response,
for they had their own teetering on the plank that no one escapes.
"He's unresponsive," a melody from an unseen siren.

Decades later and I've yet to pour the ashes,
after rituals of sailboats with his gray urn & soft spoken
words at procession stands where nomadic relatives appear
like apparitions than fade with just as much mystery.
I am alive, and even though I saw a lifeless corpse,
wonder if he is somewhere still, a recurrent dream,
wandering through fog that won't relent, longing
to answer all the questions I would have asked.

The Watch with the Ticking Heart

By: Halimah S. Dilazak

Dear Dad,

It's been six months since you passed. The house is the same — almost just as you left it. But, there are small changes that are beginning to creep in. I don't see so much of you in the hallway anymore. Just your shoes now. There's more of you in the front and back rooms— your books live there. Then there's the kitchen where you decided to build half of it yourself. The funny little wooden box on the wall where you kept your letters is my favourite, and mum still uses all those endless hooks you put on the shelves for her spoons, pots, cups and pans. There's still so much of you in the garden, it's almost as if your heart lives there. Sometimes I think I hear you *tick tick tick* in the trees, in the deep of the heartwood. Sometimes, it's loudest behind the apple tree you planted when I was ten. And at others, I'm convinced it's coming from the plum tree where my old playing shed once stood. Are the trees out there like your children, Dad? Have they taken cogs of your heart and separated them between themselves? Do I hear you because out there the memories are in close proximity, and with them all together like that, it appears at times your familiar drumming heart beats again...

But that is just wishful thinking. I know where your heartbeat really is. It beats in the box where it lives. No, not that box. Not the cold, dead box in the ground piled with dirt with just your name to mark it out. The other box that I took with me. I hear it the most when the chaotic noise of the busy streets below invade— children that scream outside, the cars that drive by, the mass movement of travelling feet. And it's not just out there, it's in here as well, when the TV is on or the neighbours are having a row or when the church bells ring or when the train rattles past on the old rails just behind the squashed houses. I hear that ticking in my ear. The doctor says it's Menieres disease— a constant ticking tinnitus from too much exposure to loud noise. It's always there, though it'll vary. Sometimes, it's quiet ticking, at other times, it's hard to ignore. I've been told there are classes for this kind of thing— how to get rid of it, how to equalise the noise so that it'll go away and there'll be silence again.

But, I don't want the ticking to stop. It used to drive me mad. I wanted to tear my eardrums out. But there is no need for that now. Your silver Sieko watch rests in my box. It was ticking on your wrist until it stopped. Stopped just when you did at 3:53 in the morning. That's what it says on its face now. And I went into town to that little shop in the square where they fix watches. The town centre was packed as always. People everywhere, Dad, you would've hated it as I did. Fragments of conversation, road works in full swing, the friction of shopping bags, the rain on the plastic sheeting overhead. That's where I heard it ticking again. The gentle *tick tick tick* was all I could hear in that boisterous square. The cold metal in my warm hand looked just the same. Its face still said 3:53. Its face maintained you were dead. But that *tick tick tick* would not stop. That little shop was forgotten. What

was the point? I could hear you all the way home.

I heard you on the top deck of the bus where the school children were. You were with me there. And then again when I was scraping the teeth of the key into the door. I heard you all the way on the complaining stairs to the second floor. I put your watch back in its box, and this letter in with it, too. Just so that you'll get it. I know you have gone dad, but your watch still ticks. It does not lie does it? You are gone from here, yes, but your heart still ticks in another plane, and you have left this here for me to find, because you knew I'd want your watch. The others had bought you so many watches over the years. Ridiculous watches. Fancy. Impractical. Never built to last. But, you would never have parted with this one. It was the one thing that confirmed you were dead. To see it on its own— lonely and purposeless was so unnatural. I know you hid your heart in it before you went so that it might keep me company. I know your heart ticks across a plane I cannot see, nor taste, nor touch nor smell... but hear.

Who knew my increasing deafness would mean I could still hear you?

Your affectionate daughter,

H.

Overpassing

By: Carson Sandell

After "*The Driver of the Car is Unconscious*" by Timothy Donnelly

Driver you think you need speed
through intersections and I used
to think I was a man. defined by
meter ticks. denied freeway free-
dom. you know ours, but where
is your destination? look left at
my old home, lean your foot on
the brake. here I learned heaven
is not in clouds, heaven is at the
normandy lounge with its never
lit wall lamp. or maybe heaven
is the stop sign on the corner of
sylvandale avenue where stray
chihuahuas and tabbies found
god in the grill of a dodge pick-
up. or maybe it's in the recessed
roof of the alano in south side
san jose, I am a child of serenity
prayers, cold coffee, and 12 step
relapse. I think heaven is in the
first time I heard zeppelin sing
about some stairway before dad
switched stations. my point is
there is an overpassing, grief
hollowing us into underpasses.
I know you mastered both the zig
and zag, but sometimes we are
sent traffic to remind us of slow
living.

An Irish Wake

By: Erin Donohue

After my grandad dies, he is brought to my parents home
and laid in my childhood bedroom for three days

The walls still green and covered in daisies
The Irish flag at his head, crucifix at his feet

The window open, to let his soul out, my grandma says
So, of course, we say the rosary

Of course, the whole family comes, dozens and dozens of them
Almost giddy with stories

My old bedroom, now the beating heart of the house
is too small to hold us all so we are pumped out to the hallway

flowing into the lounge and the kitchen and wherever
there is beer, as we wait for a turn to sit with him

And maybe you are picturing it: all of us crying around his coffin
Silent and reflective and mournful but it's not

We talk about his harmonica
How good he was at maths

Someone is playing the guitar; everyone has a drink
My mum and brother are up until the morning

singing The Soldiers Song so loudly my sister doesn't sleep
We talk about politics

About how every time someone would ask him, *did you get a haircut?*
he would say, *no, I got them all cut*

How he just couldn't believe his luck:
this life he had

This is where I know him most
Where I know him best, maybe

His wedding picture on the wall
his journals open on an empty chair

I hear stories for the first time
Learn him new again and I see all of him, finally

We take shifts sitting with him while everyone eats
I hold his hand and fix his collar

And here is the truth: there is more laughter than anything else
No one wants to leave him alone

And when it is time for him to go, the funeral at the church
starting so soon, I don't want him to

And I know it's not him. He is gone
slipped out the window in some quiet moment during the changing of the guard

But all of us there, the room pulsing with the echo of him
Someone saying, *yes he was good; yes we were lucky*

If I am asked if I have seen a dead body
I think I would have to say no

Save the last dance for me

By: Beverley Ward

Black patent party shoes pressed lightly
on your own feet, freshly shined,
reflecting childhood's eyes into a hero's face.
Hands joined, we swished around the floor,
as Ann Murray crooned a lover's waltz.
A cute pair showing off to the crowd,
we were proud,
daddy and daddy's little girl.

Twenty-one and I made you both dance,
showing you off. It was the only time you
looked like a pair, united, by the rhythm,
its beat joining hearts that had long
since lost time with each other.
I didn't know then that yours belonged to someone else.
I knew it no longer belonged to me. We danced
around each other and away,
not fancy footwork but word play,
daddy and daddy's little girl.

Your sixtieth and you looked lost, gazing
at the crowd of faces, past and present,
unable to choose. You cast a glance
my way and I rose awkward on shiny, high-heeled feet
as the band struck up a familiar beat. The women smiled
as our fingers touched, and your eyes shone with tears.
They didn't see us dancing across the lost and lonely years,
daddy and daddy's little girl.

The last time we rose in tandem, all smiling
to the floor. Me in borrowed red party shoes,
you smart and lively in a navy suit.
A cute pair, they all agreed. They didn't see
my watery eyes as I held your limp and trembling hand
and held the moment's memory in my mind.
Our feet moving on as the music played and
death danced its slow waltz through your brain.

I knew that we would never dance again,
daddy and daddy's little girl.

Texas Speed Bump

By: Kyra Cruz

Otis claimed to know nothing about grief, which was stupid, considering he scraped roadkill off the highway for a living.

That early morning, the Oklahoma sunrise was a hazy light that tinted everything grey, making the armadillo's intestines splattered across the intersection a dullish purple. It was an ungodly hour. The cicadas' buzzing seemed sluggish, and the birds weren't yet chirping. I took a sip from my thermos, tasting the bitterness of the coffee and something sour from the stench of the rotting carcass in the air.

Otis remained stubbornly quiet after my earlier question, which was relatively simple, or so I'd thought, casting an occasional glance in my direction as he unloaded supplies from his truck. He fingered the faded handle of his trusty shovel, hooking it in his tool belt.

A red sedan sped past, kicking up dirt where we stood alongside the road.

I prided myself on not flinching.

Highway 44 was known for its bumper-to-bumper traffic and constant car accidents. It cut through the heart of our small town, much to the sheriff's contention since there weren't many drivers inclined to slow down after going 60mph on a long stretch of road beforehand— less for a dawdling armadillo. It kept Otis in business, though, and with the occasional free labor from a rowdy teenager sentenced to community service, he got on fine.

"Are you gonna keep giving me the silent treatment, Otis?" I pestered. "It's not like I'm asking you where God parks his Cadillac. All I asked was, 'How are you supposed to grieve?' So answer me before I drop dead, won't you?" My grandmother would have scolded me for my tone and for pestering the poor man, especially this early, but I had a predilection, which were rare but hardly ever wrong.

If anyone knew something about grief, it was Otis McMillan.

"You're asking me?" he asked, scratching his chest. "I ain't exactly an expert for most things. You should be talking to a doctor or something..."

I set my empty thermos aside and took the hose from the back of his truck, aiming it at the armadillo carcass. It was nearly flattened, but the water helped plump off the flesh enough for us to pick it up. "I figured you'd know on account of your childhood and picking up dead things," I said. "I'm not sure a doctor ever found their mama face down in a pool of her vomit."

Otis was the town dunce. His mother hadn't let up on the whiskey when she was pregnant and, as an infant, had dropped him more than once. He had a dent on his head and an unfinished high school education to prove it. He was also a mouth breather which some would have written off as a mark on his intelligence, but I knew Otis was different since he tended to be a recluse and, therefore, was untouched by the bias of the townspeople.

"Grief and death ain't the same," he muttered. "I was more upset Ma died on my birthday than anything since she promised we'd go to Applebee's that night." His shovel grated against the asphalt, leaving white scuff marks as he pried the decapitated head off the road. "This about your grandfather?"

I choose to ignore his question. "I'm glad I met you, Otis."

He seemed genuinely confused. "You're glad the sheriff caught you throwing rocks at Ms. April's window?"

"The how isn't important," I said. "I just like spending time with you, is all."

"I don't think anyone's ever said that to me."

We moved further down the highway, and Otis passed me the shovel as he stooped to pick up half of a skunk, chucking it into a garbage bag.

"You know what they call armadillos in Texas?" he asked.

"Uh, no?"

"Texas speed bumps," he muttered. "You live in Texas long enough, and you're bound to hit one of those little bastards with your truck."

I pried a flattened bird off the road. "What is it about Texans and their big ass trucks, anyway?"

"The truck ain't my point," he said. "And watch your mouth, or I'll tell your granny."

"What is your point?"

A car flew past, their headlights briefly illuminating Otis' features which were scrunched together as he fought to put his thoughts into words. This time I was patient, splashing water on the concrete to wash away the dried blood to pass the time. I wondered what the driver thought of me for the fleeting moment our paths had crossed. I probably wasn't much to look at, a teenage girl in oversized rubber gloves and stained overalls.

"It's the same way with death," Otis finally said. "If you live long enough, you'll encounter it."

The rubber gloves slipped down my arm, and I hastily pulled them up, smearing something black and clumpy across my chest. "What if I don't want to hit a speed bump?" I asked.

"Ain't a way around it sometimes. Maybe there's a ditch or a lake—something keeps you on that road. There's no getting around it." Otis had gotten himself worked up, speaking earnestly. "Grief is the truck. You can be angry or distracted while you drive, and maybe some folks pull over, but you get to your destination eventually."

I shook my head. "That doesn't make any sense. Why do some armadillos get hit by a truck, and some get strokes and end up in the hospital?"

Otis shrugged. "Sooner or later, we'll be someone's speed bump."

"How do you drive, Otis?" I asked.

"I ain't too careful," he admitted. "Thing is, if you spend your whole life watching the road for armadillos, you'll miss out on the sights."

I groaned. "I'm more confused than ever, Otis! It's not like there's anything to see around here besides wheat fields and cattle."

Otis seemed unbothered by my bellyaching. "How's your grandfather doing? How long has he been in the hospital now, two months?"

"Three," I mumbled. "They don't think he has much longer, though."

"So, what are you doing here?" he asked. "I'm sure the sheriff wouldn't mind if we ended your community service a little early. Hell, you've done more than enough."

I shrugged. "I told you I like spending time with you."

He gave me a knowing look, and I felt Otis could see me despite the lack of sunlight. My fears, and even worse, my guilt. "What if a person refuses to drive? You know, pulls off onto the shoulder and sits in their car," I said.

"Then you're sitting idle, and that ain't any better." Otis sighed, hefting the garbage bag full of entrails over his shoulder. "C'mon, I'll buy you breakfast."

"What about the rest of the road?"

He scoffed. "Ain't going anywhere, is it?"

Over a plate of burnt toast and runny eggs, I thought about Otis' words and their simple wisdom. I closed my eyes and found myself in the truck. My grandfather's stroke took the wheel, and I was helpless in the backseat as my grandfather, the armadillo, took his time crossing the road. The car didn't slow.

In his way, Otis had helped.

I found my way to my grandfather's bedside. The dead flower petals scattered across the linoleum were a pale orange, not unlike a bird's spleen after baking all afternoon in the sun. He looked frail. The hue of his skin had lost the luster from long days in the field, and it sagged, drooping awkwardly across his pillow. He looked like the roadkill I'd spent the summer scraping off the side of the highway.

I took his hand, it was cold despite the many blankets they'd piled atop him, but it felt the same. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get here, Gramps. I was idling," I said.

When he took his last breath a week later, I realized Otis was right.

We are the armadillos.

The Artist

By: M. Kelly Peach

The Artist sees with eyes of saddest brown
So beautifully deep, so near to weep.
A final peace—no more the furrowed frown.

A life-long search for meaning, not renown,
A dance to beats that only they could keep.
The Artist sees with eyes of saddest brown.

A youngster shy and mumbling, gaze cast down
To shield the dark and starry, starry deep
Of final peace—no more the furrowed frown.

What drives the Artist to a life downtown
To live so down and out in crumbling heap?
The Artist sees with eyes of saddest brown.

This merciless and bitter world can drown
The purest artistry, a soul will reap
Its final peace—no more the furrowed frown

They wear the kindest, gentlest, blessed crown
And rest in teddy bear and blankie sleep.
The Artist closes eyes of saddest brown
So beautiful—no more the furrowed frown.

My Mother's Ghost Dancing

By: LindaAnn LoSchiavo

That year morphine became a minuet,
Sweet pianissimo. Its soft pedals stilled
Anguish, reproached relentless timekeeping —
Tick, tick — mortality's metronome.

Before my mother died at home, she learned
That cancer's like a Depression Era
Endurance contest: the dance marathon,
Odds stacked against her, swaying in slow mode.

Despite defiant hair, a plump physique
Deceiving guests, illness hokey-pokeyed
Her organs, shook breasts off, rhumbaed her cells,
Vitality an unremembered song,
Mere noise until sweet exhalations ceased.

Her corpse was wheeled away. The tempo changed.

Dynamic force reclaimed the rooms, infirm
No longer. Energy expressed intent
As if Mom were at a debutante's ball,
Star of the floor show, sequined, applauded.

The mind's embrasures, freed from pain's embrace,
Seek entertainment, longing to erase
What's real. Belonging to another realm—
Where everyone's transparent — Mom's got plans
She's telepathed. But first she wants to dance.

A coldness sidles up to seize my hand.

Ice Cream Elegy

By: Ace Boggess

Threw the ice cream out
when my car broke down in the Target lot.

Tubs of Häagen-Dazs wouldn't survive in summer heat,
humidity so dense a few minutes
saw me sweating through my clothes.

The customer-service rep from AAA
said an hour before a tow truck would arrive.

I considered eating one of the vanillas,
its sticky drippings adding to mine
until I looked like a mime who survived
nearly drowning, or like Heath Ledger
in *The Dark Knight*, his makeup running.

Instead, I chose burial by receptacle,
a mourner at the funeral of sweet things.

Hanging clean socks with my imaginary child

By: Sam Alexandra Rose

I squeeze the catch on the washing machine door, scoop out its insides and tell my imaginary child to spin the drum

– look, it's fun –

send it whoooooooshing and check for odd socks.

He puts his little hands in and pushes, confirms the all-clear. Follows me into the living room, picking up the stray sock that falls from the mound of clothes in my arms.

I drop the mound to the floor next to the clothes horse, get down on the floorboards and pull the metal frame so it sits between my legs. Say we need to get up close and personal with the washing. Idle chat as we each take a sock at a time, drape each one on the frame starting from the bottom and working our way up, balancing each side evenly.

I like these socks, my imaginary child says about my partner's bright blues with the orange computers on them.

Then, Peter likes black socks, he comments, surveying the rest of his adoptive father's collection.

I agree, Peter likes black socks, the blues and oranges an unusual deviation.

I ask my imaginary boy if he wants to help me do some other things around the house and he says yes. I'm teaching basic things, imparting my limited wisdom. It doesn't matter what we do.

I take the clean, dry clothes off the radiators upstairs, lie them on the bed, ask him to match them up for me – my animal socks, pair giraffes with giraffes, polar bears with polar bears, llamas with llamas. Find this one's mate for me, here's how to ball them up.

Later, on the couch, I will point to a wood pigeon perched on our ivy-covered back fence right outside the living room window, discuss the noises from the cockerel, the chickens and ducks, the goat in the allotment and my imaginary child will say he loves it here with the cartoon animals on my socks, the real animals outside

and I promise to provide and that we will hold steady
my imaginary child, I am here, I am ready.

The Banshee

By: Daithi Kearney

Although I never met you
I heard the banshee cry
The rainy night you left us

You were our little secret
Not yet known to others
But this wasn't your time in this world

You brought joy and excitement
Trepidation and pain
In those fleeting few weeks of wondering

Though we lie quietly in sorrow
The pain wasn't your fault
It was the banshee crying in the rain

And Then I Met Myself

By: Elisabeth Flett

“and I met myself - unchanged”

and yet transformed
hardened by hardship
softened by time

I look around this place and see it through eyes made new by experience
I walked out of these doors a girl and have come back a woman

sober now that I know the shape of suffering
angrier now that I have met with despair
looked him in the eye
and left him standing there on the pavement
my back turned towards the sun

these walls are taller than I remember, the ceiling higher
you say that I used to be better at taking up space

(After April River by Roshni Gallagher)

Together

By: Allison Walters Luther

Let us walk into the sea
Together
Hand in hand
Across the years
And drink deeply
Of the stars reflected from the skies

Let us dance into the midnight hour
Together
Like we did when
We were young and hopeful
In our new world
And all that was before us was love

Let us talk
Together
Of times long past
And times yet to come
Of stolen kisses and
Whispered frustrations that carry through walls

Let us burn
Together
As lovers do
In the twin flames of desire and hate
Always yearning
For what is just out of reach

Let us die as we lived
Together

I Take Your Grief to Target

By: Amber Watson

We have plans to go shopping
for Valentine's Day before receiving
the news about your brother.

After all the tears are shed
and the shock settles in,
what else is there to do?

We wander beneath bright fluorescents
on our original mission, like ghosts
slipping between the smiles of strangers.

Cupid's arrow, sharp and menacing,
is poised at the ready, waiting to slice
a new hole through an unsuspecting heart—

paying no mind how much it hurts
to love someone then rip the arrow out
because you know you must go on.

We walk towards the register in silence
through aisles of pink and red hearts
aware that today one less is beating.

You inhale the scent of a lavender candle,
hold up a chocolate rose on a stem with no thorns,
and slip on a pair of conjoined silver rings,

small mementos, just yesterday,
you would have loved. To think,
this could have made you happy.

A Million Times a Million

By: Joshua Trent Brown

Hello, said the toaster.

Jack pointed at his chest with his left hand as if to say “Me?” but he immediately found himself silly. He was the only person in the room. With the bread in his not pointing hand, he popped it into the toaster’s slots and pressed the appropriate levers down. Then he said hello back.

Depending on her mood, she used settings four or five, the toaster said. *She never bothered to ask anyone what the numbers mean. I found her quite silly in that way. She thought four was a little too undone. Five, a bit too cooked. Yet she never ventured in between. Silly lady. For you, I’d recommend six.*

“Silly, indeed,” Jack replied, before remembering common courtesy. “And thank you.”

He switched the dials that corresponded with his toasting bread from four to six and walked across the kitchen to the coffee machine.

Good morning, said the coffee maker. *How many cups today? Let me guess, three.*

“Good morning.”

Jack pulled out his bean grinder and poured what looked like the right amount inside for three cups. As he started to press down on it and start grinding the coffee into mulch, the coffee maker interrupted.

I was right! Wait, eleven seconds, it said. *Darlene would always do eleven seconds on the grinder. I quite liked when she would do it and count out loud. She had a way of counting deliberately and delicately, didn’t she? One, two, three. Her seconds were longer than real seconds, but Darlene seconds were all that mattered in the context, weren’t they? Maybe you should try it. Count in Darlene seconds, lovely and slow. Her coffee was the best out of the two, hers and yours. We both know that.*

Jack counted to eleven as unhurried as he could, poured the grinds into the bleached paper filter and filled up the coffee maker. It bubbled and purred with heat before running just-near-boiling water over the grounds.

He ate the toast and drank the coffee standing over the kitchen sink. When he was done, he wiped his mouth with one solitary paper towel and wiped the crumbs with it into the trash can.

Hello, said the trash can as he hit its foot pedal and opened its mouth.

“Hi.” He threw the paper towel in and took the step back over to the sink to put his dirty dishes away.

You might as well just put it in the dishwasher, said the sink.

I agree, said the dishwasher.

Darlene was so talented at speaking gently while giving commands, wasn’t she? We could all strive to be that good at it, said the trash can.

She made it seem as if you were the helpful one. Even though she was just telling you to do a task you should’ve already done, said the dishwasher.

“I would love you a million times a million if you’d take the trash bag out,” she’d say. Lots of ‘pleases’ and ‘thank you in advances’ and soft tones.

"I'm going to do the dishes in a moment, could you just go ahead and put that in there? That would be super helpful, and I'd love you a million times a million for it." She was a lovely woman, wouldn't you agree?

I believe we'd all agree.

Jack picked up the plate out of the sink and placed it in the dishwasher.

I was empty most of the time with her. What a spiffy lady, said the sink. But now I feel empty all of the time without her.

I'd throw me in if I was you, said the towel.

But we're here, if you decide not to, said the towel rack she'd installed on the stove.

Yes, we're here for reminders to help. Like don't forget to turn the timer off when you pull me open before my buzzer sounds, said the microwave. You do it every time, you know.

Yes. Reminders, like throw out the rotten broccoli in my bottom shelf before it starts to stink, said the fridge, as he opened it up to get a bottle of water.

Like call your daughter. She's so much like her mother, said the cell phone on the corner of the counter.

Reminders, said the coffee maker and the toaster, in unison.

Jack picked up the phone as he sat down to eat his breakfast. His daughter, Delilah, answered on the first ring.

"Daddy? Hey!"

"Hi, honey. How are you?"

"I'm OK. How are you? I've been waiting to hear from you since the funeral."

"I'm sorry about that."

"It's fine. So what's up? What makes you call now?"

"Well, the cell phone thought it was a good idea, so—"

She laughed. "The cell phone did?"

He laughed back. "Or maybe I did, I don't know."

"How about I come over and we hang out for a bit?"

Good idea, said the toaster.

"Great idea. I'll be here waiting. Oh, and hey, Lilah," he said, just before she ended the call. "I love you a million times a million." She said it back.

The Ruin

By: Mateo Perez Lara

blast straight through me
I'm forever bitter, there, I said it
this pandemic framed my life, put on display- vivarium
put memories I let go of back at the forefront
uprooted perfect cycles, shower, work, sleep, repeat
tore them root out bloody soil, remember delicious
sounds, drip down through your thin confidence.
Our lives became a horror room, our devotion is a haunted house
killers roam, I don't want to make it to the sequel
he said I was potent, but I have no potential, I'm just sad
childish, I pout, I'm disappointment, hotwired in undesired-ness
anger shimmies inside please tell me I'm selfish, I must remember
I recall when you descended the stairs whimpering that you were better than me
you showered with the door open, asked me to recite you poetry
never once touched me, what was that worth, prove it, you are worth so much now
so much money, so many lies, so much power, but I only remember
we dusted bookshelves for a summer, I felt incomplete, my grandpa was dying
I wanted to hold you while you slept, but I slept like a vampire
my whole body crystallized by mourning, in fear
I was afraid you would dispose of me, and you did, your fissure made
an already scattered mind crumble.

A Good and Joyful Thing

By: Taylor McKay Hathorn

Rachel is older now than her mother ever was.

Carolyn died at fifty-five, cancer having chewed through her breasts and into her bones when Rachel was in her second year of graduate school. She doesn't remember much about those long, aching months, but she remembers strange things that bubble up unexpectedly: the fact that a plane ticket from Dallas to Bar Harbor cost \$200, and that was when you had to talk to an airline agent to book a flight (they always felt sorry for her, and they always got her on even the fullest flights), the fact that the hospital served salisbury steaks on Wednesday nights (she still cringes when she sees it on the menu at a restaurant, still tastes the soybean flavor the gravy could never quite hide), the fact that the ratty red sweater of her then-boyfriend's that she wore in all the freezing cold hospital waiting rooms didn't actually keep her warm (once, a nurse had snipped a long, unraveled string that hung past her hand while she waited on a surgery to be over, one of a litany of them when they still thought surgeries might help).

But now, Rachel is fifty-six, an age her mother never was, and she has lived more years without a mother than she ever did with one. Her friends' mothers have all started dying now, too, and they all ask Rachel how did you do it, as if there is a secret guidebook passed among those who lose a parent. There isn't, even though Rachel wishes there were, especially now. She's toyed with the idea of writing it herself: Chapter I: Planning a Funeral, Chapter II: How to Get Rid of All the Food that Well-Meaning People Bring to Your House Even When You Have No Appetite, Chapter III: How to Keep Waking Up in the Morning. Ultimately, she always decides against it, because she's not an expert on any of those topics anyway.

Sophia, her best friend, had asked her tentatively a few weeks ago if she wanted to have a birthday party this year. Parties were, at this age, a relative thing anyway: a few glasses of wine around a fire, dinner out or in.

"I know this year is hard," Sophia had said, even though maybe it should feel like a victory to be fifty-six with both breasts intact and consistently negative yearly screenings.

"It'd be harder to act like it's not hard," Rachel had replied, which felt like the truth.

So Sophia comes on the third Saturday in September with tiramisu and Mandy comes with dry rose and Chrissy comes with a bag of her favorite coffee beans. Sometimes, their husbands join them for nights like this, but sometimes, like tonight, they stay at home or make other plans, and it's just the women. Sometimes, Rachel longs for Michael, just wants to have him nearby, but sometimes, it's nice to be like this, a woman in the company of other women. Chrissy will tell them about her hot flashes

and Mandy will be the person she can only be when her husband isn't around to talk over her or to belittle her stories, and they'll all laugh and send text messages littered with emojis later, writing that they love each other, that they had such a good time. Someone will say that she is grateful for friendship, and they will all concur.

Sophia props her feet up, and Rachel can see where varicose veins bloom like roses on the insides of her knees. "Many happy returns, Rach," Sophia says.

Sophia's 59, the oldest of their gaggle of friends, the most unafraid of getting older. Her mother isn't dying, but she's other difficult things: arthritic, palsied, forgetful. Sophia's sister Bridget lives nearer and can handle most day to day things, but Rachel's heard her take the phone calls, has listened to her weigh the merits of round-the-clock help versus a nursing home.

Rachel smiles in assent, and Mandy asks very quietly, "How old would your mom be if she were still here, Rachel?"

The way she asked the question and the fact that she asked it at all makes a lump rise in Rachel's throat. There are days, even still, that it feels like her mother has just stepped into the next room, when really, it's been so long that people don't often ask questions about her. Being given wordless permission to bring her up feels like a luxury.

The math is easy: Carolyn was 24 when Rachel was born.

"She'd be eighty this year," Rachel replies.

Eighty is how old Chrissy's mother is, who still goes out to the links to putt around with her friends on Saturdays. The older Rachel gets, the younger it seems.

"Does this birthday feel any different?" Mandy asks, and perhaps younger friends would discuss happier things, but they are old enough to know better.

"Sure," Rachel responds. "It does. But maybe I've long outlived her. The last two years of her life were so hard. She didn't get to live them."

Mandy smiles bitterly. Her mother had a long battle with Alzheimer's and didn't know Mandy's name — or her own, for that matter — in those last terrible months, when Mandy whittled away at her son's college fund flying to Portland every weekend.

"These are the good years," Mandy manages, lifting her sweating wine glass as if in a toast. The firelight reflects on the concave side of the glass, flickers and warps.

Oh, God, but she's right: later, Michael will roll over in bed and kiss her, open-mouthed, and tomorrow, their daughter will call to tell her happy birthday from the other side of the world where she's studying abroad, on the other side of the world where her mother's birthday has only just begun.

"They are," Rachel agrees, tipping her glass, too.

Sophia reaches out, pats her knee, pushes her own glass into the fray. Rachel breathes, watches her own chest rise and fall.

Scratched Guitar Shadorma

By: Creana Bosac

Scratched guitar,
many years loved, lies
flat, unplayed,
taut on the
frayed hem of red velvet drapes
in open door's breeze,

waiting for
familiar hands that
no longer
caress; thrums
its own honey-wood song for
the one who is gone.

Pedro

By: Kirsten Sto. Domingo

The new year was barely worn then.
I was catching up on some homework before classes resume,
and I heard the telephone ring, dropping murmurs about you—
only you weren't the one calling.
Barely a teenager, I recall being left at sea,
unequipped to swerve my body to a wave so sudden.
Most days, I forget.
But on other days, when the world seems so quiet,
I feel a quick tap on the shoulder, and all I know after
is that I'm seeing your face again, like I'm looking
at your photo in an ancient album tucked away most of the time.
I don't ask anyone else, but I wonder—how are you doing up there?
Perhaps you're eating your favorite peanuts,
lighting a cigarette as you look out
our screen window towards the rice field.
If only I could pick up the telephone and listen
to your voice, calm and steady, asking me how I am.
Maybe my heart would stop being a drum.
If only I could feel your hand pinch my arm lovingly,
say that I'm getting healthier.
Maybe my body would stop malfunctioning.
If only I could live in that moment again,
when you'd visit us for lunch and wipe your mouth
with the old kitchen towel afterwards.
Maybe my gut would stop hoarding doubts.

It's been thirteen years now, I think.
I hope you enjoy munching on your late
birthday gift from me: garlic-flavored peanuts
I left by your portrait.

Held in the Threshold of Lilac

By: R.J. Kinnarney

She opens her eyes. She pushes back the covers. She gets out of bed.

I hover in that calm lilac place between sleeping and waking, between night and day, between hope and despair. If I keep my eyes closed, I can pretend that the balance hasn't shifted, that the colossal comforting weights of fate haven't all been piled onto one side of the scales and that I'm not being catapulted into the air. He walked through my dreams again last night, tall, beautiful, a picture of bony, sinewy strength. He took my hand, touched my face, held me. He laughed when I stepped back and screamed. Screamed at the hole in his chest, the empty hole where his heart should have been. The perfidious heart that had hidden its darkest secrets, hidden its evil plans for his future. Our future.

The covers caress my body, moulding themselves to my shape. Dry, warm comfort. The comfort of weight grounds me. The discomfort of waiting floors me. Waiting for lilac-indigo-black. Day dawns black. I push away comfort; the covers pleat and crease into a landscape of lilac valleys, sheltering quiet consolation and night-time joy.

I stand. My leaden gut falls and I join the new day's rollercoaster.

She waters plants. She deadheads roses. She goes back indoors.

I am an automaton on the production line of morning. Cruel nature crisps the edges of lilac blossom, crinkling petals into paper. I have not stepped onto this earth since the day I found him, foetal, frail, curled like a sleeping worm that will unfurl at the touch. His muscles warm from exertion and sun and my hand holding his, hoping my pulse could jump-start his old battery. But he did not unfurl, uncurl, whirl back into life.

My slippers are drenched. I adjust my inner programming and lift my robotic arm to throw silvery jewels onto the desperate flowers, neglected, untended now. This was never my job, I'd never wanted a garden this big, I'd never wanted the back-breaking winters, the heartbreaking springs with their promise of new life, I'd never wanted to walk down the long path and find him lying on the grass. I'd never wanted that. That was never my job.

But the roses keep coming. Week after week. Just when I think the last bloom has come, a tiny bud peeps its head out. With my long, ragged nails, I snip off the deadheads, knowing that when the dead are removed, the living burst forth. One head resists my nails. I pinch and I saw and I scrape. But it remains.

I drop the crispy brown confetti onto the floor, celebration of a long ago joy. I leave the one dead head hanging on its weeping stem.

I close the door. On the garden. On the roses. On life.

She climbs the stairs. She draws the curtains. She gets into bed.

The stairs are a mountain, a filthy, dust-covered mountain. I could just lie at the bottom here. It would bother no one. Not even me. But I climb. Hands forward, like an aging silver-back. My knees graze the edges of each step, rough carpet against rough skin. At the top, I haul myself to my feet and think of the bungalow I had wanted us to see. He said that leaving the garden would kill him. We laughed. Then.

Full of morning sunlight, the bedroom glares at me, an unwanted visitor, hours early. I draw the curtains, trying to convince the room, the bed, myself that it is time again to escape into the joy of night. The sunlight pushes lilac light hard against the curtains.

I climb into bed and drag the covers over my head, searching for valleys of dry comfort. My wet slippers soak the mattress.

CLOUD STUDIES

By: Patrick Wright

Sun bursting six o'clock
past visiting hours, bursting
like your tangerine-sized
tumour, one you gave
a pet name. & clouds
like tissue they couldn't
save, malignancy so fine,
small as un-fallen raindrops.

I asked the surgeon why
it couldn't be excised:
why not *try*, considering
your angel face ...
His analogy of battle:
how if one swordsman
could be fought, one man
couldn't fight an army.

Shrift

By: Kendra Whitfield

Forgive me, Mother, for I have sinned.
I have lived in a world without you
I have laughed, I have been happy, I have been relieved.

It has been six years since I shed the albatross of your care and
Danced barefoot on the hot deck of a sailing ship.
I have shoved the things you no longer need into black garbage bags

I have given myself permission
to give away your treasures;
They are not mine.

The boxes leave but I am still surrounded by
The reality of you.
Loss permeates my days.

There is not enough time in eternity
To mourn you completely
So I choose to quit.

Forgive me, Mother, for stopping.
I cannot weep while ravens nest in my spruce tree
My time on earth is short, too,

There are not enough sunrises to embrace,
Nor sunsets to caress,
Nor bright blue afternoons to hold.

Sorrow is a tedious garden:
I refuse to tend it any more.
You taught me always to finish what I start

But you began this journey, not I.
Forgive me, Mother, for leaving it
As incomplete as you left me.

Ursa Colossaeus Is The Brightest Star

By: Robin Elise Hamilton

these days, each day
I teach myself a new trick,
these days, each day
I dangle my heart's desire
 just beyond the reach
 of my yearning, aching arms:
today is the day
he will be able to jump on the bed
 in one easy leap again;
today is the day
he will want to play
 with his catnip toys again;
today is the day
he'll unroll the toilet paper
 onto the floor again;
today's the day
he'll be able to groom
 himself again;
today's the day
there'll be something in the litter box that,
 with a loud and boastful announcement,
 he'll call for me to come clean up;
today's the day
I won't need to stuff quite
 so many pills down his throat;
today he'll be so excited about eating again
 he'll do his happy dance in place, so
 impatient for me to put the bowl down;
today he'll start eating again at all,
 anything at all, anything...

but instead
these days, each day
 despite tracking his sweet release
 far, far past the moon and beyond,
I have so much more time than I used to:
 hours and hours open again

with nothing to do that doesn't hurt
nor fill the big Little Bear hole

Change

By: Asher Watson

I still awake every morning
more tired than the last.
I still pour myself
A bowl of cinnamon toast crunch.
But so much has changed
since you were here.
So much no longer the same.

I wonder sometime if you
would recognize me.
I no longer have long brown hair,
never fully brushed, always tangled.
Instead it's short, curly, and always
some vibrant color.
I no longer walk around the house
in dresses from the kids's section.
Always too big or too small.
Instead it's oversized band tees, distressed
jeans and flannels.

Even my skin does not
look the same.
It's no longer youthful and smooth.
Instead its cracked and sliced,
white and broken,
like the china you used to throw
to the floor.
Every piece glistening
like new memories.
Something I can never again
create with you.
What I really want to say
Isn't I love you,
Or I miss you.
What I want to say is
I wish you were here to see me change.

This Late Summer Light

By: Reyzl Grace

This late summer light strips the ribs
if you let it— pares the last flesh away
like stars at dawn. My head is full of dreams
of things that have emptied me: light
in twelve lines, one last margarita,
all the plans that kept you here
when the ticket was in my hand.
Those seals in the harbour know me;
so do the crabs along the shore
at dusk—know how closely grey
cleaves to gold, as though the last
remnant of the day feared to be alone.

Catching Liars

By: Heather Ann Pulido

You never loved me.

You clung like weeds to the dream
of a summer
that never sets.

You were
awed by my
affinity to ice-
cold souls.

I never loved you.

PAUSE

By: Audrey Morales

The world moves in rhythmic chaos.
Never stopping for a breath,
Always going, running, churning,
Like a well-oiled machine.

When does it ever just,
Stop.
Pause.
Freeze.
Not continue in the constant bustle.

When will there be a moment to,
Inhale.
Exhale.
Lament.
To have a moment
when things standstill.

But it doesn't do that.
The world roars and moves
Hyper-speed, not one second to breathe.

The continuous state of,
People rushing.
Constant motion.
Head spinning.
A robotic system of routine.

Time waits for no one.
People move on,
The world moves on.

Wait! I need a moment to—

Dressing the Body

By: Karen Taylor

Before the burial
at the veterans cemetery
and the memorial
at the gay bar
I dress his body.

I chose the traditional white yamalkah
even though
he was not traditional.
I chose silk prayer shawl
brought from Berlin
by his father
before the war.

The threads
were ordinary
white
greyed by disuse

and blue
a color
the rabbis say we see
when night ends
and day begins,

and silver
glorious
flashy,
its afterimage
a rainbow
behind the eyelids.

There is so much past
in the past
which thread
do I follow?

Grief has made me a time traveller

By: Lauren Stokes

I teleport to that tiny bedroom, the only oasis in a deserted land.
And there I find her,
Laughing softly,
Like a song she's made up the words to.
Marrying stuffed bears and princess dolls.

I look at her eyes,
Broader than mine,
In many ways, wiser.
She knows better than me her reality.
My history.
I beg her for just pieces.
Fragments of fabrics and snippets of sound.
Anything to prove
I'm not lying I'm not lying I'm not lying.

She stares back at me,
Her heart on my cheek.
And reaches for me.
She knows I am who she waited for.
She has met me in daydreams and fantasies,
In reflections, in journals, in the sky.

She knows my wounds like I do.
I was there, she says.
You were there.

We hold each other gently,
In a way my parents never could,
And we whisper back and forth:
I believe you. I believe you. I believe you. I believe you.

Pensive Puzzlement

By: Robert Pegel

Why was a shooting star allowed so
little time?

Time lost can't be measured anymore.

It gets easier to find the truth
when you stop looking.

A parade of memories drowns out
the negative noise that needs
extermination.

Now life is spent speeding through
traffic lights in hopes of getting
to somewhere never been before.

To gaze from a level where
circumstances can be seen with
different eyes and the future's
lack of promise means less
than ever before.

Waiting for peace of mind to arrive
when it's not likely.

So I continue on in a disjointed life
that reads like a riddle.

Hopeful in my discontent.

A Stand With Life

By: Cheryl Lord

Together we'll stand against this sad world
Creating a madness of rhyme or reason
Matching sorrows with joy and fate with life
Until all is drained and choked out of this desire
To survive the cold battle between life and death.

A peace filled haven lies deep within your soul
Grasping desperately for strands of secure hope
Let yourself lose control of planned circumstance
And go boldly onward to find your sweet peace
Until you fall out of love with patterned life.

Alone, ah yes alone and so damned aware
Of surrounding sweetness within my hearts hold
Let life move along freely and take you now
Up in its touching folds of pure ecstasy
Be ready, surviving earnestly for a cause.

Meet the Contributors

Paul atten Ash is the pen name of writer Paul Nash, who lives in Bristol with his family. His work has been published internationally by Bent Key Publishing, Boudicca Press, Ginkgo Prize, International Library of Poetry (ILP), Luain Press, Poetry School, the6ress, Tiny Seed Press, Visual Verse, among others, in numerous journals and anthologies. ‘Vital Signs’ was shortlisted for the Alpine Fellowship Poetry Prize 2023; ‘Eryri’ was shortlisted in the AONB ‘Best Poem of Landscape’ category of the Ginkgo Prize 2021; and ‘Tsunami’ won the ILP International Open Amateur Poetry Contest 1999. Website: <https://campsite.bio/northseanavigator>

Sally Simon (ze/hir) lives in the Catskills of New York State. Hir writing has appeared in Citron Review, Emerge Lit, Raw Lit, and elsewhere. “Kiki’s Backpack” is a sidebar in her debut novel, *Before We Move On*, which will be published later in 2024. When not writing, ze’s either traveling the world or stabbing people with hir epee. Read more at www.sallysimonwriter.com

Aaron Sandberg has appeared or is forthcoming in *Lost Balloon*, *Flash Frog*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, *Qu*, *Asimov’s*, *No Contact*, *Alien Magazine*, *The Shore*, *The Offing*, *Sporklet*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Whale Road Review*, and elsewhere. A multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, you can see him—and his writing—on Instagram @aaronsandberg.

Brandon Shane is a Japanese-American alum of California State University, Long Beach, where he majored in Literature. He’s pursuing an MFA while working as a writing instructor and substitute teacher. You can see his work in *Acropolis Journal*, *Grim & Gilded*, *All Existing Magazine*, *Bitterleaf Books*, *Remington Review*, *Salmon Creek Journal*, *BarBar Literary Magazine*, *Discretionary Love*, among others. Find him on Twitter @Ruishanewrites

Halimah S. Dilazak was born and raised in Birmingham, UK where she currently lives. She writes horror fiction often thematic of the surreal, poor mental health, and nature. Her debut gothic short story, “The Hollow” was printed in the Winter 2021 issue of *Quill and Crow Publishing House* and she has since had various publications including her first novelette “Guardians of Fallows and Fortune” by *Love Letters to Poe*. You can find her on twitter @Dilazak_HS29

Carson Sandell (they/them she/her) is a trans and queer poet from San Jose, CA. They earned a Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing from University of California Riverside. Carson is a Poetry Reader at Split Lip Magazine and Poetry Editor at Poetry is Currency. They are an MFA Candidate in Poetry at San Diego State University.

Erin Donohue is a writer and editor from Aotearoa New Zealand. Her first novel was published in 2017 and was a finalist in the NZCYA Book Awards. She writes weekly on her Substack oldest wisest self about her mental illnesses, her treatment and her craft. She is currently working on a collection of personal essays.

Beverley Ward is an author, facilitator and writing coach. She writes poetry, fiction and life writing and, as a survivor of multiple bereavements and trauma, loss is infused through much of her work. Her grief memoir, *Dear Blacksmith*, was published by Valley Press in 2020. She's a lone parent to two children and is also the founder of The Writers Workshop in Orchard Square, Sheffield.

Kyra Cruz is an aspiring novelist working on her debut YA fantasy novel. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Drexel University, where she also served as the poetry editor for their literary magazine, the Paper Dragon. In her free time, she loves to go on road trips, sip on caffeinated beverages, and collect antique books.

M. Kelly Peach lives in the beautiful Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He hikes, reads and collects books, and bakes. His author's website is mkellypeach.com; X (Twitter) is @MichaelPeach. He has work forthcoming in *Suicid(al)iens*, *Ez.P.Zine*, *Vital Minutiae Quarterly*, *Ghost Light Lit*, *U.P. Reader #8*, and *Lumina Journal*.

Native New Yorker **LindaAnn LoSchiavo** (she/her), a four time nominee for The Pushcart Prize, was also nominated for Best of the Net, Balcones Poetry Prize, an Ippy, a Firecracker Award, the Rhysling Award, and Dwarf Stars. She is a member of SFPA, British Fantasy Society, and The Dramatists Guild. Titles for 2022: "Women Who Were Warned" (Cerasus Poetry) and "Messengers of the Macabre: Hallowe'en Poems" (Audience Askew). Forthcoming in 2023: "Apprenticed to the Night" (UniVerse Press), "Felonies de Se: Poems about Suicide" (Ukiyoto Publishing), and "Vampire Ventures" (Alien Buddha Press). Forthcoming in 2024: "Cancer Courts My Mother" (Penumbra / Stanislaus State College). Twitter: https://twitter.com/Mae_Westside YouTube: LindaAnn Literary: @lindaannliterary8035 <https://VampireVenturesPoems.com>

Ace Boggess is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *Escape Envy*. His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble. His seventh collection, *Tell Us How to Live*, is forthcoming in 2024 from Fernwood Press.

Sam Alexandra Rose is a three-time cancer survivor with a rare genetic condition, and a PhD student researching the connection between creative writing and cancer survivorship. Her poetry and prose has been published in over 70 literary magazines and anthologies, and her memoir “*Gut Feelings: Coping With Cancer and Living With Lynch Syndrome*” was released in January 2021. Find her at <https://www.writersam.co.uk> and on socials as @writersamr

Daithí Kearney is an Irish musician and dancer from Kerry, now living in Louth. His poetry is inspired by his surroundings and his young family. His poems have been recently published in *Paddler Press*, *Patchwork Folklore Journal*, *Field Guide* and *Martello*.

Elisabeth Flett is an award-winning writer, theatre-maker, musician and general feminist trouble maker. Winner of the GSMD Rose Lawrence Award in 2017 and University of Aberdeen Literary Lights 2021, Elisabeth’s writing spans academia, poetry, plays, fiction and auto-biographical content. Her poetry has been longlisted by *Northern Gravy Literary Periodical* and published by *Hysteria*, *Coin-Operated Press*, *Leopard Arts*, *Bits and Pieces*, *Queer Out Here* and *Out on the Page*. Elisabeth is passionate about mental health awareness, LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality, themes which often feature in all forms of her work as a creative practitioner.

Let’s face it, **Allison Walters Luther** is a mess. She grew up in Southern Indiana and has since lived in England, Florida, Southern California, and Washington state. A writer since the age of seven, she has Brain Dragons instead of Plot Bunnies and they frequently battle each other, leaving Allison a weeping, distracted blob. Her use of imagery has been called ‘immersive’ and she often leaves stories open-ended, dashing off into the sunset and cackling “No story is ever really over!” You can learn more about her at allisonwaltersluther.com or reach her on Twitter at @AllisonLuther.

Amber Watson is a writer and food blogger residing in Durham, NC. Her poetry appears in *3Elements Review*, *Ligeia*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Find her online at amberwatson.net and on social media @awatsonwrites.

Joshua Trent Brown is a short fiction writer from Raleigh, NC, and a fiction editor at JAKE. He has previously been published in a handful of cool lit mags and has work forthcoming in The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Mythic Picnic, and HAD. Trent is also currently in search of a publisher for a novella about a complicated storytelling commune where technology is looming. Find him on Twitter @TrentBWrites.

Mateo Perez Lara is a queer, non-binary, Latine poet from Bakersfield, California. They received their M.F.A. in Poetry from Randolph College's Creative Writing Program. They are an editor for Block Chronicles. They have a chapbook, Glitter Gods, published with Thirty West Publishing House. Their poems have been published in EOAGH, The Maine Review, PANK, and elsewhere.

Zoe Davis is an emerging writer and artist from Sheffield, England. A Quality Engineer in Advanced Manufacturing by day, she spends evenings and weekends writing poetry and prose, and especially enjoys exploring the interaction between the fantastical and the mundane. When she is not writing, Zoe can be found drawing, baking, and playing para ice hockey. You can follow her on Twitter @MeanerHarker where she is always happy to have a virtual coffee and a chat.

Taylor McKay Hathorn is a Mississippian by birth and a Jacksonian by choice, and you can read more of her work online at www.taylormckayhathorn.com.

Creana Bosac has worked as an Open University Associate Lecturer and now edits and writes creative writing critiques. Having written mainly scientific documents before, she is enjoying writing creatively. Her work has appeared in Lucent Dreaming, Briefly Zine and The Storms amongst others, and she has authored a guide to giving and receiving feedback. Creana lives in Leicestershire, UK and likes plants and the outdoors. She is on X (formerly Twitter) @CBosac

Kirsten Sto. Domingo (she/her) is a disabled writer from the Philippines. She enjoys sitcoms, k-dramas, and hot chocolate. Her work has been published in Honeyfire Literary Magazine. You can read her poems on Instagram: @fromthepsyche

R.J. Kinnarney is trying to make sense of their tiny corner of the world, through tiny pieces of writing and lots of reading. Currently working on a novel, which looks at attitudes to war, communication, prejudice and what strength means. Words lie out there in all sorts of places and links can be found at rjkinnarney.com Twitter: @rjkinnarney

Patrick Wright has a poetry collection, *Full Sight of Her (Eyewear)*, which was nominated for the John Pollard Prize. He has also been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize. His poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The North*, *London Magazine*, and *Poetry Salzburg*. He has a second collection, *Exit Strategy*, which will be published by Broken Sleep Books in 2025.

Kendra Whitfield lives and writes at the Southern Edge of the Northern Boreal Forest. Her work has been anthologized by Community Building Art Works and Beyond the Veil Press. When not writing, she can be found swimming laps at the local pool or basking in sunbeams on her back deck.

Robin Elise Hamilton (she/her) is a newly-septuagenarian, newly-out queer trans woman retired after a half-century offstage in live performance. She is also newly-returned to writing poetry, and her work has recently been presented (as R.Hamilton) by *Boats Against the Current*, *Bullshit Lit*, *Caesura*, *Crab Apple Lit*, *dadakuku*, *Dollar Store*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Gnashing Teeth*, *Intangible*, *Nightingale & Sparrow*, *Swim Press* and others.

Asher Watson (they/he/she) is a queer, Latinx student poet. They are an adoptee through foster care and live in Durham, NC. Along with writing, they enjoy art, music, baking and cosplay. Their poetry appears in *The Echo* and *The Origami Review*.

Reyzi Grace is a poet, essayist, and translator whose writing has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, named as a finalist for the Jewish Women's Poetry Prize, and featured in *Room*, *Rust & Moth*, *the Times of Israel*, and other publications. She currently serves as an editor for both *Psalttery & Lyre* and *Cordella Magazine*, in addition to her work as a teen services librarian in Minneapolis. More of her can be found at reyzilgrace.com and on Twitter @reyzilgrace.

Heather Ann Pulido is an indigenous bi author from Baguio City, Philippines. A longtime student journalist and content writer, she is a returning literary artist. Her poems are in *Moss Puppy*, *Sage Cigarettes*, and *JAKE*. When she's supposed to be writing, she's on Twitter (@heather_tries).

Audrey Morales is a poet and writer from Virginia. Her work has been published in *Volition Literary Magazine*. She was a research contributor to *The Washington Post*. When she is not writing poetry, she reads fantasy novels, bakes bread, and plays music on her record player.

Karen Taylor has written short stories for many years, but this is her first attempt at a poetry collection. She lives in Queens with her wife, author Laura Antoniou. Acknowledgements: Thank you to Leslea Newman for coaching me, and to my wife, Laura for encouraging me.

Lauren Stokes is an Australian-Canadian writer based in Ottawa, Ontario. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism and she is an immigrant and a settler on the traditional, unceded land of the Algonquin-Anishinaabe First Nations. When Lauren is not furiously scribbling into a notebook in the wee hours of the morning, she can be found hanging out with her cat, playing piano very poorly, or DIYing furniture she found on the side of road.

Robert Pegel is a husband and father whose only child, Calvin, died in his sleep of unknown causes at age 16. Robert writes about the human condition and the search for transformation. He is a Best of the Net nominee for 2023. Robert has been published in Door is a Jar, MockingHeart Review, ZiN Daily, Libretto, Green Ink Poetry, The Honest Ulsterman and others. Robert lives in Andover, NJ with his wife, Zulma.

Cheryl Lord is the grandmother of GLL's Editor-In-Chief Rachael Lord. Originally from Bowdoinham, Maine, Cheryl now lives in Wesley Chapel, Florida, where she enjoys spending time by the pool, shopping, and enjoying the sunshine. She is the proud mother of two children and five grandchildren. **From Rachael:** As one of the most incredible people that I've ever known, my Nana taught me how to sing, how to write, and how to get through this life, always smiling. I love you, Nan. Thank you for always pushing me to follow my dreams. Everything I do is for you and Gramps.