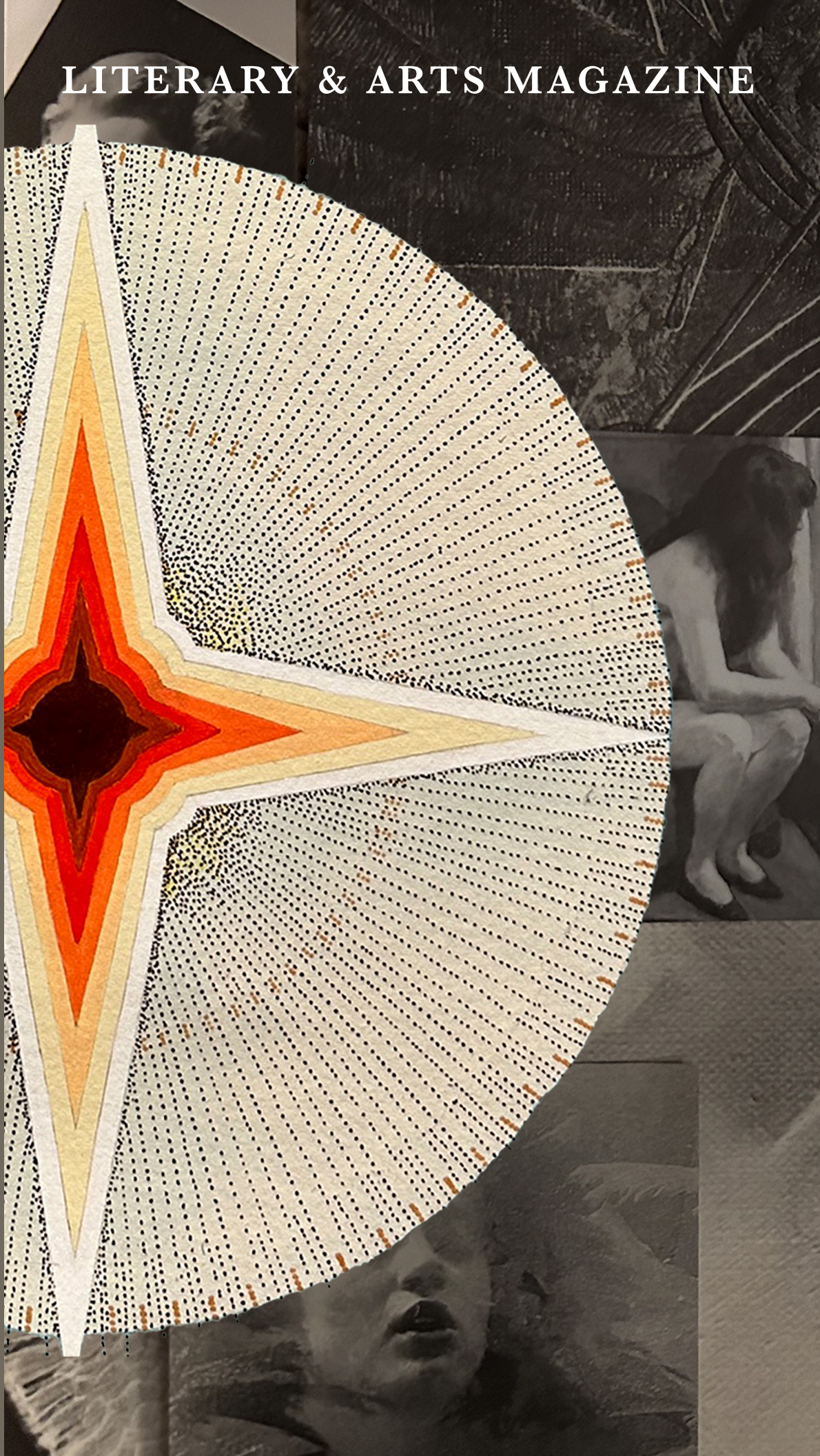


CAROLINA MUSE

Volume V • No. I • February 2025

LITERARY & ARTS MAGAZINE



CAROLINA MUSE

literary & arts magazine

VOLUME V • NO. I • FEBRUARY 2025

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From the Editor

It's human nature to seek meaning. We want to make sense of the world and each person we interact with, including ourselves, so we fit things into boxes. We label ourselves: *empathetic, athletic, funny, chronically late*, or maybe the inverse of any one of these, in order to feel secure & comfortable in our identity. We make ourselves predictable... Or, at least, we justify our actions to align with our self perception. One of my own labels, *creative*, has manifested itself in several ways: I am a *writer, musician, graphic designer*, and for the majority of my life *not-a-dancer*. That is, until last spring, when a friend invited me to a West Coast Swing dance class. There, awkwardly shuffling my body back & forth with a few other first-timers, I definitely didn't feel like a dancer. But, I was enjoying moving my body to music and making new friends, laughing as I explained to them that I was *not-a-dancer*.

The reality is that I had never attempted to become a dancer. We don't often realize how much our perception of who we are influences what we believe we're capable of. As I continued to return to dance lessons each week, I wasn't driven by a strong desire to improve and become *a dancer*; I didn't think that was possible. I just wanted to bring some joy back into my life and build a solid community of friends in my new home. However, the more time I invested into dance, the more I felt capable of, and I soon found a level of confidence in myself that I hadn't felt before. I felt the autonomy to flip my own script and redefine myself. I can be *a dancer*.

And, almost one year later, I'd say that I am. My dedication to the craft has forced me to redefine myself. *I am a dancer*. The sentence still feels clunky coming out of my mouth, but on the dancefloor, I feel graceful, rhythmic, and capable. This past weekend, I made finals in my first ever dance competition. I've realized that putting myself into boxes had been limiting the possibilities of what I could become.

As you read this issue (which does include a West Coast Swing dance!), I encourage you to rethink your boxes. Creativity flourishes when you challenge boundaries, including those you have set for yourself; so, whether you are a *dancer, writer, artist, musician, reader*, or none of these things, re-imagine these labels and watch yourself grow.



Madison

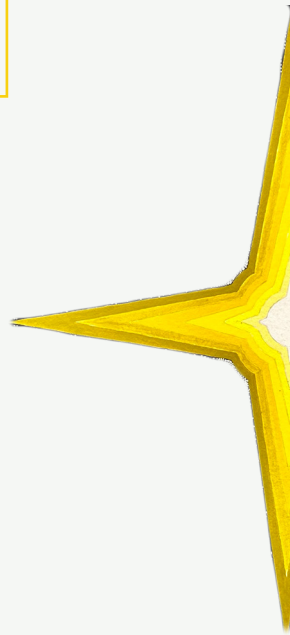
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Art & Photography

6	As Above, So Below • <i>Virginia Shepley</i>
9	Whispering House, azure • <i>Harumi Yukawa</i>
10	Nebulous Beauty • <i>Leslie Lakes</i>
13	Holding It All • <i>Virginia Shepley</i>
17	Offering • <i>Anna Kirby</i>
19	The Split • <i>Alexander Holland</i>
20	Another day • <i>Bárbara Rais</i>
22	Bloom • <i>Sara Jorgensen</i>
25	Cinnamon Lounge • <i>Sara Driver</i>
27	Unkept • <i>RaAmen Stallings</i>
28	Tremendous • <i>Sara Jorgensen</i>
30	The Musicians • <i>Alexander Holland</i>
32	The City and a Dream • <i>Anna Kirby</i>
35	Loving Parents • <i>Bárbara Rais</i>
37	Solemnly Swear • <i>Devann Donovan</i>
39	Dreams of Frostys • <i>Devann Donovan</i>
40	Loneliness in Sobriety • <i>Ashley Jones</i>

Dance & Music . . .

15	Council • <i>Tiffany Hale</i>
21	WCS to “Memo” by Years & Years • <i>Samuel Bingham & Alyssa Tyler</i>
31	regret; (an excerpt) • <i>CerVon Campbell</i>





Poetry

- 7 have you looked at the moon tonight? • *Eliana Mosko*
8 WHAT WE CAN SEE THROUGH LENSES • *Martina Reisz Newberry*
11 Crushed Cherry • *Renee Kalagayan*
12 PRISMSPEAK • *Noelle Kriegel*
18 38 Split • *Yuna Kang*
21 dailiness • *Manuel A. Melendez*
23 Was'n'wasn't • *Noelle Kriegel*
26 Cutting Through the Mountains • *Emma Redditt*
29 All for the Grasping of Limbs • *Emma Redditt*
30 Almost • *Erin Akins*
36 Generational • *Kimberly Jane Simms*
38 Funeral for a Passenger Pigeon • *Erin Akins*

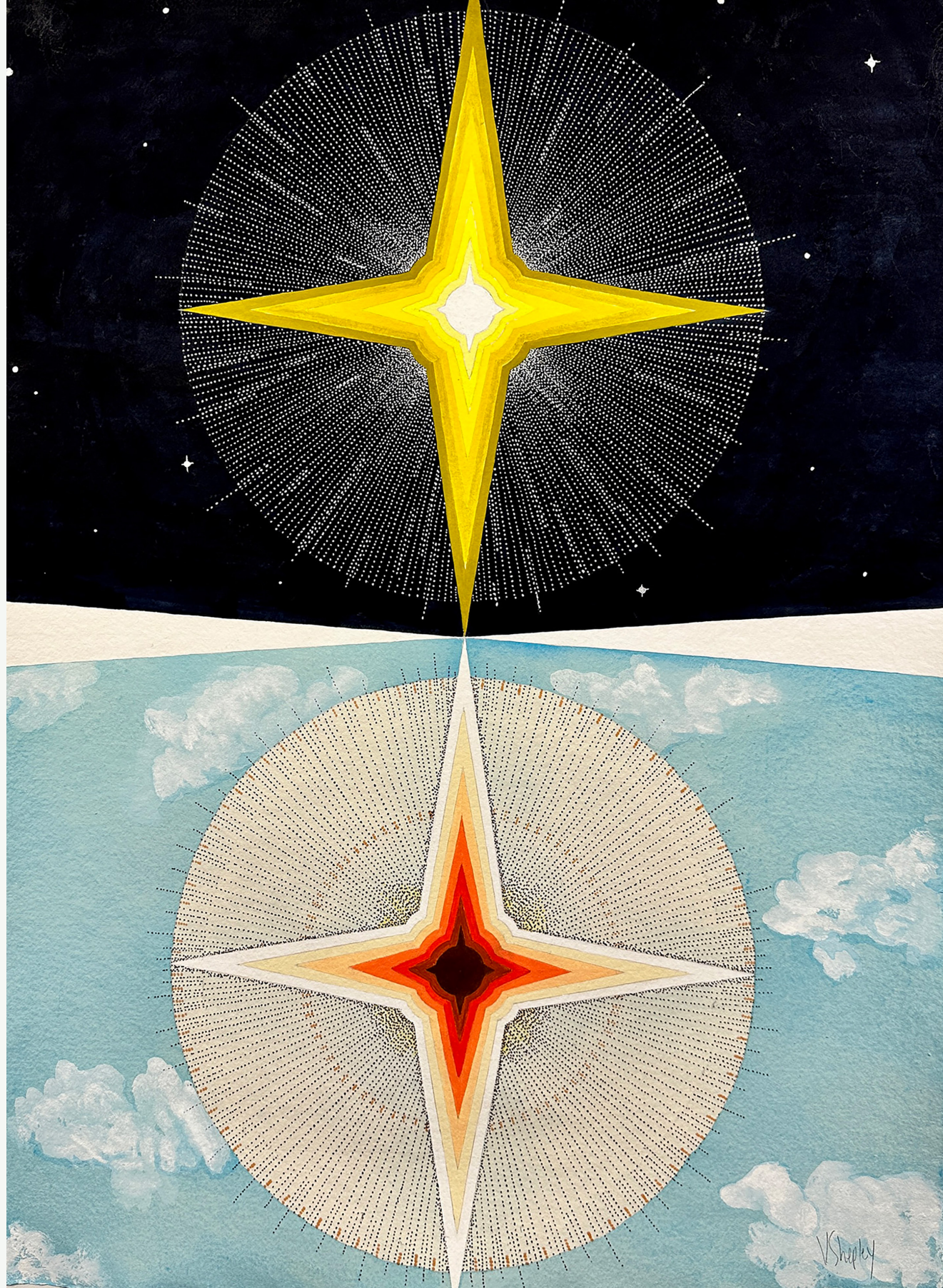
Short Stories

- 14-16 People of the Water • *Janet Goldberg*
24-25 The Scent of Fresh-Cut Lumber • *Mord McGhee*
33-35 Rosemary • *Dana Field*

Other Acknowledgements

- 1 Front Cover • *artwork by Virginia Shepley & Leslie Lakes*
2 Masthead
3 Letter from the Editor
4-5 Table of Contents
40-44 Meet the Creators
44-45 Meet the Team
45 Credits
46 Back Cover • *artwork by Virginia Shepley & Leslie Lakes*

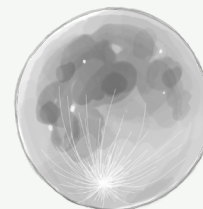
As Above, So Below



Virginia Shepley

have you looked at the moon tonight?

Eliana Mosko



she's so bright—is she always this bright?
it's hard to remember that light isn't even hers
she's just a reflective surface
we still call them moonbeams though

i've always been a night owl
apparently it's because i thrive
when i do not fear being watched
she is my only audience

i find comfort in knowing
she has seen it all
and most of it did not include us
we are a nanosecond
compared to her eons

she doesn't care about my lifetime collection
of dollar store gold star stickers
accumulated from years of needing to excel

she sees no value in my wall of laurel wreaths
she is uninterested in how much i've slept
(too much and not enough simultaneously)

she's got other things to worry about—
rising tides and changing seasons

i was always told to
reach for the moon
but i prefer the view
from here

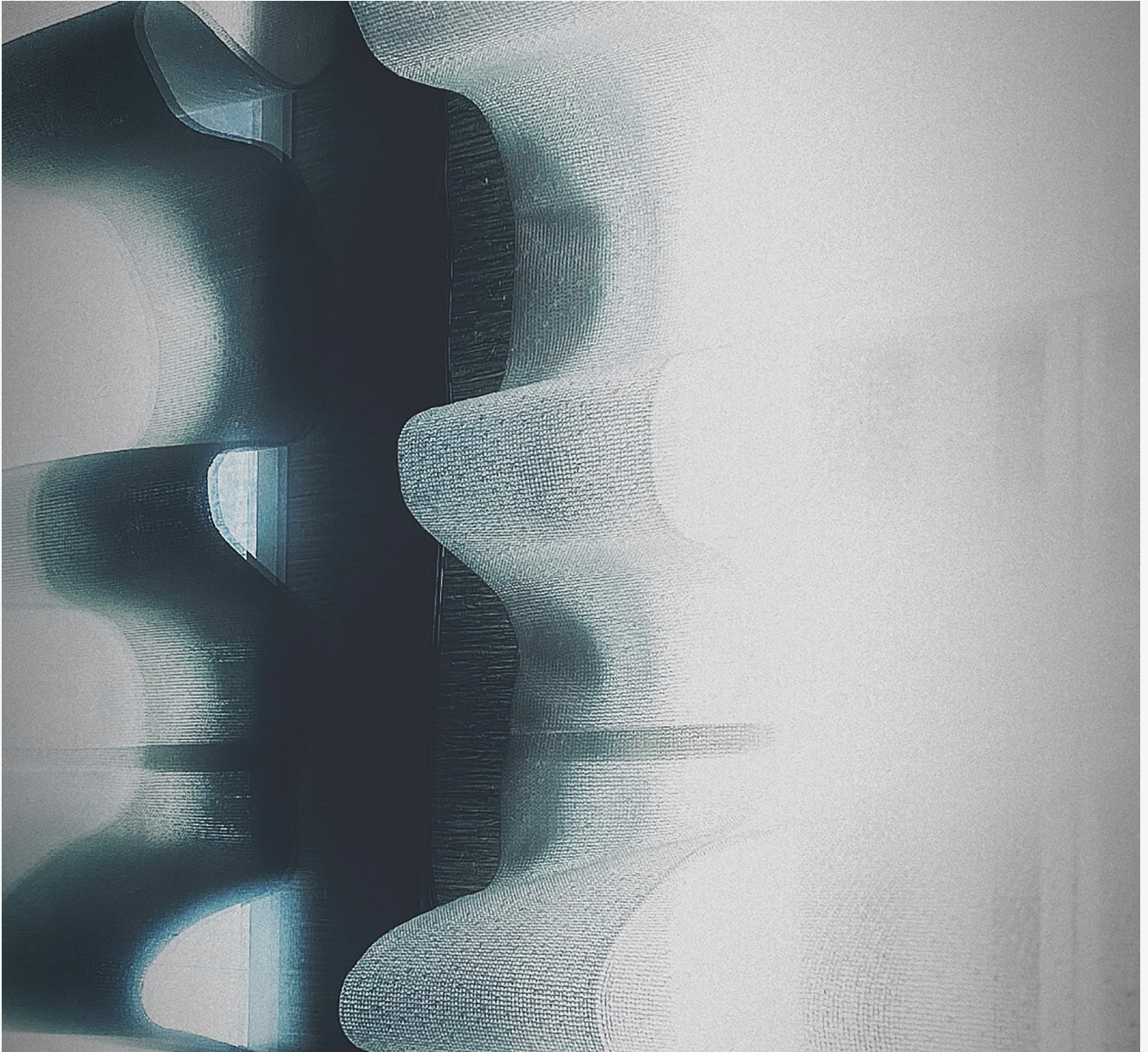
because when i look up and see her
haloed with moonglow
i have never been so honored
to be so unimportant

WHAT WE CAN SEE THROUGH LENSES

Martina Reisz Newberry

It has been raining all night.
Not too many miles away
the Griffith Park Observatory
has been rendered invisible by
low, heavy clouds.
The mountain on which it sits
is a force difficult to hide.
The Zeiss, Coelostat, and Solar telescopes'
gigantic eyes are closed today.
There will be no squinting at the sun
or the stars. Whether they will still
be in place when tomorrow comes
is anyone's guess. The rain will have to stop
and clouds dissipate before we can be certain
of the sky, the planets, the stars—
anything we see only through lenses.

Whispering House, azure



Harumi Yukawa



Nebulous Beauty *Leslie Lakes*

Crushed Cherry

Renee Kalagayan



In summertime the cherries are firm
and pragmatic as my mother, whose breasts are rebelling,
spreading undyed cancer into ruby depths. I buy the cherries for the sake of my grandmother,
who ate them whole, whose whole body purpled with dementia and forgot the taste.

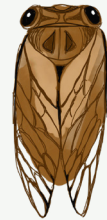
By the time I remember to eat the fruit, the bones of the cherries are soft, the blood oozing
black into the back of my icebox. As I lift the carnage from the cold and prepare to bury them
in the compost, I find a plump black spider hiding
in between the two intimate red round curves of one,
and I am so angry. I spill the cherries onto the ground
and let the bodies tumble like an open wound, splatter deep maroon
across the kitchen floor. The spider in retreat, swimming
across a sea of giant rolling red keels,
pauses by the threshold.

In this time I have torn a white flag from the paper towel rack, and in one swift wave
I drown the spider in cotton pulp between my lined forefinger and thumb.
I squeeze and feel his soft brown body pop in my hand,
the green and yellow trunk wound staining like sap. Death is a snap
you can feel in your bones, a bruised cherry
bleeding, a living mother white with a tumor I want to crush
between my violet fingers.

PRISMSPEAK

Noelle Kriegel

the sun has defected itself
 to the backsides of rainbows
 where roads twist & glitter
 like intestines.
 intersections
 sit spread eagle & open
 & we all take time to pray
 beneath red lights
 for obscene things, things all
 had & hadn't yet, counting all the
 seconds it takes to mouth mine.
 a cicadoidea exodus
 doubly undressed turns
 grills to figureheads—we're champions
 of exoskeletons, expensive & vulgar
 designs against nature, against
 eulogy-sweet romances &
 colliding generations. every story
 has a natural conclusion:
 back to the dirt. but
 there is still time.
 now that it's
 pale orange mornings,
 day moons & a solstice
 every night, we are endless &
 prismic. we do not eulogize
 in the evenings, we greet each other
 with new names.
 this,
 that & other
 summersuch phenomena
 glitter up the commute,
 brief frottages of light
 only privy to July. how lucky
 that it's pavement &
 pretty words
 miraging & spitting out
 atmosphere over tailpipes &
 not hateful exhaust, how pretty
 it is to pretend
 to know better about this world.



2024 was the year of the cicada. Broods XIX & XIII both emerged after nesting underground for over a decade, becoming an outpouring of song, raucous displays of flight, and then sudden shells as if the sandhills returned to shore. In the same summer, friends emerged, names drawled & hollered in a raucous display of life, adamant & present despite the heat. Despite everything, emerged.

Holding It All *Virginia Shepley*



People of the Water

Janet Goldberg

We'd be paddling over a watery underworld, beneath us the brown, silty depths of North Carolina's Lake Catawba, a reservoir built in the early 1900s. Depending on whom you asked, Catawba could mean "people of the water" or "separated or divided." I'd read a little about it on the flight in.

But, I wasn't going to bother my brother with this now, the world already complicated enough, our boats on the grassy banks at the ready—Andrew's, a fiberglass two-seater, mine, a flimsy inflatable that he'd borrowed from a neighbor. For five years, we hadn't seen each other. Not since our sister's funeral, if you could call it that, the two of us against the rail of the Golden Gate Bridge, in San Francisco, shrouded in fog, shivering. But it wasn't Kelsey's suicide that had driven us apart. Well before that we'd been drifting, our phone conversations small talk then awkward silence. Then, the anniversary coming up, I decided to fly in.

Crouched at the edge of the river now, I dipped my fingers in, the water here warm, fairly benign-looking, despite what Andrew had said on the short drive over. "50 square miles. 520 miles of shoreline. 100 feet deep." He knew I'd only paddled once, in a canoe down a shallow river with two Japanese people who didn't speak English in a summer ESL workshop I taught. Maybe he was trying to scare me. As a kid, he liked to hide under my bed at night and jump out just as I was about to fall asleep.

But, at least he and I could both swim. Our sister, thirteen years younger than him, ten years younger than me, couldn't. A 400-foot drop to the Pacific, she must have been terrified, her back against the rail. "Like hitting cement," the authorities had said. Severed aorta, pneumothorax, broken limbs & ribs—all the possibilities. And then there was the security footage. She'd left no note. Her body had never been found. But her car was there in the lot beneath the bridge.

Andrew tossed me a life jacket. "A few things to know." He lifted a paddle.

It wasn't the kind of oar I'd used in the canoe.

"First thing, don't strangle the baby."

I laughed.

"The paddle," he said, as if I didn't know.

I picked mine up. It looked like a long baton with a rubber propeller at either end. I had the horrible impulse to twirl it. But what did I know? If only I'd gotten some instruction or learned Japanese my first time on the water, I might not have ended up with blistered hands and a blood-stained t-shirt as I'd racked my brain for the word "row" in Japanese. No doubt anyone listening to that story would have thought me an idiot, though one of the Japanese rowers mailed me a beautiful silk table cloth, thanking me for saving her life on the river. Now, that was funny.

"But at the same time keep a good grip, thumb and index finger. Don't strain the others. Hands equal distance apart. See?" Straightening his arms, Andrew raised his paddle chest-high as if he were doing calisthenics, and I chuckled again. My brother looked like a middle-aged camp counselor or a hapless weight lifter rather than a scientist who studied the life cycles of cicadas, his real passion or only passion. Any minute now, a major resurrection was about to occur—not one but two broods rising up from their deep burrows at the very same time, up through the ground, to swarm.

There's a survival strategy to these cycles, for these sizable, red-eyed, hard-shelled creatures that live most of their lives in the dark, my brother had written in a Charlotte Gazette editorial, urging restraint, urging residents not to kill them. He made clear-eyed, intelligent arguments, hardly the boy I remember from our childhood. But then again, Andrew had always been an enigma, the boy who perpetually overslept, practically flunked out of high school only to get a doctorate in entomology to become a professor. We had grown up in a subdivision built on a Connecticut swamp, where there'd been a whole cornucopia of insects and on warm summer nights, the porch light lit, my mother forever yelling, "Shut the door."

I zipped up my life jacket. In this humidity, it felt like a small animal on my chest.

Andrew dragged the inflatable sideways into the water. Shaped more like a canoe, it was a drab orange and patched on one side.

"Why can't we just go in yours?"

We both peered at the front seat, where my sister would have sat. *The lightest always up front*, my brother had said on the drive over.

I stepped into the inflatable. The seat, which Andrew had fastened in, shifted beneath me, and the inflatable sank a little.



He placed a small cooler in front of my feet and handed me the paddle. Then, he got into his kayak. “Any questions?”

I arranged my hands, trying not to squeeze, holding it in the middle, the sheer length of it like a third arm spanning out both sides of my body.

Andrew pulled out first, neatly slicing the water.

I dug in, moving forward.

My brother stopped and looked back at me. “Keep it straight. Pull evenly on both sides. Don’t let the current take you.”

I floated up beside him, bumping him. Here, up above the banks, were houses woven into the trees, mini mansions, with their own slips & fancy boats, some with built-in slides. “Where the rich live, eh?”

“Copperheads, too. They’re excellent swimmers.”

Looking out at the water, I scanned the surface for any in-coming, silty water already swishing at the bottom of my inflatable.

We began paddling again, and for a while I managed to straighten myself out, though I was slow. On TV it always looked so easy, everyone straight backed, awed, as some fragment of a blue-tinged glacier collapsed in slow motion. No one ever got hurt.

“Pontoon,” Andrew said.

It looked like something out of the Amazon, a large slow-moving oblong barge with a small pilot house. As the waves started rippling across, traveling under us, I dropped my paddle on my lap and grabbed onto the sides of the inflatable.

We started paddling again, my arms beginning to ache.

Andrew waited for me ahead.

“Now, stay away from those footings,” he said, pointing his paddle to a bridge up ahead.

Andrew took off and deftly paddled through.

Getting closer, I could see small whirlpools around the footings, where the water swirled seeming to sink a little. But as hard as I tried, I side wiped it anyway, more water splashing in. I had to use my paddle to push myself away from it.

My brother paddled over to me. “What are you doing?”

I laid my paddle on my lap again and tugged on my life jacket. “This thing is killing me.”

“Well, you can’t take it off.”

“I can swim.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

I looked over at his front seat, where Kelsey would have been. Her freckles, her bangs, her front tooth still chipped. Fair-skinned, she hated the sun. Kept out of it. Like a vampire. Even alive, she’d been ageless. She was never meant to be—an accident, my mother admitted. But then, we loved her.

Good thing our parents were dead. I looked at Andrew. There were things to say. But he’d started paddling again, leaving me behind, and when I finally caught up, I said, “You know there’s a Ferris wheel somewhere under here. Cemeteries. War sites. Slave plantations.”



Andrew leaned over the side. “That so?”

“Creepy, isn’t it?”

“Reservoirs prevent flooding. Save water. You can’t blame Catawba Power for that,” he said.

“Right, Professor. Where are we going anyways?”

“As far as you want.”

I peered down the river, another pontoon crawling our way. It was a pretty place but hardly wild.

“There’s an island just ahead. We could paddle out there.”

“What kind?”

“The kind surrounded by water.”

My shorts soggy, I was anxious to dry out.

We started paddling again, for the moment staying side by side. Soon enough, an island came into view, a mound rising out of the water, heavily treed. We paddled up onto a shallow beach and got out. For the moment, I felt like a real explorer. Jacques Cousteau. I looked at the dark water pooling at the bottom of my inflatable and then flipped it over.

Andrew took the cooler and trudged up the beach toward the trees.

I took off my life jacket and dropped it on the beach, then followed him to a narrow sandy trail up.

“Just watch where you put your feet. Mostly black snakes here. Not venomous, but they bite. And they’re big.”

“Big,” I repeated. “Like cicadas.”

“Bigger.”

We’d hiked to the island top, there three large rocks circling a fire pit of charred wood.

I looked around, expecting to see stray beer cans or bottles. But there was only foliage.

We sat down.

Andrew opened the cooler and handed me a beer.

I hesitated. Sober, I had no idea what I was doing. Still, I was hot. “You didn’t bring any water?” I cracked open the can and took a sip. Out here, on the island, it didn’t taste so bitter. I drank more.

Through the trees, I gazed out at the water and then looked over at the third rock, smaller than the others. “So, what’s your prediction? For the cicadas?”

Andrew shrugged. “They’ll just appear. And then they’ll

be here.”

“Then what?” I asked.

“They’ll mate.” He crushed up his can and dropped it back in the cooler and then opened another.

“And then?”

“Die. Most of their life is spent underground, waiting.”

I kept peering down through the trees, to the beach, where our boats were moored.

“Sad, having to live like that.”

Andrew handed me another beer. “I doubt they think so. It’s what they’re programmed for. Their best chance at survival.” A cool breeze blew through, lifting my hair. Was it that simple, I wondered. White-knuckled,

“Was it that simple, I wondered. White-knuckled, clinging to the bridge, the wind blasting her, had my sister changed her mind?”

clinging to the bridge, the wind blasting her, had my sister changed her mind? But both my brother and I had viewed the security tapes. *You see what you want to see*, bridge security had told me,

each time I called back and asked, “Are you sure?”

“So, you don’t want to talk about it,” I said. “What she did.”

“Okay. She did what she did. Why belabor it?” Andrew, leaning forward now, seemed to be studying something on the ground.

“What is it?” I shot up to my feet. I imagined thick-bodied insects, hard-shelled, topped by translucent wings, their eyes just as my brother had written—red. I started swiping the air.

Andrew grabbed my hand. “They haven’t risen yet. And besides, you don’t want to do that. They don’t bite. Just wait, and they’ll start singing.”





Offering *Anna Kirby*

38 Split *Yuna Kang*

Seoul is like this:

ash, rubble, sleet, snow, pounding on

the heads of our enemies, I hold a broken bowl up to cannon-plastered sky, the glassiness of our heads vague, uneven. It is like drinking too much, *물고기*¹, fish swimming at the bottom

of our fecund little soups. I swallow her whole. Seoul

is like this:

technicolor bright lights, taxis screaming down rain-slicked roads, obliging little restaurants and people everywhere, geometrical categories of smoking, women in black umbrellas and Chanel. a nervous dog follows the fashionable like in Paris, we choked out the underbrush, smoked the ruins of

country life like how summer flame sups itself on overgrown brush. We tried too hard, tried much too hard, and in our bellies lay swollen:

golden fish circling, lazy drain currents making the rounds of a toilet with no entrance or exit. I ate too much soup on that glassy little night, wanted

something else.

¹*Korean word for fish. Roughly pronounced like mool-ko-gi.*



The Split

*Alexander
Holland*



Another day *Barbara Rais*

dailiness

Manuel A. Melendez

Every day, maybe, is too long. Why can't I choose to spend a week among the cacao leaves then retire? Be gone until I grow on the lip of another day. Or retain it. Like the basil green on your teeth, crunching down a refusal while I teeter over the easy chair, the grow lights humming around our tired Sunday bodies. Every day like that is too much of you. A dream that wears drowsy hiking sneakers, dropping you like salami into your closet, you— fragrantly parceled. The perfume of rice drizzles into curried green beans as they pile on a bowl you select for me. Another choice, like how to wear this day, a droopy band around my ankle or my wrist, smelling like coconut oil or painting the sliver of your right butt-cheek I cannot bite from me, right as you hunch over, leaning to collect items, all items, to decorate today between the legs of your Levi's. Every day cannot hold your unwashed toes, furred inside your grey socks, but the imprint they leave discarded— how hampers do anything but hamper another snowed-in dinner full of potato skins. Here you're spun back, like a tired song, to fall into arms you don't ask for, into a day that is all mine but full of your sugar. Too long is every day that replenishes, leaving only splashes. A splash of your fingers glossy with fish oil as we laugh, sniffing them together, the winter outside deciding, like a ring, to encircle us in possibility. A splash of warm sheets pawing back lightness, the reverb of reverie, that hums some version of your six a.m. voice, a voice that splashes, and so, is only a droplet, then another, then another, unfulfilling until you comprehend, of course, that you were the one that remembered buckets can hold water, but they cannot hold the day.





Bloom *Sara Jorgensen*

Was'n'wasn't

Noelle Kriegel 

a petal that was'n'wasn't there.
 I woke up latently & timely & all-at-once with the idea
 of the taste. It had passed, its contours unbeknownst to me,
 but the base & floral aspects salted my tongue;
 a gentle recoil. It feathered out my mouth, a forgive-me 'n forget-me-not.

The Scent of Fresh-Cut Lumber

Mord McGhee

The scent of freshly sawed lumber held an enchantment, a trigger that awakened memories Gray had long shelved in the recesses of routine and coping mechanisms. Nature seemed to compress emotion between rings & grains, making them manageable for him. He held the board, eyeing it carefully, then squeezed the power button. The miter saw hummed, and as it passed through the wood, a scrap fell to the ground. Gray brushed the sawdust off the machine, savoring the piney scent. It transported him back to a summer morning ten years earlier, a walk through the woods shortly after relocating to the Lowcountry.

They had only bought the house a year before, and when terrible luck struck, they were hardly acclimated. Despite the purported healing influence of fairies, flags, and flowers, she had still gotten sicker. He had been alone with their toy poodle, Abby, crossing the boardwalk that day, which carried them across the wetland. Township workers were actively replacing the structural framework along the span, running from the public dock through Vereen's Forest to the cemetery at its entrance. There were just a handful of people there, and he only saw one since arriving.

Along the shaded maritime paths, traces of wildlife were everywhere. This made him smile. Fiddler crabs as far as he could see, moving slightly, hovering near holes where water receded, leaving dry patches. A black snake catching the first rays, its tongue searching the pinecone floor beneath the loblollies. Far away, he heard voices carried on the wind and the hum of a rod and reel casting.

Gray paused for a circling osprey, then stepped nearer to the little pooch. Here, he heard soft music created by abundant crustacean shells, notes on and off, rustled by gentle surf. His hand touched the railing,

warm already. It hadn't been so long since he was walking beside her, but it felt like it was forever. Abby's tiny paws tapped the planks, and there was the invoking smell of freshly cut lumber. He felt her hand in his, remembering. He missed that most of all. He took a deep breath. With wet eyes, he said, "Come on, girl. Let's go home."

Snapping back to the woodshop behind the home, he laid the scrap aside and drilled pilot holes in his piece, then set the steamer on high and applied pressure with the jig. It would take a good day to start the Adirondack chair's arm bending, and he couldn't help but think there was a certain magic at work. Not just in the wood, but in everything.

Gray drank it in. He imagined the lengths primitive woodworkers had gone to as he set in place his next pass. Abby walked past, grass to her belly, and it made him want to tell the woman he loved how funny their girl looked down there. Gray nodded to her favorite fairy. "Wish you could come home again." He didn't even clean up just then but got into the car and went to visit her at

“Despite the purported healing influence of fairies, flags, and flowers, she had still gotten sicker.”

assisted living.

•••

He came into the room, and she smiled. He slipped a hand in his pocket, squeezing for a moment a new scrap sawn from that morning. She didn't meet his eye, but it was okay. He said, "Almost done with another order of garden chairs. Should see them, getting real good." She turned as if she suddenly realized he was there. She took his hands into hers, pressed them to her lips. So, Gray spent three hours with her, just sitting beside her in the chair. She fell asleep, and he kissed her goodbye. He climbed into the car and began to cry, his head on the steering wheel. The drive home was slow &

sad, but something rolled across the passenger seat and bumped into his leg. He looked at it curiously. It was a small, intricately carved wooden box.

He opened the lid and inside was a note in her handwriting, dating the day before she fell ill. He pulled to the side of the road, incapable of guessing how it had found its way to him that day. He turned his head to the sky, breathing life in for just one moment, thinking of

what she had said just before he left her. "Love the smell of a fresh cut," she'd said, and Gray smiled, his hand touching the little scrap in his pocket.



Sara Driven

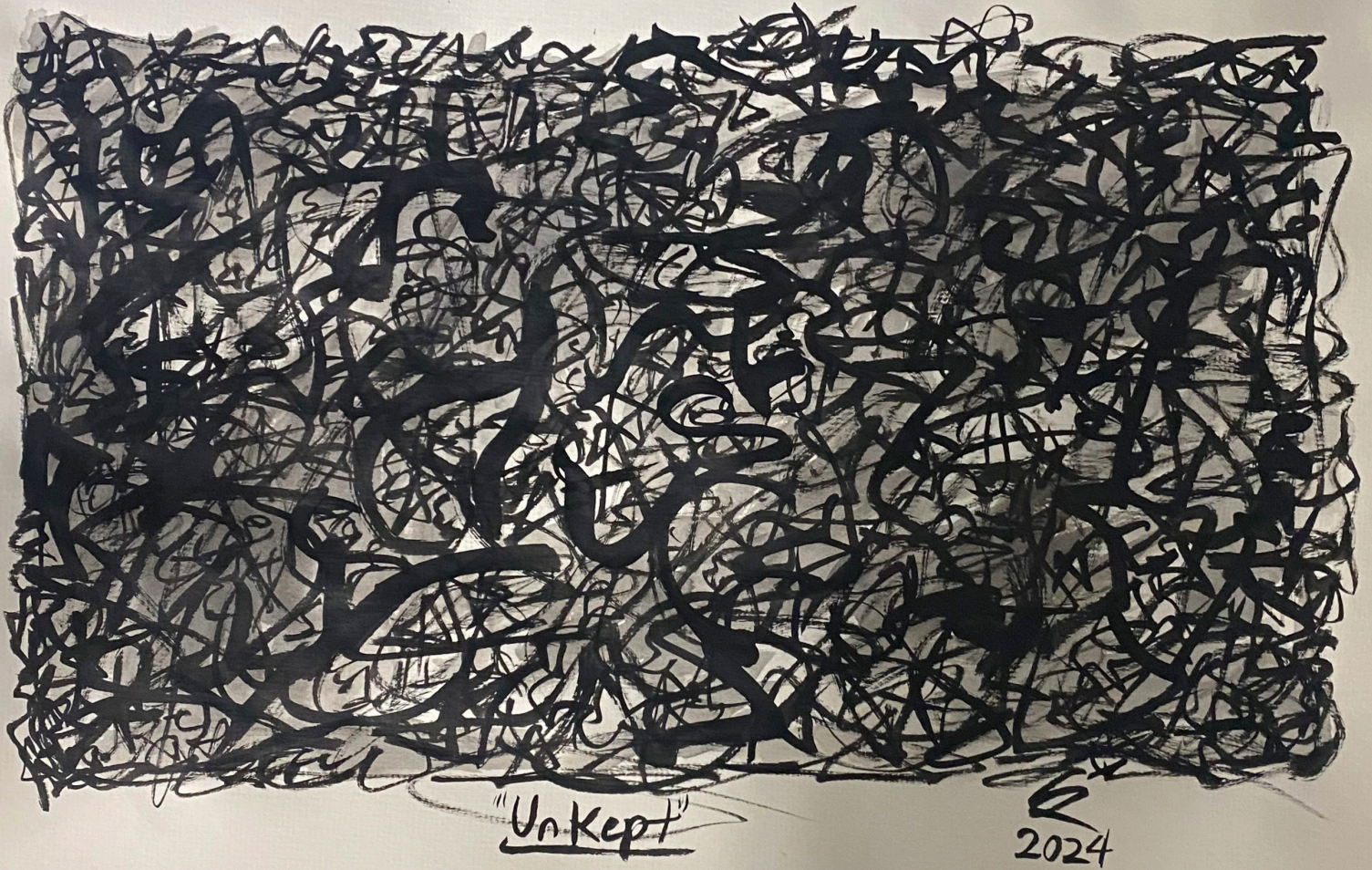
Cinnamon Lounge



Cutting Through the Mountains

Emma Redditt

There is a stump
in my friend's backyard,
or maybe it's an altar,
crooked nails jutting out
of the chainsawed-smooth surface.
Gathered around this timber shrine,
we shout and cry and laugh and sing,
trying to forget that last month,
part of the mountain range that surrounds us
fell in on itself,
crumbling slowly,
like a face
succumbing to grief.
The hammer swings down, slicing
through chill autumn air,
and sometimes metal strikes metal hard enough,
fallen stars spray out,
trying to return
to a home that is familiar.
In the morning, when we place
blue morning glories on her ringed face,
the navy irises will open and close
in time
with the beating
of a broken town's windswept heart.



Unkept

Ra Amen Stallings



Tremendous *Sara Jorgensen*

All for the Grasping of Limbs

Emma Redditt

Thumbs pressed to brow,
eyes closed to the sunlight
being pitched off the mountains.
Slipping on mossy rocks for shoes,
letting the river deliver her
baptismal gifts.
A kingfisher flies on,
ignorant to us all and yet somehow,
he pulls the air out of our lungs with each wing flap.
Our words becoming mourning dove moans,
begging for a kudzu burial,
or the kindness of forgetting.



Almost

Erin Atkins

a quarter moon when
our feet hold the lake

she breaks slow
her hair leaves lines

on my shoulder
I tell her sorry

the waves break
like unsteady breaths

why is everything
an ache I tell her

I don't have an answer
the waves ask again
her fingernails

clutch into my palm
this is an almost
good thing

don't waste it
I tell her I love you
her hair leaves lines

in my memory
the moon rests low
tonight
watch with me

The Musicians

Alexander Holland



regret;

Cer Von Campbell

regret;
an excerpt

*Cer Von
Campbell*

it's judgment within ya eyes
do you love me?
trust in whatever the lie
it must be
smothering the way you regret
stuck with a chance of never touching the net
lust for peace
that's the one thing you'll never get

sweet but turn bitter cause that's what time do
i'm a liar
because when you were lost
i promised i'd find you
i promise to find you

maybe i'm better alone
maybe i'll be better on my own



The City and a Dream

Anna Kirby

Rosemary

Dana Field

The window panes rattle above me, but I keep my head down. The distorted bass sound intensifies and then slowly fades, the syncopated beat somehow defying the wobbly Doppler effect we get when sirens wail by. Mama glares but she doesn't look up, her face in shadow under her broad-brimmed hat. "How are their eardrums not busted? Damn kids," she mutters to herself. Cars stream steadily by.

Kneeling in the soil, I gently manipulate the tangled root system of a plant that has grown too big for its pot. Life has taken over, and a transplant is long overdue.

Gardening is kind of our thing, Mama and me. We had created our own little version of Eden just fifteen feet from the street; seventeen, if you count the sidewalk. Our oasis is compartmentalized in window boxes and terracotta pots and those pots that look like terracotta but they're plastic. We've got some herbs, veggies, succulents, and a poinsettia from Christmas. The red blooms are gone now and it's all green, but it seems happy enough. A tree would be nice, or some hedges, something to help block the noise, but our soil is too sandy. And it isn't deep enough to support anything more than crabgrass & sandspurs. I suggested a birdbath once, but Mama said the stray cats would eat the birds.

We live in the city, but not the *city-city*. No one pulls the weeds growing through the buckled slabs of sidewalk. No one repairs the chain-link fences that are bent out of shape, corners curled & rusted. No one paints over the graffiti. And no one stops here unless they know someone that lives here. We've been here eight years.

"Mary is coming for dinner tonight. I wish the tomatoes were ready. You'll have to go to the store."

Mary.

"Great." We're out of wine anyway.

•••

"Still playing in the dirt?" Mary stares at me as she takes a sip of water. It's like we're children again as I look at my dirty nails, fingers curled around my fork. My eyes

drift to my crumpled napkin, the basket of bread, and then rest on her mouth. Her lips are straight & closed—someone else would mistake them for smirking, but I know what she's waiting for. I won't look her in the eye. I'll think of a comeback later, something about being a hoe. But not in front of Mama.

"I have some quarters for you to wash your clothes, Mary."

"Why can't I wash them here?"

"The dryer quit a few days back," Mama sighs.

We have been draping our clothes over every surface in the house, running the fans so high I'm scared they're gonna fall out of the ceiling.

"I'll find you a used one on Craigslist."

"I don't have the cash for that, sweetie."

•••

I hate summer. During the school year, Mama and I get some time apart. She works in the library at the elementary school, and I'm a teacher's aide. We both stay for the after-school program. Sometimes we help kids with homework, but mostly we make sure they don't kill each other. We walk the mile home together in the late afternoon. Mostly in silence. But it's a contented silence. Not like summer silence. Summer silence is stagnant. It hangs in the air, thick & palpable, smothering. Summer silence is suffocating.

I stare at the dried oregano leaves in front of me. There seems to be just as many scattered on the counter as in the bowl. I pick up the stray pieces, separate the tiny leaves from the tiny stems, and crumble them between my fingers into the bowl. I funnel these into the spice jar we've been re-filling for years. There's got to be a better way to do this.

"I don't think we'll ever run out of oregano, Mama."

"Hmm."

"But, don't get me started on thyme. Never enough," I smirk at myself.

"Guess we should try it inside," Mama offers.

I look at the crowded sill above the sink. All rosemary plants. No room for thyme in this house.

"Maybe in a few weeks... we can put the rosemary out." I actually believe it's one of the few plants that could thrive in our useless soil.

"Hmm."

I know better. Mama loves rosemary. It's her



favorite. If I move one of her precious pots, she finds it and puts it back. When the plants eventually coil in on themselves, rootbound & shriveled, she buys new ones. She doesn't even cook with it.

"Do you think Mary would be caught dead in a laundromat?"

"Guess we should buy another drying rack."

"Or, she could figure out how to do her own laundry." *She's not a child.*

"Hmm."

•••

Mary and I slept in the same room when we were little. At night, we would stay up talking in the dark, making up imaginary worlds and exploring them together until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell you exactly when we started to grow apart. Maybe it was the day one of her friends made fun of me and she didn't say anything. Or the day I wouldn't cover for her when Mama asked where she went after school. Or the morning we woke up to the policeman in our living room, comforting Mama without touching her, in our old house with the big yard and the plank swing that hung from the oak tree with rope as thick as my arms.

•••

The humid air circulating from the box fan hits me in the face and ruffles the papers in my hand. I close the garage door and blindly grope for the lightswitch. It smells like musty laundry detergent out here. And damp cardboard. I push some boxes out of the way, not looking at the black letters scrawled across the tops in my handwriting. D-A-D. Burned in my mind's eye. If I look at them, they're real. If I don't, they're just a memory. Or a dream. Maybe not real. I thumb through the pages I had printed out at the library. *Dryer Repair Guide*. Hopefully, one of these papers holds an answer. I crank the timer to 20 minutes and turn on the dryer. The motor is running, but nothing else is happening. I turn it off. *Gas Dryers, Electric Dryers, Troubleshooting,*

Tools You Need. Shit. Tools. The brown boxes blur in my peripheral.

"Have you seen the toolbox anywhere?"

Mary is sitting at the kitchen table. Her chin is resting on her knees which are drawn up against her chest, bare feet hanging off the front of her chair. One hand loosely cups a mug of coffee—no sugar, extra cream—and the other balances a pen which hovers above the Daily Word Scramble; the partially filled-in crossword puzzle is recently abandoned. I'll finish it later.

"Dad's tools?"

"Yeah. They're not in the garage," I say walking past her.

"I had to hang up a picture."

"Then just take a hammer. You left me with nothing." I turn the coffee pot off and pour a mug, no sugar, just cream.

"No one was using them. What do you need them for, anyway?" She's drawing glasses on one of the lawyers in the Divorce For Men advertisement.

"Just bring them back, could you?"

One of them has an eye patch now.

"Why? What are you making?"

"Nothing. What

do you care?"

The attorneys are losing teeth, painstakingly being inked out one by one.

"I care. Just tell me."

"Mary, I just..." *Breathe in.* "I... just thought..." *Breathe out.* "I was looking at the dryer."

Eye contact.

"I told Mama I was gonna get her one."

"When?"

"On Craigslist. My friend is coming to pick up the broken one this week."

"Is that what you meant?"

"What did you think I meant?"

Slam! Sweet Jesus. Mama's home.

•••

Mary always had friends, always had somewhere

else to be or something better to do, even when she was a kid. She threw grass seeds to the sky and pretended it was raining. They popped up, and we had some patches of thin, soft grass for a few days and she was so proud of herself. She left the hose running while she rode off down the street with her newest boyfriend. She never really moved out so much as she just stopped coming home. She left her dresses hanging in the closet. She left me home with Mama.

I don't remember how I got to the hospital. I do remember that I had just finished one of my evening classes and was walking to the bus stop when I got the phone call. Mary was in the ER. One of her friends had found her and couldn't wake her up. My first thought had been Mama. She wouldn't survive this if Mary didn't.

- Lights.
- Scrubs.
- Fluids.
- Needles.
- Midnight.
- Nurses.
- Are you family?*
- In.
- Out.
- Tubes.
- 2:12 A.M.
- Fluorescents.
- Do you want a blanket?*
- Charts.
- Eyelids.
- 5:37 A.M.
- Pulse.
- Beeping.
- Linoleum.
- Where's my charger?*
- 8:09 A.M.
- She's awake.*
- Options. Treatment. Medication. Observation.



Loving Parents

Bárbara Rais

- Insurance?*
- Vending machine.
- New room.
- Has it been one day? Two?*
- Release.
- Sign here. And here. *Are we done?*
- And here.

Mary never said a single word about it. She was home for a few days and then she was gone again. I missed my finals. I didn't talk to my professors. I didn't do anything.





Generational

Kimberly Jane Simms

I grab for you, brother, but you dive
over the edge into the lake. You remain
subsurface as I chatter on karma and the cult.
How our leader was exiled with a following
so strong: stars, politicians, our father—
sucked in with a nod of the head.

Dad speculated his soul was nine hundred
years-old when the leader shook his hand
in '85. He came to believe misalignment
could snuff out a soul. Remember when you astral

projected as a child. That feeling of being everywhere
must be leathered behind your eyes. I tried to follow
you into space, stretch it around us like an airplane blanket,
hoping we'd disappear through a hole in time, reincarnate as bees of light.

But your face emerges out of the lake, slick and dripping,
your intention shadowed below the surface
of our family's crimped fabrications.
Confident, you open your jaws, rolling
out a wet yarn, Dad's dimples flashing,
as you turn up your palm to heaven.

Solemnly Swear *Devann Donovan*



Funeral for a Passenger Pigeon

Erin Akins

Martha passed on the first of September,
1914, the last of her kind. An endling
they called her. It means the final page
of something living.

It happened because we hunted them
for feathers, when suddenly the sky dropped
from under them and only Martha
remained. The story goes she was molting
when she died. Missing her tail feathers.

Grief, we say at her funeral, “to love
what was,” separates us from birds.
Makes us human. We say nothing
of harm, how our actions can injure
the earth. No mention of guilt;
a trace of regret.

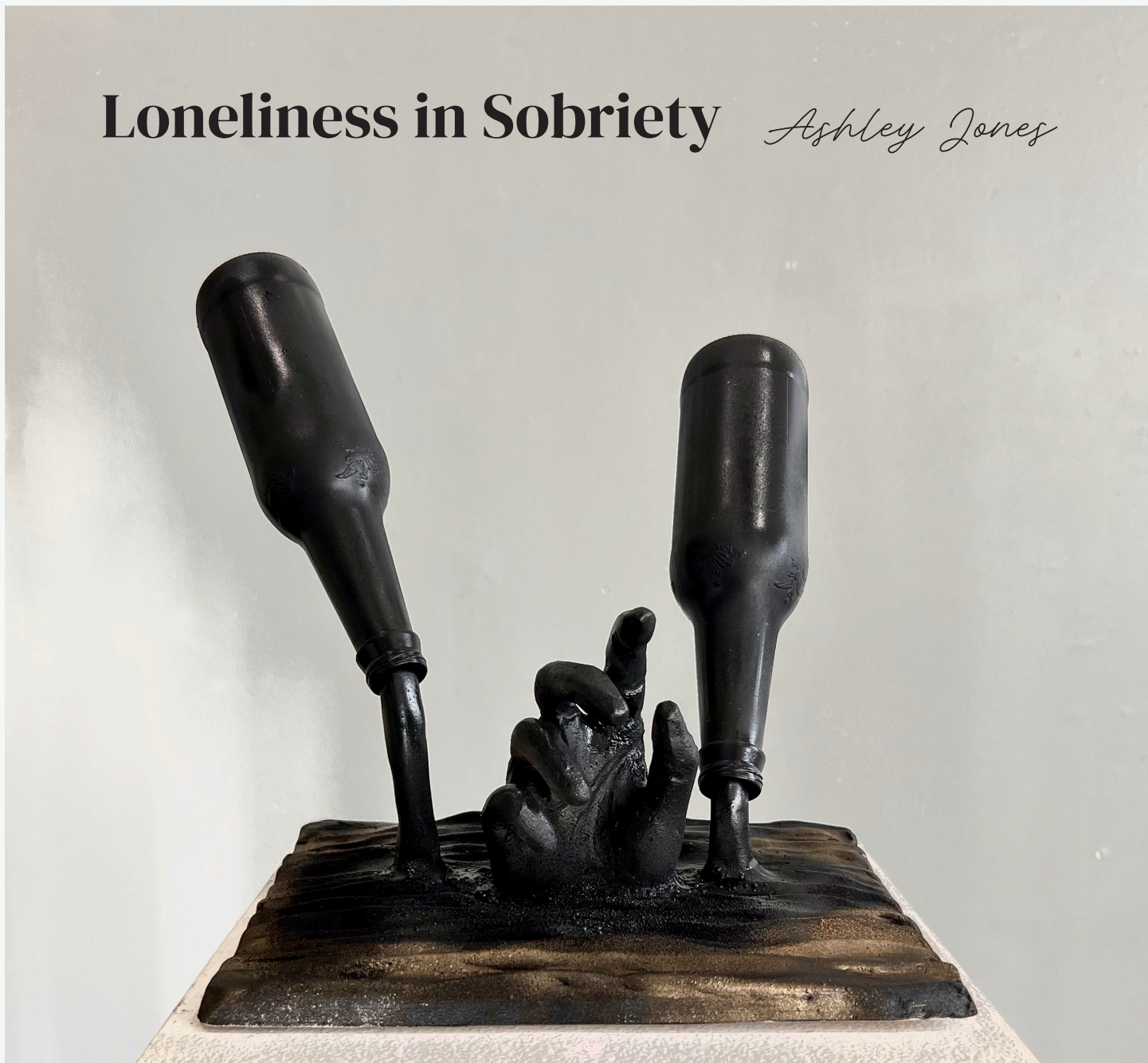
As a parting gift, we apologize
to ourselves. Less than half what is owed.
We won't say that loss is acceptable risk, or
how to fix what we're breaking.
Perhaps we only know to break,
apologize,
to break, again.



Dreams of Frostys

Devann Donovan

Loneliness in Sobriety *Ashley Jones*



meet the creators



Using divided space and associations with color, **Virginia Shepley** explores unity & duality as a metaphor for the human struggle to find a place of balance. Shepley received her Master of Fine Art in painting from John F. Kennedy University's Arts and Consciousness

Program. Her work has been shown in solo & group shows in galleries in California & North Carolina. Her drawings & paintings are in private collections around the world. Shepley has attended residencies at the Lucid Art Foundation, Atlin Art Center, and Art Farm. She lives and works on a farm in Winston Salem, North Carolina.

Leslie Lakes' artwork is eclectic, often quirky; bringing into



play photography as well as singular & mixed media drawings & paintings. Fascinated with creating unique art shadow box pieces and various other 3-dimensional assemblages & collages by incorporating a palette of nostalgic antique & vintage items: old photographs, unusual & rare ephemera, antique prints & vintage collectibles, striving to create work that is witty, tactile, and sometimes interactive. The juxtaposition of different elements is designed to provoke thought, tickle one's senses, to make one smile, and bring joy. Leslie currently lives in Greenville, South Carolina with her husband and three cats.



Eliana Mosko is an actor & writer from South Carolina. She began writing poetry on the backs of notebooks during math class after watching a recording of Carlos Andrés Gómez perform “Juan Valdez” when she was 13 and has been doing so ever since. Her work primarily focuses on finding divinity in the mundane and is heavily influenced by her Jewish-Appalachian upbringing. Her own favorite writers include Susan Sontag, Tom Stoppard, and Maimonides.



Martina Reisz Newberry is the author of seven books of poetry. Her most recent book is *Beyond Temples* (Deerbrook Editions May 2024). Newberry has been included in Cog, Blue Nib, Braided Way, Roanoke Review, THAT Literary Review, and many other literary magazines & anthologies in the U.S. and abroad. She has been awarded residencies at Yaddo Colony for the Arts, Djerassi Colony for the Arts, and Anderson Center for Disciplinary Arts. Passionate in her love for LA, Martina currently lives there with her husband. Her city often is a “player” in her poems.



Harumi Yukawa graduated from the University of California at Berkeley and uses Japanese shell lime ink & Sumi ink to depict the infinite range of light & shadow.



Renee Kalagayan is an editor & poet from Greenville, South Carolina, where she edits marketing materials and writes poems about death & fruit, focusing on the intersection of grief & goodness. An MFA student at Converse University in Spartanburg, she is also on the poetry staff of South 85 Journal. Her work is featured or forthcoming in Inkwell Literary Magazine, Listening Journal, Persephone Literary Magazine, and three anthologies. When she does not write or edit, she reads. And, if she does not read, she takes long walks or tends her jungle of houseplants. Her interests include cooking, gardening, and all things gothic & spooky.



Noelle Kriegel (femme!) is a first year graduate student at Clemson University seeking a Master's degree in English. Hailing from Aiken, SC, they are in love with everything Carolina, finding glory & poetry in every pine. Kriegel has been previously published in Beloved Zine editions 1 & 2, a lesbian based zine; and The Werks Zine, a queer-based zine in Columbia, SC. You can find more of Noelle's work on Instagram @carolinastunned443ver.



Though **Janet Goldberg** lives in California now, much of her family resides in North Carolina near Charlotte. Place has always played an important role in her fiction, including in her debut novel, *The Proprietor's Song* (Regal House), set in the Sierra Nevada, and in her forthcoming collection, *Like Human* (Cornerstone Press), with stories set in the South, the Midwest, and the West, due out in Fall 2025. She also serves as the fiction editor of Deep Wild, a journal devoted to wilderness experiences.



Tiffany Hale is a dancer, educator, and choreographer based in Greensboro, North Carolina. After graduating Cum Laude with a BA in dance / K-12 Certification from Winthrop University, Tiffany taught

dance at Central Academy of the Arts, a Title I magnet arts school in Central, South Carolina. During this time, Tiffany served as Regional Coordinator for the South Carolina Dance Association and directed the Easley High School Color Guard Program. A lifelong learner, Tiffany currently holds a certification in Language of Dance- Foundations I through the Language of Dance Center in New York and is in the process of finishing her Pilates Certification through Balanced Body. She is currently pursuing her MFA in dance choreography at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she teaches courses in the School of Dance and is the vice president of the Association of Graduate Students in Dance.



Anna Kirby is a community college English instructor living in North Carolina. Her collages have been selected for juried exhibitions across the country and published in numerous magazines & literary journals. She makes her collages using second-hand books, scissors, glue dots, and oil paints. Anna Kirby's collages are sensory poems that express the complex emotions surrounding PTSD, abuse, child loss, infertility, and female identity.



Yuna Kang is a queer, half-deaf, Korean-American writer based in Northern California. Many of her loved ones hail from South Carolina, specifically. She loves postcards, crows, and cats. She is also the recipient of the 2024 New Feathers Award. Their website link is: <https://kangyunak.wixsite.com/website>



Alexander Holland was born & raised North Carolinian figure artist, dancer, photographer, and lover of nature. Many of his works involve themes of bodies in movement, dance, and nature. Best found in the middle of the woods on a spring day or dancing late night to some blues.

Bárbara Rais is a Salvadoran artist who began her artistic journey in 2020, dedicating herself to learning and exploring new ideas. She studied photography in Germany and took pottery classes in El Salvador and the United



States; she holds a degree in painting & drawing from ESARDI. Barbara has collaborated with some brands in art product testing and participated in the Rights and Dignity Project to promote social change. She specializes in social critique, often using sarcasm with different art techniques like watercolor, digital drawing, and collage. You can find her on Instagram @b.maia.art



Manuel A. Melendez is a hybrid writer born and partially raised in Camagüey, Cuba. He has been published in Carolina Muse Literary & Arts Magazine, WayWords Literary Journal, Apricity Magazine, Dream Noir Magazine, Superstition Review, and Midway Journal. He fell in love with the Carolinas on a skiing trip his senior year of high school when he discovered they made the best breakfasts in the world. He dreams of one day living on a planet where poetry can take permanent physical shape, but he settles for a fierce latte, vibrant verses, and being penniless but ravishing on his deathbed.



Samuel Bingham was born & raised in Albuquerque, NM but has since found his home & place in Clemson, SC. Currently, he attends Clemson University where he is obtaining his PhD in photonics in high-power and -energy fiber lasers. Outside of his science & engineering endeavors, Sam is an avid dancer in Balboa, Blues, Fusion, Lindy Hop, and West Coast Swing; wherein the latter he competes. He has traveled throughout the Carolinas to dance West Coast Swing in competitions and weekly or monthly dances, including Greenville, SC and Charlotte, Raleigh, and Asheville in North Carolina.



Mord McGhee is the author of *Ironblood* (Golden Storyline Books UK) and *The Stroke of Oars* (Nat 1 Pub USA), whose literary works have recently been nominated for the Maya Angelou Book Award and Bram Stoker Award 2024-25. Mord

is a resident of Little River, SC, while frequently haunting Charleston, SC and Mt. Airy, NC.



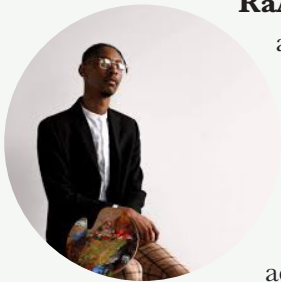
Sara Driver is a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate art student at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Her work focuses on themes of childhood, nostalgia, and life growing up in the rural South. Having lived in North Carolina her entire life, she recognizes

the poetry of simple moments and seeks to capture that in her work. She has previously appeared in some small shows around Onslow County, NC and has been published in UNCW's creative magazine, Atlantis. She hopes to show work in some bigger exhibitions this year and is grateful to be published in the Carolina Muse.



Emma Redditt is a queer & nonbinary writer originally from Alabama, but they have called Asheville, North Carolina home for the last three years. They were recently published in Loblolly Press' Understory, a digital zine for relief in Western North Carolina following Hurricane Helene. For them, writing is

a vehicle for both connection & exploration, and they are deeply inspired by the landscapes of Appalachia and the South as a whole. You can find them on Substack at <https://substack.com/@gentlewraparoundporch>.



RaAmen Stallings is a revolutionary artist based in the Carolinas. Raised in Greenville, he is adamant about using his art to enhance the lives of others. He uses various mediums to teach, assist in fundraising, and create art-centric systems to advance his local communities. He travels nationally, to create a chain

network of creatives that allow art to be archival and tell representational stories of history. His philosophy is that "all forms of creation are art." As his career advances, he desires to be an archivist to further discover & protect his culture and create systems that integrate art more practically into modern society.

Sara Jorgensen is an art teacher and is currently pursuing



a graduate degree in art education. A lifelong artist, she is dedicated to uplifting & supporting young artists. Growing up in the Carolinas has imbued her with an appreciation for nature and a strong sense of community. Jorgensen was

born & raised in the Sandhills of North Carolina, where she was inspired by countless mentors and teachers to follow her passion for art.



Erin Akins (she/her) is a poet, educator, and literature PhD student living in Austin, Texas. Her poetry has previously appeared in The South Florida Poetry Journal and The Green Hills Literary Lantern.



CerVon Campbell, an Carolina hip hop artist, has been carving a distinct niche within the hip hop & alternative hip hop scenes with his innovative & boundary-pushing music. Cherished for his avant-garde approach, Campbell's music is a melting pot of jazz, funk, soul, and rock, seamlessly woven into the fabric

of hip hop to create unforgettable soundscapes.



Originally from Florida's Nature Coast, **Dana Field** traded the salty, mangrove-laden shores for North Carolina's muddy Piedmont (complete with seasons) in the spring of 2020. She has always been a creative spirit, writing poetry, songs, and stories since childhood, but

has recently taken the endeavor to write more seriously, finding the outlet simultaneously necessary & enlightening. She found her passion for short stories & poetry when she went back to school (at the tender age of 30) for her BA in English. Dana has a love for the American South, fairy tales, nature, and raw, simple poetry. She writes to capture the charms & idiosyncrasies of the people that cross her path & imagination.

Kimberly Jane Simms (Gibbs) is an acclaimed Greenville, SC poet, literary organizer, and educator whose voice is



deeply rooted in the Southern tradition of storytelling, influenced by her British & Southern heritage. In her debut poetry collection, *Lindy Lee: Songs on Mill Hill*, Kimberly chronicles the lives of textile workers in the Piedmont region with historical accuracy & imaginative insight. Kimberly is a former Carl Sandburg National Historic Site Writer-in-Residence, a TedX speaker, and a slam pioneer turned literary curator. She is a member of the South Carolina Humanities Council's Speakers Bureau, and her work is archived in the South Carolina Poetry Archives at Furman University.



Devann Donovan, from Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, has curated an artistic career rooted in her personal narrative. Armed with an MFA from Winthrop University, she possesses a unique ability to weave the threads of her life into captivating artworks that transcend mediums and elicit profound emotions. Devann's practice is a playful exploration, with a constantly changing attraction to new mediums that leaves no medium untested. Her work knows no bounds, as she navigates from paintings & textiles to sculptures & videos. She has showcased from North Carolina to California, and most recently, Spartanburg, Columbia, and a solo show, *Forget Me Knots*, in Rock Hill, SC. Currently residing in Rock Hill with her husband and three dogs, Devann is the art instructor at York Technical College. She previously held the position of gallery manager at the Arts Council of York County and continues to program & teach children's art classes there.



Ashley Jones is a sculpture & ceramic artist from Lexington, North Carolina. She is currently studying at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for a BFA in sculpture and ceramics. Ashley took up wheel throwing when she was nineteen and discovered her love of 3D forms. She focuses on creating pieces that express complex experiences. She hopes her work resonates with viewers and offers a sense of connection.

meet the team



Editor-in-Chief, Madison Foster

has been passionate about the arts in their full scope since she was little. Growing up in Greenville, SC, she could always be found with her face in a book or a guitar strapped over her shoulder. While attending Elon University in North Carolina, she grew her writing & design skills as an English literature major with minors in communications & multimedia authoring. After graduating in 2020, Madison's love for publishing and the arts led her to bring Carolina Muse Literary & Arts Magazine to life. The multimedia arts magazine provides a platform for artists from all of the creative arts to share their message. In addition to her work as editor-in-chief of Carolina Muse, Madison works as a social media manager in Western North Carolina.



Art Editor, Lilliana Cameron

is a visual artist who has lived all over the Carolinas and is now residing in Greenville, SC. She is an alumni of the College of Charleston, where she majored in studio art & arts management with a minor in art history. In her art, she aspires to capture beauty in the small, everyday moments and inspire a sort of introspection. She works in a variety of mediums but has a strong love for oil paint, watercolor, and charcoal.



Dance Editor, Rush Johnston

(they/them) is a Bronx-based multimedia choreographer, poet, performer, filmmaker, and movement researcher. Rush creates at the intersection of visual & performing art, often exploring modes of artistic expression beyond the binary. As a queer, Native, neurodiverse artist, their work often plays with perception & identity, inviting viewers to question proposed truths of self & social misunderstanding. Social justice work is a key element of Rush's creative vision, often encompassing themes of political turmoil, queerness, and mental health. Rush is the founder & artistic director

of Kaleid Dance Collective, an interdisciplinary artistic platform for creative experiments & exhibitions.



Music Editor, Jake Shores is a multidisciplinary artist from Greensboro, NC, with a background in theater, music, visual, and literary arts. He is a recent graduate from High Point University, receiving a degree in English with a focus on writing and a minor in theater. He plans to further pursue his education by studying poetry at the graduate level while continuing work on his other creative pursuits in a non-academic setting. He is inspired largely by the natural world and by his interactions with people. His work takes on the challenge of putting a name to the indescribable.



Poetry Editor, Amanda Conover is a queer writer based in Raleigh, NC. She has a BA in English from Elon University and is currently a student in Arcadia University's MFA in Creative Writing program, where she specializes in poetry. Amanda has been the poetry editor for Carolina Muse ever since volume I, issue II and absolutely loves everything she gets to do with the literary & arts magazine. Along with her studies and editor responsibilities, she works full time in scholarly publishing, getting to contribute to the publication of scientific articles in journals.



Stories Editor, Aidan Mel is a writer living & working in the Greater Philadelphia area. He graduated from Elon University with a BA in creative writing and religious studies and is planning to continue his education by pursuing an MFA over the next few years. His work draws on his fascination with religion & mythology, examining the intersections between the two and their implications in his own life. Currently, he is working at an independent bookstore in Philadelphia, PA while continuing his writing.

Communications Strategist, Misbah Chhotani is based in Burlington, North Carolina. She received a



Bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Currently, Misbah is preparing to pursue graduate studies in hopes of becoming an occupational therapist. In addition to her academic pursuits, Misbah actively contributes to various online communities. She recently joined the team at Carolina Muse, where she lends her expertise to curating engaging social media content. Outside of this role, Misbah serves as an admin for a worldwide mental health Facebook group, providing support & resources to individuals in need. She also acts as a moderator for the Dermot Kennedy Discord community, fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment for fans of the artist.



Newsletter Writer, Jenna Kay Duxbury (she/her) is a writer, musician, and painter living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She graduated from Western Michigan University with a Bachelor's degree in professional writing and anthropology. As the project manager for an online community focused on nurturing the intersections of artistic expression & spirituality, Jenna regards the arts as a cornerstone for building community and enriching public & private life. In addition to her role as the newsletter writer for Carolina Muse, Jenna is the lead singer & keyboardist of Skeleton Crew, an alt rock cover band based in the Raleigh-Durham area. Currently she is learning how to rollerblade and play the trumpet.

credits

Carolina Muse Literary & Arts Magazine is a multimedia arts magazine primarily showcasing young adult creators in the Carolinas. Our mission is to provide a multi-sensory, immersive platform for young adult creatives that reveals the way various art forms can work together to tell the true stories of our human experience. We publish short stories & scripts, poetry, art & photography, music, dance in a digital multimedia format on a tri-annual basis. Whether you submit a document, image file, audio file, or video file, our team loves to see creators test the boundaries of their art form to bring their passions, interpretations, experiences, and messages to life. Submit your creative work to us through Duosuma.



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