



Editor's Note

After the last two years, you would be forgiven if you were to assume the “quarterly” in our name was vestigial, like the name of the famous California restaurant The French Laundry. Since March 2020, our issue cadence has ranged from six months to a full year, and in the lead up to this issue, we’ve been reflecting on why.

The fact is, literary magazines like ours tend to exist on spent energy and borrowed time. Of the two things that keep them going, one is the force of continuity. It’s easier to put out an issue when you put one out three months ago; the muscle memory is there. Like everyone, we struggled immediately after the initial COVID surge, as day jobs changed locations and families shifted rhythms. The pure mechanics of putting out an issue didn’t change all that much, but our continuity broke. We intend to re-establish that continuity in the coming year.

The second thing that keeps a literary magazine going, though, remains as alive as ever: Our writers. Within these pages you’ll find that same vibrancy of form, depth of thought, and clarity of observation that has powered our run to this point. While our continuity has experienced some challenges, the life force that brought Rumble Fish Quarterly into existence remains there at the core, ready to meet you where you are.

Katie Sions
Editor-in-Chief

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Equinox

Gerard Sarnat

Summer gone, autumn first rain,
I oil doors that squeal again.

Creaky knobs throb like burning coals,
as the cobra queen coils to swallow me whole.

With my white bush clover and your soft white lily,
why must our bodies drift apart?

Will an old oak's cock grow cold this winter?
Can there be spring out here on the rocks?



Trace of Photons on a Sleepy Moon

Bobby Parrott

When I tell you the morning is only
a preface, a foreword to this millennial
pool of mercury, what do you see
in a watercolor earth where *never* means

can't stop? No language could resist
these daubs of aquamarine, brush-tipped
stylus a missile. Awkward, your NASA
with its airless crunch of boots. An iris sheds

flesh late in summer, me with a bumblebee
in each hand, golden fur, precious hum
on my retina. We're excluded from time's
suitcase, steel-hinged opalescent box

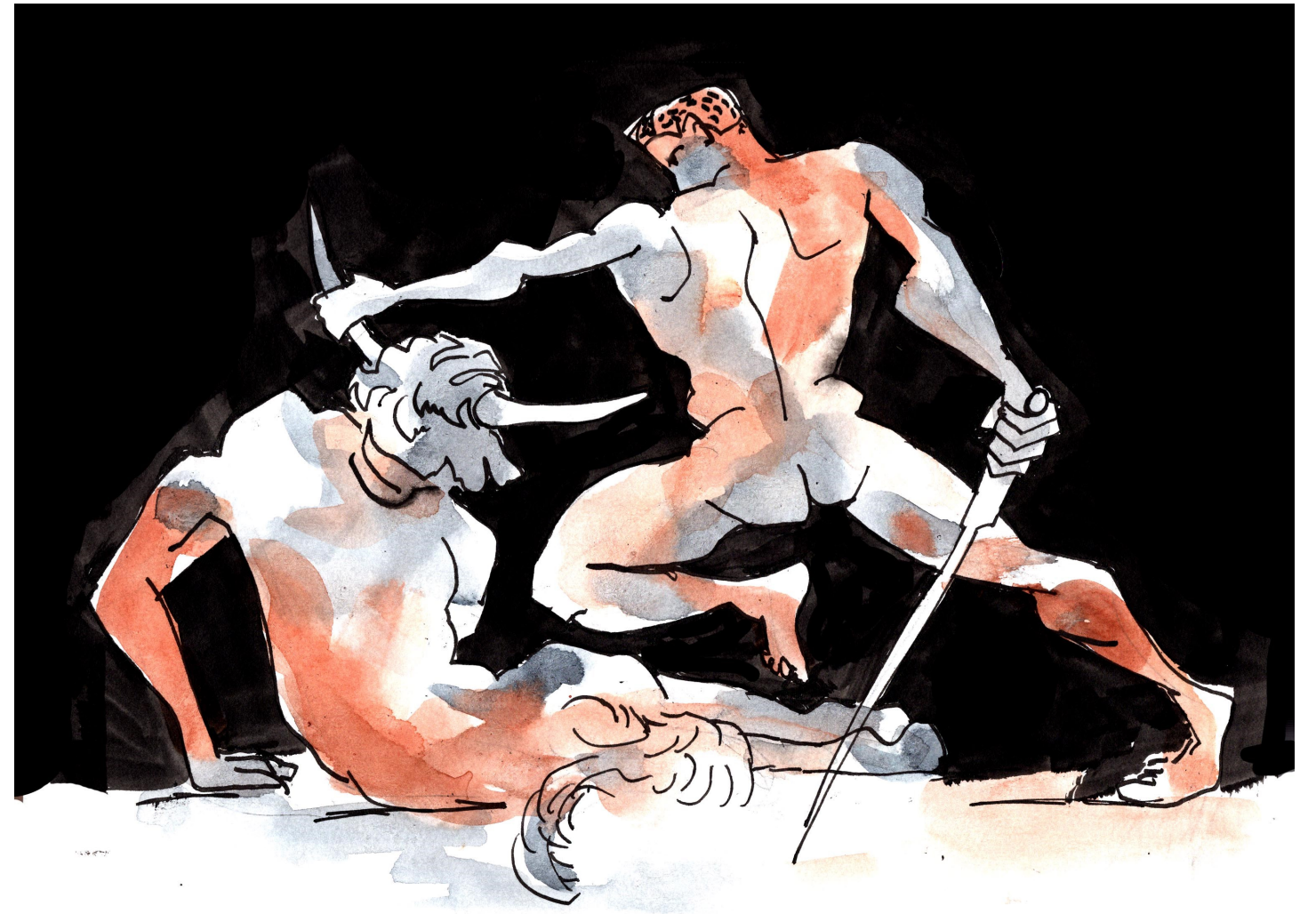
while time, shoelace in a stir-fry jacket
flies to Amsterdam, rents a tiny boat, draws
bicycles, refuses to paint canals. Blinking
finds my name rhymes with every face here.

A ragged moon cut into finely wedged
rabbits like how your lips shift my lunacy
into a rebellion, a serenade in cerulean,
fingered guitar chords of cerebral. I terrify

my brain with this. Inversion of butterflies
my starry field of angels coming home.
I gather myself, harbor in the sun's deepest
charms a fusion. How ice marbles water

into lenses the Moon rains for in its sleep.







WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

Martin Kleinman

Scott finally pulled the trigger just before his world closed up shop for good, a deceptively warm New York City day in late winter of 2020. A damp ocean breeze, temperatures in the mid-fifties, enough to cadge faint hope. Even flowers were fooled; crocuses burst their brown barricade, only to collapse from the cold hours later.

On this pre-mask day, the Dow dropped again, to under 21,000. This, after topping 30,000 only three months earlier. Scott put his book down on the elbow-worn oak bar. The book was “No Name in the Street” by James Baldwin. Scott uncapped his red Sharpie and underlined a passage: “People pay for what they do, and still more for what they have allowed themselves to become. They pay for it very simply; by the lives they lead.”

His reverie was shattered by the nattering of a baseball cap-wearing Brooklyn man-child who yelled at the corner TV monitor. The guy pushed up the sleeves of his Kaepernick football jersey and pointed at the interviewee, a financial analyst, who predicted a sharp market rebound. Tommy, the bartender, dried pint glasses with a rag, peered over his cheaters, and shook his head. The few day drinkers, all in early middle age, stared out onto the rain-slick street, their heads all at the same angle, like birds on a wire.

“What does this guy know? If Warren Buffett can’t time the market...” Kaepernick jersey said.

Scott scanned the CNN crawl on the bottom of the bar’s TV. *It’s coming, alright, I just know it.* Scott heard the voices in his head for weeks now, louder with every new story of global COVID-19 hospitalizations. His local hospital, Woodhull, was becoming a wall-to-wall shit show. He recalled the wisdom of Pema Chödrön, the Tibetan Buddhist: “Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know.”

That’s when he did it.

Scott called Judy, his helmet-haired Greene County Trulia real estate rep. After weeks of back-and-forth, he took the plunge and bid way over-ask on a restored nineteenth century upstate farm house with seventy-five wooded acres. The property was owned by an older couple looking to retire to warmer climes. Judy, a cagey pro, orchestrated a bidding war. Before the world stopped cold, the listing had languished.

“How’s every little thing in beautiful downtown Catskill, New York?” Scott asked and, before he got a response, added, “So? What did your guy think of my offer?”

“I think you’re making a *very* smart decision,” Judy said. She surfed the Mercedes-Benz site while congratulating Scott. “The house, *your* house, is simply delicious. You and your wife will make a lot of wonderful memories there.”

Next call: Sally, his Upper West Side-born wife, corporate counsel for a major Wall Street investment bank. He knew she would likely be in the midst of a meeting and called anyway, he being five beers in.

“What?” Sally asked, her voice hushed.

Scott sipped his Stella. “I got something special for you, babe,” he said.

“Fast.”

“Yeah. I took a stone farmhouse for us in Palenville. Lots of land, lots, ten minutes up the road from Saugerties, a short drive off I-87. We’re getting out of Dodge.”

Silence.

“Babe? You there?” He braced for the barrage. “Define ‘took’.”

“Ummm. Bought.”

“You *what*? How many have you had, Scotty? Palenville? What, in the everlasting fuck, is Palenville?”

He pushed in his psychological clutch, a method his shrink taught him to decouple his anger and his mouth before his eff-bomb fury flew.

“It’s on-the-come. Cute as a button. Stone house. With a huge parcel. Imagine the garden you could create.” In fact, to Scott it was paradise on earth, compared to Meadville, Pennsylvania, where the city guy spent the summers of his youth with his grammy and gramps.

“Palenville. Is that anywhere near Chatham?” she snapped, in reference to the Columbia County, east-of-the-Hudson, and the choice of many upscale New York City professionals.

Silence.

“Kinderhook?”

Silence.

“Oh, Scotty! Don’t tell me: It’s on the *west* side of the river?” Silence.

“Oh, Scotty.”

“See you back home,” he said, ending the call.

Covid came after a rough winter. Not weather-wise, but in terms of their finances. Scott's salary sank as the award-winning graphic designer got stuck in an ongoing, pan-industry, race-to-the-bottom. One by one, his clients left for lower-cost providers. Sally was virtually the couple's sole breadwinner, a tenuous position for all but the most affluent couples in brownstone Brooklyn.

The Palenville idea first struck Scott one January night, pre-24/7 pandemic pandemonium, on the IRT two train. The subway car sat, for no apparent reason, somewhere under the East River. Scott shifted in his seat as the lightning bolt came into his head, out of the blue: geo-arbitrage.

Why not cycle out of their pricey Brooklyn co-op, harvest a decade of profit, and take advantage of upstate New York's higher quality of life and far lower cost of living?

Why the hell not, he thought? What did they call it, "lifestyle design?" He turned the idea over and over in his mind as he shivered in the dark, cold, subway car.

"Fuck this shit!" Scott screamed on the pre-Covid, packed subway car. No one paid him any mind.

In the weeks ahead, he did his online due-diligence and zeroed in on towns with significant upside potential. His efforts intensified as the news about Wuhan and zoonotic disease became entwined with media interest in presidential impeachment, and N95s and Lady Macbeth-level hand sanitizing became de rigueur. Realtors led him on virtual house tours and hooked him up with inspectors and upstate attorneys.

It all proved prescient. The first U.S. death from the virus was reported on February 29, and by the Ides of March, local doctors screamed to any reporter who would listen, "We are not prepared." From there, 'rona wreaked havoc. Nineteen years after nine-eleven, New York became, yet again, Ground Zero, complete with the twenty-four-seven shriek of sirens. The city was a shambles.

Despite the suddenness of the Big Apple's wartime footing, Sally initially pushed back hard against Palenville, a rustic Hudson Valley hamlet, when Scott first presented the idea. She relented after finding herself on the receiving end of a vicious one-two punch. Just before the first big lockdown, her best friend Pam tested positive for the virus, was taken to the MASH unit that was Woodhull, and died in two days.

The very next day, while sheltered in place, and on the phone with Pam's inconsolable Midwestern parents, Sally got a text.

From her boss.

She was outfoxed at work, a corporate imbroglio. Sally was derailed, her career goalposts moved. She had to admit it: her head-in-the-clouds dreamer of a hick-husband may have actually been right about the NYC-to-upstate New York move. She profited handsomely from her company's success: the IPO, plus corporate contributions to her fully-vested retirement plan, plus years of six-figure performance bonuses. And then there was the certainty of a sizable severance package.

The couple was armed with financial options. They were – in circus parlance – "working with a net".

It was an easy-peasy job for the masked men from Shleppers Moving Company. And, with New York City in mid-transition from capital "G" Gotham to lower-case "g" ghost town, there was no one on the road the Monday of their move. They sailed up the BQE in their Audi Q5, crossed the Triboro without a hitch, and minutes later passed Yonkers Raceway on I-87. "Eastern Parkway to Yonkers in thirty-three minutes – a new land speed record," Scott joked as he bit into a scallion cream cheese-and-Nova everything bagel from Shelsky's.

It took less than two and a half hours to reach Palenville. "That was no time at all," Sally marveled as Scott turned off at Exit 20, Saugerties. She was hungry but her stomach churned at the sight of the sad-sack storefronts that dotted the Route 32 intersection. McDonald's, a quickie mart, Tomo Sushi, Subway, a pizza joint.

"Re**cal**culating," their GPS lady said in her vague, Continental accent.

Scott turned the car around and headed north on thirty-two. Sally was heartened by billboards for two local eateries, the Rip Van Winkle Brewing Company and Last Chance Restaurant. "Featured in The New York Times', well...*hell-o*," she said. But small-town Greene County, in leafless, muddy, early spring, was a far cry from their Brooklyn nabe, which teemed with life all-year 'round, if to the point of exasperation.

"Look at this shit," Scott said, as they sped north to 300 Maple Street, their new Palenville address. There was nothing. A motel. Auto repair. Another auto repair. Two Brothers Deli. Auto repair. Sunoco. "Reminds me of Meadville."

"*Day-um*, people up here need new cars, seems to me," Sally said.

"In three-quarters of a **MY-ull**, **prePARE** to turn left," Ms. GPS advised.

"Snide bitch," Sally said. "Look! OK! This could work." She pointed towards the Circle W., an old-timey looking general store.

"Drop anchor! Pull in there," Sally said. "I'll be right back." She donned her New York Mets-branded mask and was gone. Scott turned off his tunes and dialed in WDST-FM, Radio Woodstock, which played The Cranberries' "Zombie". He powered down the front windows. The country air was fresh and clean, if a bit chilly.

In minutes, Sally bounced to the car with a big smile and a thumbs-up. Her mask was now a chin-strap.

"Two Kaaterskill Sandwich specials," she said. "Black Forest ham, honey mustard, micro-greens on ciabatta – things are looking up."

"Re**CAL**culating," Ms. GPS said as Scott sped out of the parking lot in the wrong direction.

"Whoops." Scott said, again making a U-turn.

"In two hundred feet, **prepare** to turn left." Then: "Turn **left**."

They drove from a county road to a rutted two-lane to a narrow dirt path. Branches raked the flanks of their Florett Silver Audi SUV.

"You have arrived at your destination."

This was 300 Maple Street. The movers were already there, let in by their realtor, Judy.

Sally pointed, with a bounce in her seat. "Oh Scott!" Sally unbuckled her seatbelt, bolted from the car and jumped up and down like a kid. "The Zillow photos don't do it justice at all."

The first night was rough, scary-quiet and dark. The furnishings that crammed their Brooklyn apartment proved a drop in the bucket in the three-thousand square foot home. There were rooms, closets and kitchen cupboards left completely empty.

“I can’t sleep,” Sally said.

So turn on the light,” Scott said, drowsy.

“Tomorrow, let’s find the gardening center and plant my garden. Wake up, Scott. Are you listening?”

“You bet.”

In the distance, coyotes howled.

After a breakfast of leftover ciabatta sandwiches, the couple pulled into town to gas up. The Sunoco guy’s shirt had a red embroidered “Billy” over the pocket. He rattled off a half-dozen nurseries within twenty miles. Wal-Mart got their attention. For native New Yorkers, Wal-Mart was verboten, enemy territory. And yet, their interest was piqued, in a Margaret Mead, anthropological sort of way.

“Jeez, Wal-Mart, huh? Isn’t that like twenty miles?” Sally asked. “Where you guys from?” Billy asked, as he topped off their tank. “Downstate. Brooklyn.”

“My kid lives there,” Billy said. “Think of it this way. Your trip will take less time than it takes to get from Grand Army Plaza to the Manhattan Bridge. On a *good* day, mind you. And you won’t have to lean on the horn or stomp on your brakes once. *That*, I can promise you.”

Wal-Mart was everything they expected, and more. A phalanx of fatties on motorized mobility scooters. Kids in oversized shopping carts that brimmed with barrels of cheese balls. Dorm-sized fridges for the price of a so-so Saint-Emilion.

Scott and Sally did have to concede that the gardening center was both well-stocked and priced. They overbought, filled the way-back of their car with plants, tools and a mountain of peat moss, and drove off. “Hungry?”

Sally nodded “yes.”

“Me too. *Starving*. It’s the air, I think.” And at that very moment, Sally spied an oasis in the near distance and pointed. “There! There!”

Scott pulled into the lot of the Main Street Smokehouse, got a table out back, went inside and ordered. Sally swiped through her socials until Scott kicked open the screen door and set down a groaning tray of grub. They made short shrift of a rack of rubbed ribs, greens, mac and cheese, and PBR tall boys. Their table was soon a pile of rib rubble and sauce-stained paper napkins.

“Better,” Sally said, pulling packets of pre-moistened towelettes from her Tory Burch backpack. “You know what I like? Every place has a parking lot. It’s so much *easier*



here!”

“What’s new with the peeps,” Scott asked, looking at her phone.

“It’s a shit show. Temporary morgues in back of Methodist. Midtown is empty. You can bicycle ride river-to-river, right down the middle of 42nd Street.”

“Dammit.” He gathered up their lunch detritus, dumped it in the trash bin, headed to the car and said “Let’s blow this pop stand.”

On the way home, they passed the town dump.

“Ah, so *that’s* where it is,” Scott said. He turned onto the gravelly dirt road and marveled at the layout. Separate dumpsters for clear, green, and brown glass, as well as for paper, aluminum, compostable waste and, at the end of the path, a crater that served as the local repository for broken household appliances.

“Amazing,” Sally muttered.

“*You’re moving into a land of both shadow, and substance, of things and ideas – you’ve just crossed over into...The Twilight Zone,*” Scott said in his best Rod Serling impersonation.

“I think we need a pickup for our garbage runs. Let’s get a big old pickup!” Sally said. “With a stick. And some chewing tobacco. And John Deere baseball caps!”

Fully into the spirit of their new environs, Scott sped out of the dump, slinging a rooster tail of gravel. In minutes, he saw a sign for Trail Boss, an outdoor outfitter. He pulled into the lot, between a red Dodge Ram and a super-duty Ford F-150.

“Because...*why*?” Sally asked.

“I need work clothes,” he said, on a mission.

“So...can I help you with your dungarees?” the jolly clerk asked. Scott found double-front Carhartt carpenter jeans, and a Filson Tin Cloth jacket.

As they exited, Sally yanked on his shirtsleeve and laughed. “He actually said ‘*dungarees*!’” she whooped.

“I know, I know. This place is fucking awesome!”

Further down the road, just miles from their house, a lawn sign for a local crafts

fair. The posted hours were nine a.m. to four p.m. Scott looked at the dashboard clock and shrugged.

“Even if they’re closing up, they’ll take one look at the Audi, and you in that three hundred dollar Filson jacket, which you need like a hole in the head, smell big city money, and stay open,” Sally said.

There had been rows of craft tables beyond the pasture’s pristine horse fence, but load-out was in full swing and the unsold wares — antiques, farm implements and Americana knick knacks from lost decades — soon disappeared into rusted minivans.

Undaunted, Scott piloted into the emptying grassy parking area. Scott was immediately drawn to a table full of old rifles and western style revolvers. He sighted a Mauser and was reminded of the summer days of his youth in western Pennsylvania, shooting empty Clorox bottles on his gramp’s farm.

Sally admired a caramel colored FADA Bakelite tube radio at a table stocked with Deco housewares.

“If you like that classic design, this is your radio,” the vendor said, as she packed her wares into a rusted Ford Bronco. She flicked a cigarette ash and nodded her head towards a knot of men in early middle age across the street. “It’s all original, and I can work with you on the price,” she said. “I’ll be back next weekend and I can hold it for you. But now, you and your hubby best scoot out of town.”

“Because...?”

The vendor looked at the men across the street. Sally turned and sized them up. They wore a uniform, of sorts. Matching grey janitorial supply store shirts and slacks, black Garrison belts and Red Wing biker boots. A gaggle of them slouched in front of a bar holding cans of Coors Banquet. To Scott, they looked like long-ago jocks; white guys-gone-soft.

A steady stream of craft vendors packed up and drove out of the pasture. “You don’t want to be here before long, alls I’m sayin’,” the radio vendor said. “Here’s my card. I’ll have your radio. But right now, color me gone.” She continued packing her goods.

Sally picked up on the woman’s vibe and motioned to Scott. “Hon’? We should go.”

“Yeah, in a minute, babe. Look at this lever-action .30-30. It’s pristine.” He held the beefy Winchester up for his wife’s inspection.

The radio dealer’s eyes narrowed and she shooed Sally towards her husband. “Git!” she urged. Sally turned to her husband and took him by the hand. “I’ll explain in the car.”

Just then, a burst of laughter from across the street. Their apparent leader, a buzz cut guy in his late thirties, stared at the couple as they got into their car.

“What was that all about?” Scott asked.

“Keep going,” she said, as she fiddled with the car radio. On came the Grateful Dead’s “Box of Rain” and they sang along: “Walk into splintered sunlight, inch your way, through dead dreams, to another land...”

Sally then took a turn imitating Rod Serling: “*This is not a new world. It is simply an extension of what began in the old one. A case to be filed under ‘M’ for ‘mankind’ on a strange intersection in a shadow-land called...*” And as one, they both intoned, from the relative safety of their car’s cocoon, “*The Twilight Zone.*”

They did not notice the cascade of Coors hurled behind them as they drove back to Maple Street.

A fox waited for them on their front porch. It paced back and forth with intent, howling all the while. White lather foamed the animal’s mouth. Its head slung low, and its reddish coat was matted with mud.

The couple did not notice the animal. Scott whipped the Audi up the drive and Sally sang along to Waylen Jennings’ “I’ve Always Been Crazy” which blared over the Bose. She reminded Scott that they needed to pick up some chewing tobacco the next time they rode into town. He sensed she was not kidding, and this pleased him. As one, they unlocked their seatbelts, opened their car doors, and stopped dead: they finally noticed the rabid fox. The sick animal’s jowls dripped as it moved to the top of the front porch stairs and stared Scott and Sally down.

“Don’t go near it; don’t touch it!” Sally warned. Scott tensed his body and stood perfectly erect, an instinctive transition from mild-mannered graphic designer to frontier hero and protector of womenfolk. Scott found a fallen branch and flung it at the fox, which ducked, glowered, and advanced.

No stranger to wildlife, Scott was schooled by his grandfather on how to make loud noises, act “large” by raising one’s arms and do whatever it took to scare the scavengers off.

“I got this,” Scott said. He opened the car door and honked the Audi’s horn. The fox raised its head skyward and howled.

“The bastard has perfect pitch — do you hear that?” Sally said, as the animal matched the frequency of their car’s horn, stared at the couple, and advanced again.

“Get in the car,” Scott said to his wife. “Now!” The fox took another step, and Scott got back behind the wheel, started the car, and backed out of the driveway.

“We need a fucking gun, that is for shit sure,” he said as the Brooklynites motored back to town.

Scott and Sally were bowled over by the wall display of rifles, shotguns, and handguns. The Saugerties Sport Center was a spacious, modern store. Sally marveled at the industrial design of each piece. The crisp, clean lines of the blue-barreled pistols and the hand checkered walnut stocks of the long guns appealed to her sense of aesthetics. Scott simply saw them as tools needed in rural settings.

“How are you folks today? What can I do you for?” asked the store’s proprietor after allowing the couple to get their bearings. He sized them right up as soon as they wheeled their shiny new car into the lot.

The proprietor was a non-threatening sort, a friendly, pink-palmed man who could be mistaken for an earth science educator or weekend Foot Locker clerk. Locally renowned for his nice tight groupings at the range, he wore pressed chinos and a short-sleeved button down shirt with his name — Hal — embroidered on the shirt pocket in the same gaudy red script as their Sunoco guy, Billy.

Scott and Sally looked at each other, paused, then spoke as one.

“No, go ahead, you start,” Scott said to Sally. “You’ve got to be totally comfortable with this process.”

“That one!” Sally said, pointing to a burnished Winchester Model 12, an iconic shotgun found on the wall rack of many a sheriff’s office back in the day. “Let me hold that one!”

Hal reached back and proffered the nine-pound twelve gauge. “See, there’s this fox,” she sputtered as she reached for the Winchester as if it were a nail-studded Louisville Slugger. “We think it has rabies and there’s probably more out there in the woods behind the house, and...” Sally struggled with the shotgun’s heft and nearly dropped it.

Hal’s smile was warm, disarming, and honed with care. His customer base had evolved from local sportsmen to the so-called “covidiot”, pandemic-driven apartment people from downstate. He took the Winchester from Sally and placed it back on the wall. “Have you called Animal Control? Ask for Jerry. He’s my big brother. Won’t steer you wrong.” Hal reached behind the counter and produced Jerry’s business card.

“Let me ask you,” Sally said. “As long as we’re here? For home protection? Which gun would you recommend?”

At that, Hal smiled again, for he saw in her face that she was hooked real good, bound and determined to buy. There was nothing he liked better than ending a long week with a home run sale to a couple of downstaters.

“The Model 12 is a beauty, an heirloom quality, true American classic. It does what it’s supposed to do. But it’s a lot of shotgun. Let’s start at the beginning: either of you ever shoot a firearm?”

Again as one, they spoke:

“Nope,” she said.

“Yep,” he said.

“You’re probably better off with a robust security system and a good dog,” Hal said. “However...” he continued, reaching for a short-barreled Remington 870 and offered it to Sally. “Here, hold it...”

“Hold it, it won’t bite,” Hal said. “That’s my best seller right there, chambered for twenty gauge. Much easier to handle, much less recoil. That receiver? That’s milled from a solid billet of steel for strength and durability. Easy to point, accurate, smooth as silk. What you’re holding is precision, dependable, American-made quality.”

“It’s so light!” Sally said, as she swung the shotgun around to his right, in front of Hal’s face. “Whoa! Easy there,” Hal said, motioning for the Remington.

“Sorry,” Sally said, sensing she’d broken cardinal rules of firearm safety.

“Now, let’s go through this, step by step,” Hal said, going into his well-practiced spiel. Forty minutes later, FBI background check done, the couple loaded the Remington, a nylon flotation case, five boxes of ammo, a cleaning kit, and gun lock into the back of the Audi.

Hal waved to them as they got into their car. “Hope we never have to use it,” Scott said, with a return wave.

“Amen to that!” Hal said.

And as they drove off, Scott turned to Sally and smiled. “Let’s get some watermelons.”

“Watermelons?”

“Yeah, for practice,” he said with a chuckle.

“Amen to that!” Sally said.

The fox was never seen again. Scott reckoned it limped off into the woods to die, as sick animals will do.

Time passed and the couple stopped their compulsive digital thermometer and oximeter readings. The morning air was fresh, cool and fragrant. At first light, Scott would put up coffee in an old-school Farberware percolator, check their investment account, well padded with the profits from their Brooklyn apartment sale, and go for a run. By the time he crossed the lawn and jogged down the driveway, his New Balance running shoes were drenched with dew.

Sometimes, as he chuffed through the early fog that settled in the hollers, Scott would spy a family of deer. Other times, a bunch of bears would gambol in the distance. Scott snapped photos of them with his phone, barely breaking his pace, and posted the pix to Instagram.

He knew it was important to make some sort of noise while running, so the bears were not startled by sudden human presence. Scott opted for a string of bells around his neck. The scavenging bears must have taken him for a tiny reindeer. The creatures were everywhere now, it seemed, thanks to recent real estate encroachment, a decline in hunters, and covidiot who failed to secure their trash bin lids.

Sometimes, as they drove into town, they’d see someone doing yard work, and they would wave. But their greeting was not reciprocated. Trump-Pence barn banners sprouted along with the magnolias, and were to remain long after the election.

They understood. They were the newcomers, yet again, as they were back in brownstone Brooklyn years earlier, when apartment house construction sheds were spray painted “No Mas Yuppies!” They survived, thrived, and prospered as Brooklyn gentrified, and they were confident they would do so yet again.

In fact, they *had* to do so yet again, for each contact with their former neighbors back in New York City underscored the inexorable shift in tectonic plates.

“It’s been nutso here,” Sally’s hot yoga friend from the Upper West Side told her one morning. At first, she explained, there were the unmasked runners up and down Broadway. Frantic fighting over prosaic household items. Toilet paper. Disinfectant wipes. “Whole Foods was sold out of yeast,” she said. “Fucking yeast!”

Scott’s barman, Tommy, weighed in with his state-of-the-city. A madman pushed a pregnant lady onto the tracks at Nevins Street, just as the Manhattan-bound two train pulled into the station. A homeless lady cut a violinist’s face with a box cutter on West 103rd Street. “Get this, some moron on a BMX bike rode up and down Flatbush Avenue yesterday, waving a gun. A gun! And I just kept walking, as if it was just another day,” Tommy said.

“What? Did he say anything?”

Tommy paused, then chuckled. “Yeah. He screamed ‘I *hate* motherfuckers! I *hate* motherfuckers!’”

“That’s it?”

“But wait: there’s more,” Tommy said. “The next day, the guy walks into Ace, buys a cherry Popsicle and a chopped cheese from Maha, puts the ice pop into the sandwich, pulls out the stick, and stands outside the bodega eating until the cops rolled up.”

“All your essential food groups.”

“Remember Anna Halloran? The realtor across from Ace?” Tommy referred to the neighborhood success story, a woman who rolled into pre-gentrified Brooklyn from New-ark without two nickels to rub together, survived a dreadful divorce and a dance with cancer, and ignited the area’s co-op conversion fever.

“She tested positive. They put her on a vent, and she died in two days.”

Scott told Sally about Nevins Street, and the violinist, and the nut on Flatbush, and poor Anna, over takeout pizza that night. “Anna? Wasn’t it true that, once upon a time, she sold wigs from out of the trunk of her Impala to keep food on the table for her kids?” Sally asked.

“Absolutely,” Scott said. “She scrimped, saved, became a realtor, and sold every brownstone conversion she could, even the crap Arthur Kaufman developed. She finally was ready to retire, and boom.”

They looked into each other’s eyes as they ate the last of the garlic knots and washed them down with Genny Cream Ale. They knew. They truly weren’t coming back to New York City. There was no turning back. They were going to have to make this upstate thing work.

And they did, all through the warm summer months, a time when virus numbers fell and the upstate citizenry’s distaste for masking and social distancing rose. Humans are hard-wired for happiness, saddled (or blessed) with an optimism bias. The species needs to believe, wants to believe and so **does** believe, that things will “work out”. Better times lie ahead. Even in the face of clear evidence to the contrary, humans envision a positive outcome. Like the melodic patterns of western music, the sequence ever-remains: preparation, suspension, resolution.

“Spinoza argues that rational beings always act honestly, not with deception,” Sally said one cool and rainy Saturday afternoon in early September. They were day drinking at Tiny’s, as they had most Saturdays for the last few months. Earlier in the year, they were ignored by bartenders and patrons alike, but over time they were granted a grudging “hey” of recognition and won dubious status as “sort-of regulars”. “So, Brooklyn, how’s it goin’?” the mountainous manager, Tiny, would smile as he set them up with a soup bowl full of Rold Gold Tiny Twist pretzels and two beers.

On this particular Saturday, Sally peeled the label off her third Bud. Fox News was on one of the two TVs. A talking head with permanent-press hair and Chiclet-white teeth vilified Fauci. The bar patrons swiveled between Fox and the Yankee game down at the other end of the bar.

“Yeah, well Spinoza was an asshole,” Scott said, calling for another round. “I mean, define ‘rational.’” Sally went to the ladies room and then ambled over to the ancient juke box. She punched in five plays of TNT by AC/DC.

“I suppose,” she said, slugging the fresh beer and pointing her finger at Scott. “And the bigger, the more repeated the whopper, the deeper it becomes embedded, until it is

ingrained, an ear worm, like this shit I just played. The big lie becomes a collective candy, a crutch that can lift us from depression, move us to tears, soothe our fear. Build inner strength. Reduce stress.”

“Or lead us to disaster,” Scott said. “I’ll be right back. I gotta pee.”

Minutes later, as Scott weaved back to his bar stool, Sally continued without missing a beat. “So tell me,” she slurred. “What happens to the perennially stressed New Yorker when the addictive stress of daily life is removed? Or, is such stress desirable? Is its absence a danger?”

He closed his eyes. A flood of memories. As a boy, Scott was entrusted with going to the local “old man bar,” the Dew Drop, and reminding his gramps that Sunday dinner was on the table. The process was not always smooth. In many ways, the crowd at Tiny’s was no different. A lot of tough-talking white guys. Obese middle-aged couples. A cluster of old guys at the end of the bar, like birds on a wire. But no Kaepernick jerseys, though.

“You see this,” Scott said, nodding to the maskless patrons in hooded flannel work shirts, huddled outside in a cloud of cigarette smoke as the rain came down in sheets. “The human brain,” he rambled, “is a pattern detector, a diligent prediction machine that depends upon, craves, repetition and structure. It’s a foundation for the species’ survival. Thunder rolls, or the saber-toothed tiger growls, and prompts an entrained response. Human minds: synchronized, involuntarily vibrating tuning forks that shimmy at the same frequency.”

“OK, agreed, my philosopher husband,” she said, “but you didn’t answer my question.”

Scott managed a crooked smile. “What happens when the stress of city life is removed? Well, we’re day drinking at Tiny’s, in west bum fuck New York, on a Saturday afternoon. You tell *me*.”

The Covid numbers kept improving throughout New York State. By October, the hardy, self-reliant Palenville residents had their fill of pandemic news, and considered it a downstate (read: New York City people of color) plague that would happen to “other people” in “other places” but not them. They went about their daily lives with the careless abandon of a seventeen-year-old boy on a 1200cc bike.

Social distancing and masks were now ancient history in Greene County, which led to a bit of pushback from the new wave of covidiot, and some jostling between the masked and the maskless. But soon enough, even the arriviste ex-pat New Yorkers shrugged off health concerns, even as the second spike in infections sheared through the populace like a scythe.

Yet Scott and Sally succumbed to peer group pressure and grew lax in their mask wearing and social distancing.

In mid-October, Marge Costello, owner of the Le Gran Fromage on Route 212, called the Saugerties Sentinel with a news tip. Her housecats, Scully and Mulder, began coughing. News editor Tim Brown would ordinarily have ignored Marge’s report, except that (a) she was a heavy advertiser and (b) earlier in the day he fielded a call from his buddy Ron Kay over in Tannersville, who reported a herd of deer around a nearby salt lick “coughing like there’s no tomorrow.”

The following week, a bowhunter complained of high fever and chest compression two days after he field-dressed a deer, and tested positive for Covid-19. Then Marge called the paper a second time. She manifested symptoms as well, after sweeping out mouse droppings from the tool shed behind her store.

Tim Brown called his Boston-based cousin, head of Emergency Medicine at Mass General.

“Of course it’s possible,” Dr. James Brown said. “Most RNA viruses, coronaviruses that infect humans, are zoonotic. They can infect vertebrate hosts other than humans. Birds, livestock, pets. These viruses mutate fast. And they jump species, human to non-human, and back again. And this won’t be our last zoonotic attack. Far from it.”

“So, like, we’re fucked?”

“Darwin was right,” Dr. Brown said. “We are all animals. So? Mask up. Social distance. Wash your hands. And batten down the hatches. The second spike is virtually here.”

Dr. Brown’s words proved prescient. Not many of the upstate citizens gasping to breathe, as the first flakes of winter flew, were students of history and so could not know that the zoonotic Plague of Justinian killed half of the world’s population, as many as 50 million people, when it tore through Europe, Asia, North Africa and Arabia in 541 CE. It started in Constantinople when infected fleas rode upon the black rats that feasted on grain shipped across the Mediterranean, grain paid as a tribute to the Byzantine Empire’s emperor by the just-conquered Egypt.

And it, that plague, never really went away.

Some of Scott and Sally’s upstate neighbors had to have known that the Black Death decimated Europe in 1347. And yet they clung to an “it can’t happen to me” arrogance fueled by relentless media-driven confirmation bias. In fact, the Black Death claimed 200 million souls in four years, and rebounded in London 40 times over the next 300 years. Each new outbreak killed 20 percent of the London population.

By the time the gorillas started coughing in the Bronx Zoo, just before Christmas, the numbers did indeed spike again, as Dr. James Brown projected. Vaccines became sporadically available in mid-December, and became a bit more attainable in the first quarter of 2021, yet public distrust, fueled by an availability cascade of misinformation, depressed demand for the free medicine.

Scott coughed into the crook of his elbow, as he wheeled his Dodge Ram 1500 into the lot of Hal’s Saugerties Sports Center. The lot was full of holiday shoppers and there was a closely packed, and unmasked, line out the door and around the side of the building. “Ammo limited to three boxes per customer” read the sign taped to the front door.

Next stop: Billy’s Sunoco station. The couple’s new pickup sucked fuel at twice the

rate of their Audi, which they sold to a covidiot couple from Chelsea. That big hemi V-8 couldn’t be beat when it was time to plow out the drive. There was a line of cars down Main Street, waiting for a fill-up, for the first time since the last oil embargo in 1979.

Two days after a big holiday blowout at Tiny’s, Scott and Sally lost their sense of taste and smell, and complained of overall malaise. Tired, weak, confused, they coughed their way to the local clinic, where they tested positive for the virus.

Winter was bleak in Greene County, so sheltering-in-place was not a problem. They spent winter in front of their computer screens, and watched their portfolio trampoline as the Dow nudged 35,000. In the weeks to follow, their symptoms subsided, leaving only the wobbly, unfocused feel of the Covid long-hauler.

They attended two Zoom funerals for old Brooklyn friends, and went online shopping for nearly everything, including their new spring ensembles: durable grey Dickies workwear, black garrison belts and Red Wing biker boots for Scott, and a trim-fitting Schott biker jacket in black leather for Sally.

During an early-spring thaw, crocuses burst their brown barricade, only to croak with the next night’s freeze.

One overcast weekday in April they coughed their way through the Wal-Mart home center. Sally got her gardening supplies and started her garden, and dropped Scott off to work on his nice tight groupings at the local range.

“This Sig is such a fine piece,” he said to Sally that night, over pizza from Sal’s in Tannersville.

“How’s the recoil?” Sally asked.

“Oh you can handle a nine, easy-peasy,” he said, shaking red pepper flakes onto his pepperoni pie.

On the first summer-like day of spring, Scott and Sally hung out with the guys outside the bar across from the crafts fair. They knew most of them from weekend afternoons at Tiny’s. Scott rolled up the sleeves of his grey Dickies work shirt and slugged a Coors. Sally bummed a Winston from a biker and exhaled a plume of smoke. She wondered if that vendor still had those cool deco Bakelite radios.

Statewide numbers improved as overall vaccination levels rose. Albany lifted some pandemic restrictions. After so many months of mental and physical isolation, the public’s need to just “do stuff” exploded. As a result, the local crafts fair attracted down-staters to the point where the grassy parking field looked like a vast luxury car lot. Browsers blocked the narrow aisles and business was brisk. Most of the day trippers still wore masks despite relaxed regulations.

“Look at ‘em all,” Scott said. “The brightest and the best. Sheeple.”

Sally smiled and hugged her guy. “Go ahead,” she said. “Do your imitation.”

Scott drained his brew, crushed the can, and threw it at a metallic black Mercedes GLE as it turned past the white horse fence and into the fair’s parking field.

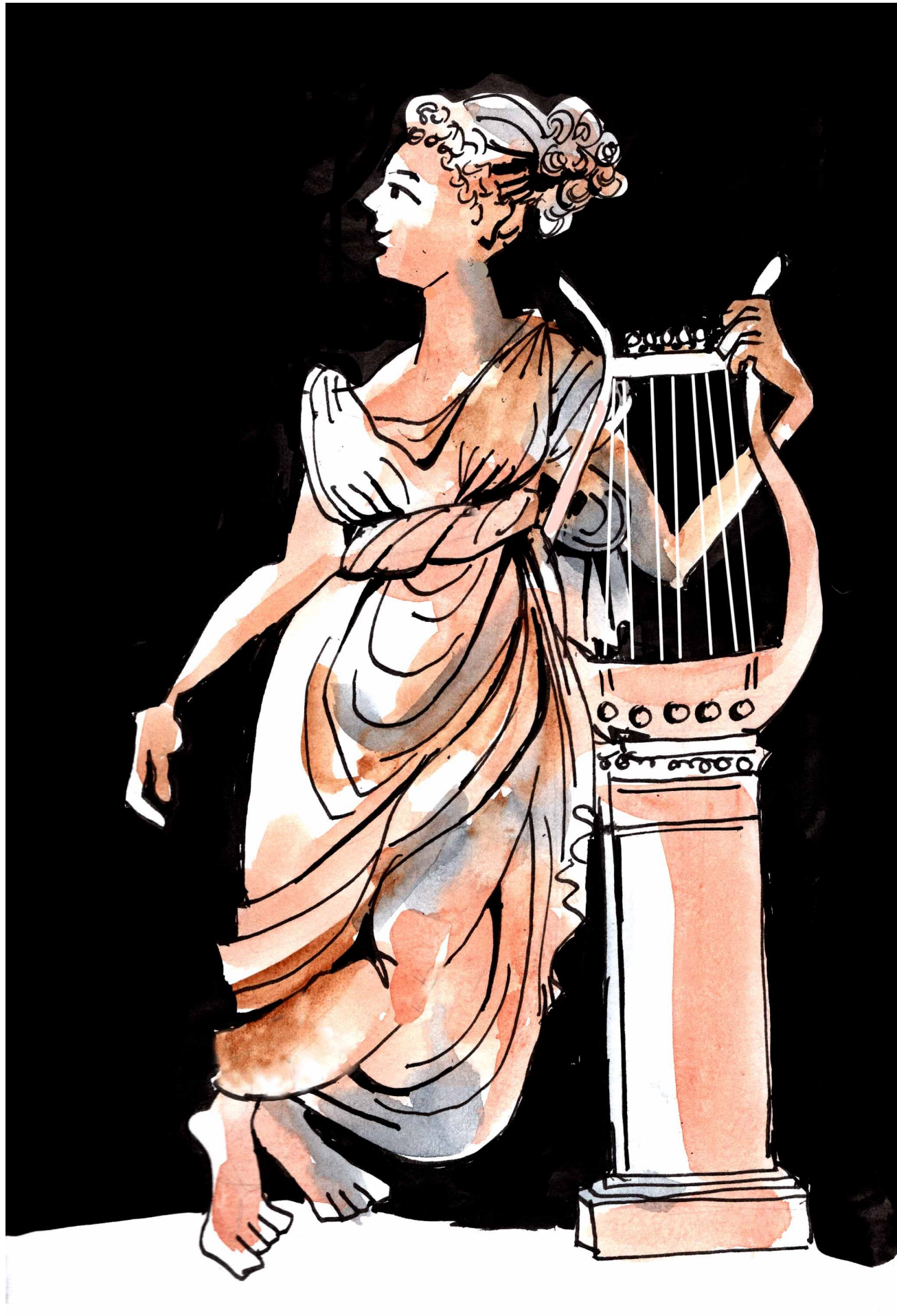
“Oh, alright,” he said, placing a Skoal Bandit between cheek and gum. “*You’re moving into a land of both shadow, and substance, of things and ideas – you’ve just crossed over into...The Twilight Zone.*” It was Scott’s best Rod Serling impersonation yet.

The Many Ways to Become

Danielle Hanson

A pine tree engulfs *dogwood*.
There are many birds within one thunderstorm.
Sky is the absence of bird.
The sky swallows wings when it can,
grows roots when ground isn't looking.
The sky grew grass before it could be mowed.
The trees grew hair before humans were
old enough to shave,
the world digesting its own.





Dawn's Aesthesis

Jennifer Lothrigel

Conjure up half the moon
to dream inside me
because that's all
she has tonight.

Conjure up lips
for the wind's haunting exhale
relentless
at my door.

Conjure up a chant
for the circle of delicate
moths mending
my aura, light by light.

Conjure up sheets
of cerulean sky
fading
into dusty blue.

Conjure up Eos
to slip rosy fingers
through the gates
and open the latch for dawn.

Conjure up a body
so I have
a place
to soften.

Conjure up the slow
unfold of morning
from my
ribs.

Contemplative in the Middle of the World

Theresa Monteiro

Stay with me,
silent. Stay, look at me—I'll
look at you, then we'll
stare at the round leaves
of a nameless tree that
shiver like coins
even with no breeze. Now,
eyes closed,
they're black leaves
in negative space. Through webs
of eyelid light, past
the third eye,
you stand, confident,
at a cliff's edge.
I am irrationally tall, closer,
your face almost—
a voice in the air. Someone
lost a watch.
The cliff, the leaves, light,
all whirl—a window shade
rolled-up violently.

In that moment between cutting
the engine and opening the door,
sit. August sun
heats the steering wheel. Palms
against vinyl feel a straight
burning line, like a lash
or the dropped stomach
of remembering—
there are different ways to
hear. What you told me
made a sound. The sound
you made was voice and bell
and clean white paper, rustling.







THE CACTI

William Hayward

Beth walked back from work slowly and the sun was going down. She didn't live far from her work and she'd decided not to take the car that morning and she regretted it. It was October and the air was chilly and there were leaves drifting down from trees and the leaves were torn orange and red and yellow. She stepped in them and they broke and crunched under her feet.

Beth got home and walked in and Gary was sitting in the armchair by the heating with a blanket over his legs and his hands hovering over the heat. He was thirty-five and he looked sixty. He had his little round glasses balanced on the end of his nose and he was peering through the window at the leaves and general coldness. The glasses had a crack in their frame. He looked up sometimes and the light from a lamp caught in them and it looked like they winked out at nothing.

"It looks cold out," he shouted when he heard Beth walk in.

"It is cold out," Beth said.

"Really cold?" he asked and he pulled at the blanket on his legs. It was grey and dirty and there were little balls of wool that fell off it whenever he shifted in his seat. He was rolling one of the balls of wool around in his fingers. He'd rolled a lot of different

ones around. He liked the way they felt in his hand. Every time he picked up a new one, it got smaller and harder in his fingers until he flicked it away and started on a new one.

"Cold enough," she said back.

"Cold enough for what?"

She ignored that and walked into the kitchen. She took the bottle of gin off the tall shelf and she filled a glass half full of it and then poured another half of lemon sour in. She mixed it and drained it in one. It made her smile, so she made another one and put some ice cubes in from the freezer and walked back into the living room.

Gary looked up at her and his glasses winked. He looked at her body and her face and her hair and he shook his head.

"You look tired," he said.

"I've been at work all day," Beth said, and she sat down in the chair opposite him and she felt the heat in her cold fingertips. They ached as they warmed up. Ached and tingled. She put her drink down on the table next to her and held her hands close to the heating as well.

Gary nodded and scratched his chin and tugged at his hair.

"I need a haircut," he muttered.

"Why didn't you get one today?" Beth asked and picking her drink back up, took a sip.

Gary waved his hand at the leaves blowing around outside the window and didn't say anything. His hand was pink and there were black dirt lines running through it.

Beth cleared her throat. She was scared to ask him what she knew she was going to ask him. She could feel the question asking her throat to let it out.

"Have you been out today?"

Gary looked up quickly and his glasses almost slipped off his nose completely as he cracked his knuckles on the side of the armchair. They popped one after the other and Gary grunted. The pops were like wood crackling in a fireplace.

Beth listened to the ten pops and then she asked again. "What have you done today?"

"Got up, had some breakfast. Then I watered the plants in our room. Did you know they were all dying?... then I tidied a little. Made some lunch... noodles and soup if you were going to ask that... I know you wanted me to clean the porch but jeez you know how cold it's been. I washed up the bowl from lunch. Watched T.V. Phoned work and they said they'd phone me back if they had anything, so I've been waiting here for work to phone. They said they'd phone again this week if they had anything available. So, I've been waiting for them to phone."

He said this slowly and he rubbed his face as he spoke. He took his glasses off and put them on the side next to her drink. His eyes looked red and small without them and she could see big red lines running across the white in his eyes. He hadn't worked for three months. He said he wasn't missing it. His face had gotten rounder and she noticed how his neck was starting to blend into his cheeks.

Beth nodded for a while and she drank her drink. It was sweet and bitter, and the ice cubes bumped against her teeth.

"Jordan and Charlotte phoned me at work earlier. They asked if we want to go out for dinner tonight if we weren't busy," she finally said.

"Oh," he nodded.

“So....,” Beth asked.

“So what?”

Beth leaned her back, sighed and finished her drink. The ice cubes rattled at the bottom of her empty glass.

“So, do you want to go... it would be good for you to get out of the house.”

“Can we afford it?”

“They said they'd pay. They said they missed us.”

Gary stood up and let the blanket fall off his legs. He wasn't wearing any trousers and his pants were ripped and dirty.

“I'll get dressed,” he said, and he walked slowly up the stairs.

Beth nodded at his retreating back, then she stood up and followed him.

Gary stared at Beth as she changed from her nurse outfit into a light blue dress. Her face was round and pretty, and her teeth caught the light of the bedside lamp. He picked up a shirt and some trousers from the wardrobe and carried them to the bathroom. He took his top off and he stared at himself in the mirror as he got dressed. His eyes narrowed and disappeared and then reappeared as he pulled a vest on and did the shirt up over it. His face was round and ugly, and his teeth looked yellow when he bared them to the mirror. He bared them and growled.

“Grrrrr,” he growled. “You're a bear. You're just a bear. That's all. That's all you are.”

“What did you say?” Beth called and he shut his mouth and became Gary again.

“Nothing,” he called back, “I didn't say anything.”

He walked out of the bathroom and he hugged her from behind and smelled her hair. He chewed on the ends of it and tasted it and it tasted of bamboo and burnt wool. She patted his hands where they folded around her middle. She patted them slowly until he let her go and she turned and smiled up at him. Her smile was wide and wet looking. He smiled back and didn't know how it looked. He hoped it looked alright.

“Do I look alright?” he asked.

Beth looked him up and down.

“You look fine,” she smiled. “How do I look?”

Gary looked at her. He growled in his head. “You look alright,” he said.

Beth shook her head and they walked down the stairs together. Her feet had shiny shoes wrapped around them and they had metal heels. The heels clicked together as they banged down the stairs. They dinged like two coins being jostled together.

“You're making music,” Gary said from behind her.

Beth didn't turn around and Gary laughed to himself.

They passed an empty plant pot that Gary had left on the wooden table by the back door and Beth stopped. The pot had a crack running down its side and there was dry soil running up and down the crack and on the table.

“What happened to the cacti?” she asked.

Gary looked at the pot and his eyes dropped down and then back up. He looked away, waved his hand and walked out the door. Beth followed him. Gary shivered when he stepped outside. The air was cold. He could feel it on his teeth. He breathed in and out. Beth locked the door behind them, and they walked to the car together and got in.

Gary kissed Beth on the cheek when she started the engine and she looked at him.

“What was that for?” she asked.

Gary looked out the window and didn't say anything. He could see himself in the window and through himself, he could see black clouds floating across the dark blue night sky. They rolled across the stars and the stars flashed at him when they slipped from behind them. A plane flew past everything like a star and was swallowed by a cloud.

Beth drove fast and houses slipped past them like time and they didn't speak.

Sometimes Beth reached over and squeezed Gary's leg. Her head was swimming from the gin, and she felt happy and weak. When she touched Gary's leg she could feel skin and fat bulging under her hand. She pinched it sometimes and felt how elastic it felt. His leg didn't feel real. It felt like something someone had stuck to his body. She touched his knee and it was hard and circular and he tensed under her.

“What are you doing?”

Beth took her hand off him and laughed.

“Hahahaha. Hahaha,” she laughed, and she kissed her fingertips and tapped them on his cheek.

“Are you drunk, Beth?”

Beth laughed again and she shook her head.

Gary shook his head and looked back out the window.

“So, what happened to the cacti, Gary?” Beth asked again.

“The what?” he asked looking around at her.

“The cacti...”

“You mean the cactus?”

“What?”

“Why did you call it a cacti?”

“I just did. You knew what I meant.”

Gary breathed. “Nothing happened to it,” he said.

Beth turned and looked at him. “The pot was broke,” she said, “did you drop it? I thought you loved that Cacti.”

Gary breathed louder. “Cactus,” he said, “and... it was just a plant.”

Gary thought about the plant and his stomach crumbled and broke. He'd brought it the day work had said they didn't need him anymore. He'd been driving home with a box filled with a bunch of stuff from his desk and he passed the little flower shop. He thought maybe he'd buy Beth some flowers to soften the blow when he told her she'd have to take more shifts. He stopped the car and got out. He passed bunches of roses and tulips and petunias. They were beautiful and smelled beautiful and they cost as much as beautiful things did. He walked past them and picked up the little spiky cactus from the sale section and paid.

It jabbed him twice through the paper bag as he carried it to the car. It was circular and big, and it sat in the soil in the pot like a small fat man. He thought Beth would maybe like it and if she didn't it was enough that he did at least.

He carried it home with him and he placed it on the kitchen side. He waited for Beth to get home. He phoned people about work. He phoned his brother. He stared at the cactus. He had a shower. He masturbated. He read the paper. He switched on the T.V. and watched the news. He stared at the cactus. He liked the way it bulged in the soil. He'd never seen a completely round plant. It was like an alien.

“You were always staring at it,” Beth laughed.



“It was just a plant,” Gary said again. His glasses slipped down his nose and he pushed them back up. They were dirty and Beth saw a patch on them where he'd glued the frame back together.

They carried on driving and the car was cold and Beth turned on the heating. The heating was on full because the colder settings didn't work. The heating was hot. Gary started sweating and he put his window down a crack. The air was cool and nice. Beth put her hand on his leg again and he put his hand on her hand. He moved his thumb over the veins on the back of her hand. They were thick and soft, and they moved under his thumb. He moved his thumb under her wrist, and he felt her pulse beating.

One... two...threefourfive...six...seven...eightnineten. He counted along with it in his head and sweated. The roads kept moving along until they pulled up at Charlotte's house. It was small and flat looking. They got out and knocked on the front door. No one answered. They knocked again. No one came. Some gold leaves blew against their shoes and then carried on down the street.

Jordan opened the front door. He was wearing a t-shirt and shorts and he shivered from the wind when he opened the door. He slapped his hand against his head when he saw them.

“I completely forgot we were meeting,” he said. Charlotte came up behind him and she put her hand over mouth.

“I'm so sorry,” she said.

Beth and Gary shifted back and forth in their clothes. Beth pretended to laugh and waved her hand around. Gary narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

Jordan and Charlotte shifted back and forth on the doorstep.

“I'm sorry,” Jordan said again.

“I'm so sorry,” Charlotte added.

Charlotte was wearing a small dress and it had tiny horses all over it. They reared on their back legs and their mouths were open. They had little pink tongues that flopped out between their lips. Jordan leaned on the door frame and folded his arms. Gary's shirt was open at the collar and he pulled at his collar. Charlotte was blushing. Her face was red on the cheeks and they had a little white spot in the middle of each one. She kept brushing her hands across her dress and smoothing the horses down.

Beth brushed some black hair off her face, and it fell off and fell onto the floor.

Charlotte coughed. “We'll have to plan something soon,” she said.

Beth was nodding her head as if it was all normal and Gary was just standing there doing nothing. He had his hands in his pockets and his fingers were moving back and forth in there. They were bulging up and down and his round face wasn't moving.

“So, you just forgot?” Gary asked suddenly.

Jordan nodded and nodded. His cheeks moved up and down with his head.

“You didn't phone to say, you know, or let us know you were coming,” he muttered.

“You asked us,” Gary said.

“Come on man, I'm sorry,” Jordan almost whispered.

“It's alright,” Beth suddenly smiled. Her smile was big, and it spread across her face like paint on a canvas.

“We really are sorry,” Charlotte said. Her face was red and smiley, and Beth rubbed her hair and Gary touched the small of her back.

“It's alright,” Beth said again. She waved her hand like a fan in front of her face. Gary could feel the air coming off it, hitting his face and whipping his hair back and forth. In the shadow of their doorway, Charlotte's nose looked like it stretched from her forehead to her mouth. Her eyes were dark and white, and they just looked like dolls eyes floating around. Beth and Charlotte hugged once, and Jordan and Gary looked at each other. Gary hugged Charlotte. Charlotte hugged Gary. Gary hugged Jordan. Jordan hugged Beth. Beth hugged Charlotte one more time. Gary shook Jordan's hand and then Beth and Gary walked back to their car.

They got in and they didn't say anything. Gary undid another button on his shirt and some hair on his chest stuck out between his fingers as he did it. He was thinking about his cactus. He was rubbing his fingers together. There were some prick marks on the tips of them. Little pricks from the cactus.

The car started fine and they drove off. The engine purred and groaned fine. It buzzed and growled, and it ran beautifully. It ran as beautifully as Beth expected. They drove past the houses they'd already passed without saying anything. Gary tried to flick the radio to another station at one point, but it was just static. He put his window down again even now the heating was off. The air blew through the car and swept Beth's hair back and her face didn't move. She looked like stone. She looked like nothing. Gary looked like nothing. Everything looked like nothing. He wanted to scream, ‘what is happening!’ Beth wanted to scream that this was the end of everything. That Jordan and Charlotte would never ask them out again.

“What are we going to have for dinner then?” Beth asked instead.

Gary's stomach rumbled like rocks. His stomach tumbled against his belly and his belly rumbled against his tummy and his tummy rumbled against his hand that was pressed against it.

“We have that Mexican bean soup leftover,” he said.

“Oh yeah,” she said, “...didn’t we finish that yesterday?”

“No, we had the left-over chilli yesterday.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said.

They carried on driving. The roads blurred and the sky went clear and then cloudy and then clear again. Gary looked at it from his window. Beth focused on driving and occasionally touching Gary’s leg.

‘What else is there to do,’ she thought as she looked out her window to make sure no cars were pulling out before they turned and touched his leg again.

They drove along their street and then stopped in front of their house. They hit the curb as they pulled up onto the driveway and Gary’s head bounced up and brushed the roof of the car. He rubbed his head when they stopped and tutted. Beth held the key after she turned off the engine. She left it in there, and the noise of the radio stayed on. Static hissing all around. She turned the key and it stopped.

They got out the car and walked up to the front door together and Gary felt in his pockets and then laughed and nudged Beth’s shoulder, who already had the key out and ready to go in the lock. She laughed as well, and they walked in together laughing and nudging shoulders. The door stayed open for a few minutes when they walked in. Gary went to the boiler and he switched the heating on, and Beth wiped her shoes on the mat even though there was nothing on them and then she took them off and put them on the little metal shoe rack that leaned up against the wall by the front door. Gary turned the thermostat up high and he passed the broken plant pot and then he walked to Beth, kissed her and took his shoes off at the same time and then, after putting his shoes on the shoe rack as well, hugged her.

He held her tight to him and he could feel her breathing and she could feel him breathing and they could feel each other breathing. His breaths were shuddering and deep and her breaths were shallow and shaky, and she listened to him breathe and hugged him back and he listened to himself breathe. His heart did a little dance in his chest like cabaret girls and they kicked his ribs over and over again.

He moved his hands up and down Beth’s back and then he pushed her away from him a little and he cradled her face in his hands and looked her in the eyes and didn’t say anything. Beth could smell his hands and they smelled of sweat and dirt. They were damp on her face and she could feel the lines that ran through them running across her face.

“Why are your hands dirty?” she asked looking up at him.

“I buried the cactus today,” he said, letting go of her face and walking into the kitchen.

He poured himself a glass of gin from the bottle from the tall shelf and then put it back. Beth walked in after him and leaned up and brought the bottle back down and poured the rest of it into a glass. She didn’t mix it this time and she leaned on the kitchen counter and took little, little sips like a kitten sipping milk.

“I killed it by accident,” Gary said. Taking a big drink and wincing a little.

“How do you kill a cactus?” Beth asked and she laughed a little into her drink.

“I dropped it out the bedroom window and it just broke all over the floor outside. It had started turning brown and the spikes were going weak... I could poke them without even getting pricked. They’d just bend under my fingers. The internet guide said to move

it to by a window, so it got more sunlight, so I moved it there the other day... I don’t know if you noticed.”

Gary stared at her.

“I didn’t,” she said.

“Oh,” Gary muttered and took another gulp of his drink, “... well I moved it to the window ledge. It started going green again and It started pricking me when I prodded the spikes again. It was bathing in the sun. It was bathing in the sun and then when I tried to pick the pot up to water it today it slipped out my hand and I had the window open because I’d had a shower and you know how the windows fog up in the bedroom when you have a shower unless you open them. It slipped out my hands, Beth. It slipped out my hands and I watched it slip out my hands and it slipped all the way out the window and it slipped all the way down to the driveway and it broke and I watched it break and my hands were still open like I was holding it. It broke and when I ran down the stairs and out the door and onto the driveway I saw that the cactus was in three pieces. Three pieces. Three pieces. It was dead.”

Gary finished his drink and he stopped speaking and he walked to the sink and started rinsing out his empty glass. There was a little mark on the corner of the glass, and he rubbed it with his finger before putting it on the draining board.

“I buried it under the tree in the back garden,” he said after he put the glass away. Then he turned and looked at her.

She looked at him and his eyes and his little round glasses and his eyes were unfocused and looked slightly wonky behind the glasses.

“Why did you bury it?” she asked and she was surprised when her voice cracked a little. She coughed and then chuckled. “It was just a cacti,” she chuckled.

Gary slammed his hand down on the kitchen sideboard and some glasses rattled and a plate in the sink slipped and make the sound all plates make when they slip and hit another one of their fragile brothers. He slammed his hand down and then he shook it because it hurt and he shouted “CACTUS! CACTUS... CACTUS... I’ve told you and told you and told you.”

Beth held up her hands. Calm down, she said, calm down. She held her hands out with the palms facing Gary as if she was pushing the air in front of her away and he looked at her palms. He looked at the lines that ran through them and then he looked down at the lines running through his palms. He could still see the dirt from where he’d dug. It was black and thin. He scratched at one line and nothing happened. Beth still had hands up, but she took a step closer to Gary.

“What’s actually wrong honey,” she said, “what’s wrong?”

She took a step towards him and it looked to Gary like she was going to hug him. Beth thought to herself, ‘what is wrong with him? What is wrong with him?’ Her shoes clicked and clacked and clicked on the tile. They sounded like a horse running.

Gary scratched at the dirt again and this time a tiny bit crumbled away from his skin and fell on the floor. Another tiny piece got caught beneath his fingernail.

“What’s actually wrong,” Beth said again, and she stepped forward again.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know... I don’t know... I don’t know...”

Pyrexia

Amy Soricelli

There is nothing here that helps me. None
of the fat, honey bees you save before my
eyes, and my eyes, show me what came

before this, and then that. Some of you tie
ribbons into chains, and others just wait for a bus
at stations in another language. There is the city

behind glass, and a poster about climbing
trees with swinging sneakers/roughed up knees.
Someone has freckles you can count for

a jar of vintage buttons. Someone has a dog
with no collar they found under a bridge.
Then they named him *Long Goodbyes* because

his tail curled-up. Someone tips their hat. There are
small bowls of bright fruit on a wooden table, see her
open mouth in the background?. She is waiting for

her kid to stop crying about home schooling. The
older brother got married in the forest with nothing
but his hands. That other girl shows us her boots.

Someone cries into a mirror, then makes breakfast
with small chopped onions on a blue plate. Someone
packed their life into a cardboard box with her family,

and ran away to a town with a name that you can
only say in your head. If you get down really close,
you can see her eyes under water.



Doors

Sara Rath

I have made light of the spirit trumpet
In the corner as I've explained
how the tin tube was telescoped
and shared during a séance to stir
the ectoplasm, thus encouraging spirit
voices to perhaps find voice. I confess
now that I have not listened for Spirit.
nor called anyone to come, to speak
to me through this tin horn, rusting.
I might hear words breathed,
words I prefer not to hear
if a presence causes disquiet
with his whispered "I'm missing you."



“Tortured by sidewalks”

Eric Grabowski

And since we're all just a heartbeat
From heaven, and since heaven is like
An empty mirror colliding with a dust
Cloud.

And since one plus one equals
Two, I don't have to tell you the dawn
Rolls in anyway.

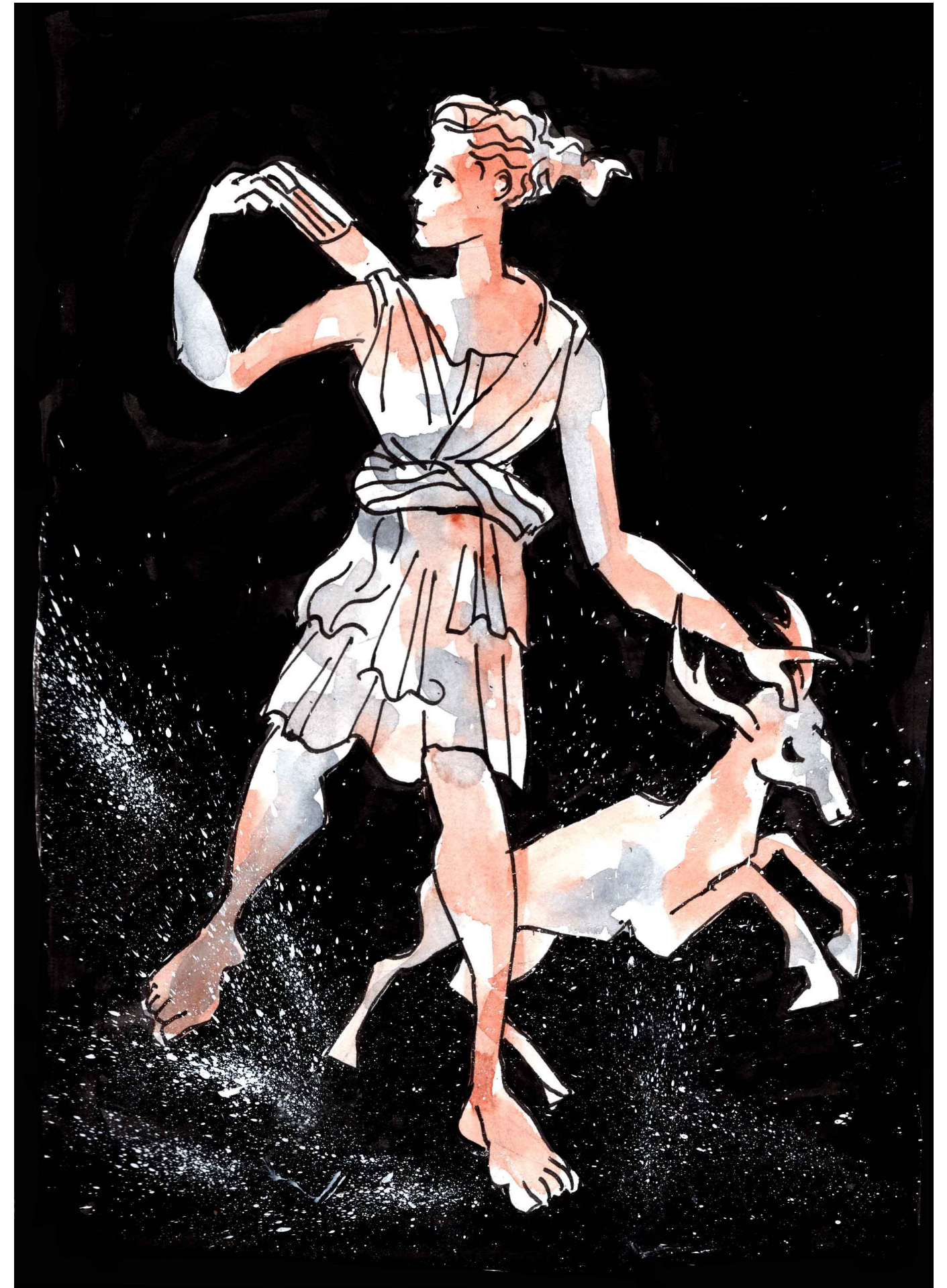
Where do beautiful words go after
Infinite mouths release not caring whose
Eternal ears hears?

And since we're all probably now Buddhas
Sitting under bodhi trees waiting in 'Golden
Eternity' for Teacups of truth that taste
Like discourses on our own emptiness...

Like, say, “There is no one, there is no where,
There is no thing, now lasts forever.”

So perhaps I am a star, and you, one thing I know surely
We are all destined for that night sky.
To peek out from Heartbeat heaven holding
Teardrops for the cold world to cry when happiness
Is all and loneliness has forgotten its lost love.
“Oh my soul!”

So goodnight sweet angels of Earth, forget the future
Quit being tortured by sidewalks and reach upward
Chin... and those baby blues, up!





Epilogue

Dave Nielsen

All those things we looked forward to
are behind us now, like mountain ranges,
with only the plain before us,

and a silver blue sea after that.
How many years did we travel to get here?
Love, it's getting hard to keep track.

Now that there's nothing
standing in our way, now that we
can finally see the horizon,

will we stay where we are
and write poems, or keep going
just a little bit further?



Contributors

Janet Biehl enjoys using watercolor and ink to glory in the dynamism and details of old statues. She lives in Burlington, Vermont.

Eric Grabowski is a poet and fiction writer residing in Massachusetts. His poetry has been seen in Rumble Fish Quarterly.

Danielle Hanson is a poet who strives to create and facilitate wonder. She is the author of the poetry collections *Fraying Edge of Sky*, winner of the Codhill Press Poetry Prize, and *Ambushing Water*, Finalist for the Georgia Author of the Year Award. Her poetry has been the basis for *Haunting the Wrong House*, a puppet show at the Center for Puppetry Arts. She curated a poet/artist collaboration show *Alloy* at Arts Beacon in Atlanta, where she's Poet-in-Residence. Danielle is Poetry Editor for Doubleback Books. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of California at Irvine starting in 2022. More about her at daniellejhanson.com.

William Hayward was born in Birmingham, England. He has been writing for several years, mainly in short fiction. He's previously been published in *The Emerald City Review*, *The White Wall Review* and Underwood Press.

Martin Kleinman is a New York City story teller. He has told his tales of real New Yorkers in his short fiction collection, "Home Front," (Sock Monkey Press 2013), in fiction anthologies and literary publications, in www.thisisthebronX.info, and on his blog www.therealnewyorkers.com, as well as in the Huffington Post, and in venues all around New York City – from KGB Bar to Union Hall. A native New Yorker, Marty has written two books on workplace innovation trends, and his new collection of short stories is "A Shoebox Full of Money". "What We Need to Know" is his latest story. For more information, visit www.martykleinman.com.

Jennifer Lothrigel is a poet and artist in the San Francisco Bay area. She is the author of *Waking Up Hungry* (Dancing Girl Press, 2021) and *Pneuma* (Liquid Light Press, 2018). Her work has also been published in *Phoebe Journal*, *Arcturus*, *Dash Literary Journal*, and *Adanna Journal*, amongst others.

Theresa Monteiro lives in New Hampshire with her husband and six children. She is a former teacher and holds an MFA from the University of New Hampshire. She has had poems published in various magazines and journals including, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *On the Seawall*, *River Heron Review*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Journal*, *Presence*, *Cutbank*, and *The Banyan Review*. She received the Dick Shea Memorial Prize for poetry in 2019. Dave Nielsen's poems have appeared recently in *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. He is the author of *Unfinished Figures*, winner of the Blue Lynx Prize for Poetry. He lives in Salt Lake City.

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Bobby Parrott's poems appear or are forthcoming in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *RHINO Poetry*, *Atticus Review*, *The Hopper*, *Poetic Sun*, *Clade Song*, *Rabid Oak*, and elsewhere. In his own words, "The intentions of trees are a form of loneliness we climb like a ladder." Immersed in a forest-spun jacket of toy dirigibles, he dreams himself out of formlessness in the chartreuse meditation capsule called Fort Collins, Colorado.

Sara Rath holds an MFA from Vermont College and is the author of 4 collections of poetry, 5 novels and several volumes of non-fiction. She has received fellowships from The

MacDowell Colony and Ucross Foundation and was on the faculty at Goddard College, Univ. of Wisconsin, and The Clearing in Door County. She and her husband make their home near Spring Green, Wisconsin, with Emma, their Manx cat, and two Labrador Retrievers – Lizzy and Sally.

Gerard Sarnat won San Francisco Poetry's 2020 Contest, the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for handfuls of 2021 and previous Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published including in Hong Kong Review, Tokyo Poetry Journal, Buddhist Poetry Review, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Arkansas Review, Hamilton-Stone Review, Northampton Review, New Haven Poetry Institute, Texas Review, Vonnegut Journal, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, Monterey Poetry Review, The Los Angeles Review, and The New York Times as well as by Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, North Dakota and University of Chicago presses. He's authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles*, *Disputes*, *17s*, *Melting the Ice King*. Gerry is a Harvard-trained physician who's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and serves on Climate Action Now's board. Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids plus six grandsons, and is looking forward to potential future granddaughters. gerardsarnat.com

Amy Soricelli has been published in numerous publications and anthologies including Remington Review, Corvus Review, The Westchester Review, Deadbeats, Long Island Quarterly, Voice of Eve, Thirty West, Yellow Arrow, Literati Magazine, The Muddy River Poetry Review, Pure Slush, Glimpse Poetry, *Carmen Has no Umbrella but Went for Cigarettes Anyway* (chapbook) Dancing Girl Press, October 2021, *Sail Me Away* (chapbook) Dancing Girl Press, 2019. Nominated by Billy Collins for Aspen Words Emerging Writer's Fellowship 2019 and for Sundress Publications "Best of the Net" 2020, 2013. Recipient of the Grace C. Croff Poetry Award, Herbert H. Lehman College, 1975.