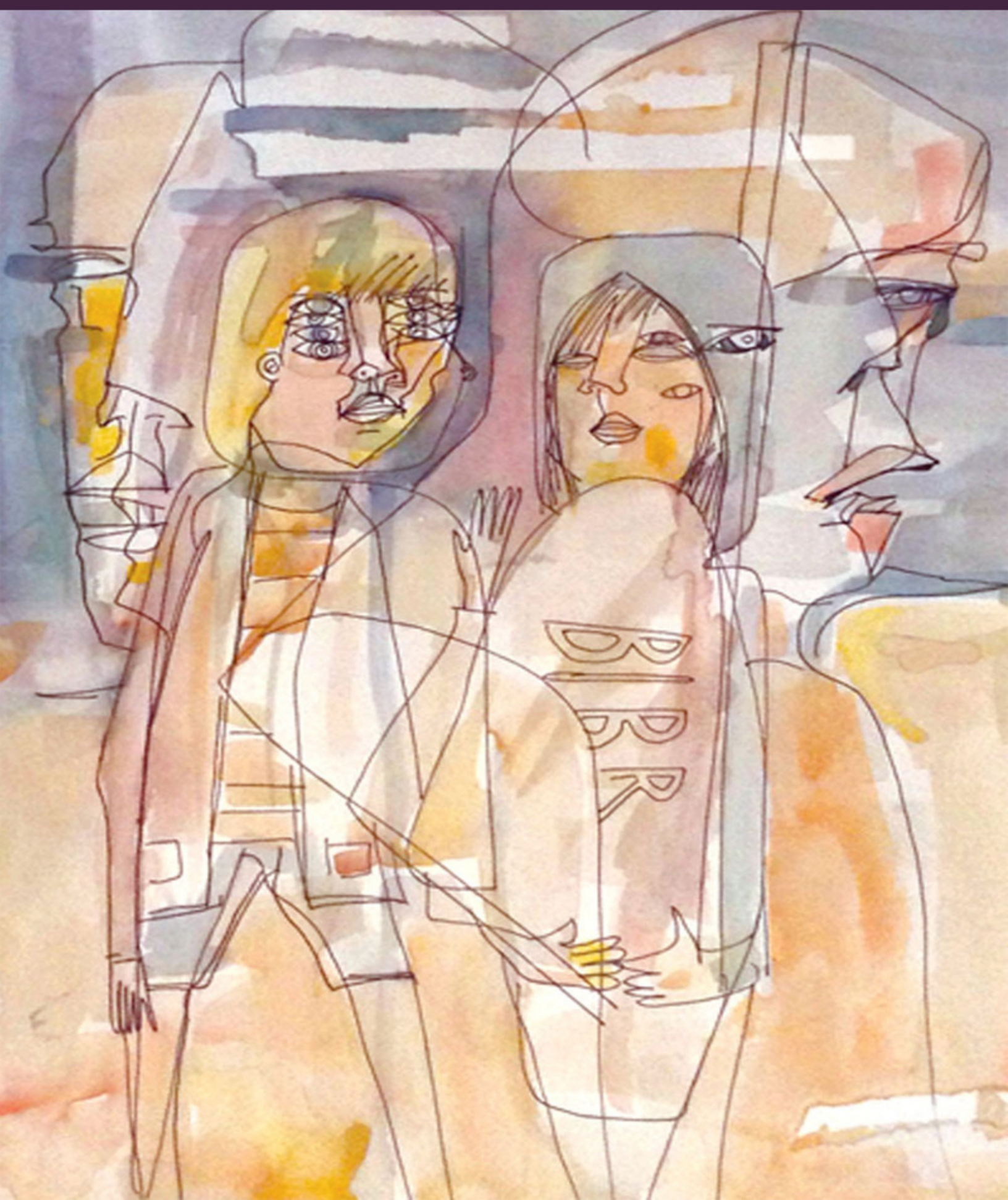


# PRETTY OWL POETRY







PRETTY OWL  
POETRY

ISSUE 5 | *Spring 2015*



## POETRY EDITORS

*Kelly Andrews*

*Gordon Buchan*

## FICTION EDITOR

*B. Rose Huber*

## FEATURED ARTIST

*Heather Simon*

slowdaze (Cover)

skykiss (Page 6)

mindwalk (Page 31)

ultragray (Page 40)

**WWW.PRETTYOWLPOETRY.COM**

**ESTABLISHED | 2013**

*prettyowlpoetry@gmail.com*



*Owls and logo design by Gordon Buchan  
Layout design by B. Rose Huber*





# CONTENTS

## POETRY

<i>Carol Shillibeer</i>	The problem of ephemeral human beings in deep time, or does the Fortress of Solitude have a single book?	7
<i>Mathias Svalina</i>	from <i>88 Poetic Forms</i>	8
<i>Jill Khoury</i>	The Agnostic Addresses Dog	12
	[optic nerve hypoplasia]	14
	the heart is at least as big as a fist, and	15
<i>Jennifer MacBain-Stephens</i>	Growths	16
	Ghost Fairy	17
<i>Jennifer MacBain-Stephens and Meg Tisinger</i>	My Friend Meg's Response to the Ghost Fairy	18
<i>Dominique Wagner</i>	Legs	19
<i>Les Kay</i>	One Hundred Words Written Near Winter on the West Side of Cincinnati While Several Dogs, My Wife, and Most of the City Slept	20
	Self-Portrait as Cipher	21
<i>Howie Good</i>	Before the Future	22
	After the Future	23
<i>Brandon J. Lefebvre</i>	Making Flurries with a Chainsaw	24
	Family Portraits	25
<i>E. H. Brogan</i>	Porchia	27
<i>Brian Keathley</i>	Excavation	29
<i>Donna Vorreyer</i>	I remember you best	30

## FICTION

<i>Anna Lea Jancemicz</i>	Garden Party of a Thousand Yesses	32
<i>Jose Angel Aragonz</i>	Spinster	33
	Oceans	34
<i>Lora M. Straub</i>	Staircase to the Study	35
<i>Ron Burch</i>	You Go Through the Window Only to Find the Door Unlocked	36
<i>Jason Peck</i>	Acceptance	38





# The problem of ephemeral human beings in deep time, or does the Fortress of Solitude have a single book?

Carol Shillibeer

it is here that meaning is sprouted  
you and I are the balloon skin of the thinking world

philologically speaking we have a long neck  
shimmering blue an extended eye

here's the truth: the dove is just  
a pigeon that we respect  
that's what words do

There is no other word  
but

*time*

Here I am  
looking around at the Permian Extinction  
plagioclase and the shatter-break of lithic history

[please don't die, but of course we all ]

to swallow is something the fetus begins  
and by this time, the Cenozoic  
has crystallized mammalian dreams

we claim to want a few simple things  
gopher holes and hawk feathers  
ocher deposits and sweet water ice  
the simplest of eternal truths

but really, under all the insulting solitude  
desire curls for the ephemeral and everlasting electron

all these moments of octopus hunting  
like *impossible stuff in coal and rock*  
or a woman working in Superman's kitchen

there is no word in the Vostok ice ::: instead  
Mickey Mouse. Klingon. Porpoise. Sphere.  
Leftover Turkey

and in another country  
Trilobrite with curling antennae  
polish marks left there by an African craftsman

the scariest thing in the linguistic world is a  
long sharp pin

or Iron-age tunics under melting snow

or the curling of macromolecules into things  
or the wind speaking at the open mouth of  
chemistry

a  
n  
d  
y  
e  
t  
it doesn't matter what it says  
It's not a song so much as 3 operas  
running simultaneously in an incense factory  
half-buried in a field where a thousand  
varieties of antique roses grow and skunks  
go to test their weaponry it's all happening  
in a summer ice cream storm carrying both grit  
from the murmuring volcano  
at the edge of the next valley  
and the whirling pungent of pine forests  
carried on the backs of burning needles

that's why we seek this dream of cool  
oh to have made Superman's simples  
have them bottled in a smooth icy forever

but instead we have become fossils  
the density of knowledge & memory  
a sandstone embedding

## **from 88 Poetic Forms**

*Mathias Svalina*

### 68. My Bloody Valentine

Step one: Listen to the music you loved most when you were thirteen. Do not imagine yourself at age thirteen, but at the age when you plan to die, listening to the same music.

Step two: Write what your thirteen-year-old self will say when she sees your dying-age self.

Step three: Add some extra metaphors; give the writing what is sometimes called “depth.”

Step four: Never listen to music again.

### 69. Languor

Step one: Decide love is everywhere.

Step two: Wait; be patient; watch things turn green. Greener. Greener than grass.

Step three: Enact a contradiction in the filling of a page.

Step four: Wear that sweater you never feel like taking off.

Step five: Revise the poem when it is at its greenest. Use all of its green.

### 70. Curse

Step one: LummoX your way to the mall.

Step two: Frankly express love for another person while both of you sit on the air conditioning exhaust unit in the back parking lot. Have the other person awkwardly fail to reciprocate.

Step three: Cast a curse on this person.

Step four: Use this curse as a safety net for all the things falling out of your life. Collect all these things; at the end of each week, write a stanza employing all these things as its images.

Step five: When the curse is done present the poem to the person. At this point you will be loved by him or



her. But she or he will not love you.

### 71. God

Step one: Create earth, the universe, man, etc.

Step two: Write a poem each morning & extinguish it each night.

Step three: While each poem exists proclaim it to be the only truth.

Step four: Revise each poem to take the truths out of it & then make each resultant text one stanza of the great poem you are creating via concourse & errata.

### 72. Contagion

Step one: Write down ten words that remind you of failure.

Step two: Each time you cough or sneeze, spread these words through the cough or sneeze. Touch door-knobs & light switches with your unwashed hands. Get the words everywhere.

Step three: Step back & watch failure spread out from you exponentially.

Step four: Create a vaccine of ten equally potent words for the original ten. This is the poem.

### 73. Barter

Step one: Write an old fashioned poem.

Step two: Trade the poem to a nurse for a pair of shoes.

Step three: Trade the pair of shoes for a painting of beautiful things.

Step four: After the accident be afraid to drive in a car ever again.

Step five: After the accident seek out new flesh, new tines to the old forks. Allow the nurse to do whatever

she needs to do to save you.

#### 74. Circle the Wagons

Step one: Wrap your arms around one who loves you.

Step two: Wait until the words fall out of her or his mouth. Get out of the way so that the words do not touch your skin & burn you.

Step three: Wearing protective gloves, collect the words & take them to a laboratory & put them in a beaker & put the beaker over a Bunsen burner.

Step four: Once the words have melted down into a yellow liquid take them off the Bunsen burner.

Step five: Wait for the liquid words to cool slightly & then drink them. What you turn into is the poem.

#### 75. Earth

Step one: Go into the woods until you find a clearing where the air is thick with pollen.

Step two: Look at all the animals that have stepped out of the forest & encircled you.

Step three: Pour the blood you have been carrying into the center of the clearing.

Step four: What grows from this spot is the poem.

#### 76. The Ocean

Step one: Wake at the bottom of the ocean; it is black & the pressure alone would kill you, but do not be dead.

Step two: When you need to breathe, hold your favorite poem to your mouth & nose & breathe.

Step three: When you need to eat let brine be food.

Step four: When you need to sleep, dream of what is buried beneath the tallest mountains, beneath your bed, beneath the doormat to the burned-down house.

Step five: Return to the surface, buy a condo in Cleveland.

Step six: Sit at your table or desk, turn on some good music & write a poem that reminds you of a poem.



# The Agnostic Addresses Dog

*Jill Kboury*

1.

Neurochemicals have guided  
me to these foothills.

They look like the buried  
backs of dinosaurs.

How to interpret this  
muddled sky?

Cirrus contrails cursive  
all through its vividness.

2.

If I were ice, falling  
with no haste  
through space.

If my rough sphere  
were distracted  
by Your gravity.

If my center  
disintegrated  
while being dragged

toward You  
by a force I only half  
understood.

3.

We hold this quantum	thread between us	maybe
How long for the weather	inside my head	to break?

4.

it's getting  
harder to  
focus on You

I gotta lie in bed  
long enough to  
stop shaking

5.  
my haunts  
pin my shoulders to the bed  
put their hands over my mouth

in it

they  
tongue my face  
leave their atmosphere

everywhere on me

and if I believed, You could  
say *stop* and it would stop

but you are  
ineffable

## **[optic nerve hypoplasia]**

*Jill Kboury*

pastoral play-actors conspire  
these cavalier inciters

erase the nest in the apse  
every aerie stolen, only scant hairs

(plaits and ravel  
riven too early, they starve)

carve trails into thin pine; then—spoilation  
sever inert parts into ashen teasel, torn horsetail

they poison the sepals  
leave no coils in the hive

snip & chip  
coarse epitaphs

they shave the shyer pairs  
reveal a tinier center



# **the heart is at least as big as a fist, and**

*Jill Kboury*

locked up like a rarified beau  
which is to say, it is a

rusted cage :  
only open with axe, or

put your ear to  
invective engine; it may be a

rat covered in tar, because  
genetics; rather a

fear barer searching for safe area, or

the huntsman has it

stowed under  
the unremarkable hedge; it is

tachycardic, or

it's a fey burr  
under there, maybe

a fluid earth—

will it die  
from these common factors e.g.

late with rent

amphetamines

velvet / couches / swooning etc.

what if

tenderer, it returned to

## Growths

*Jennifer MacBain-Stephens*

The chickadees were skittish at first. Then they began moving in. The first sighting occurred somewhere in Nebraska. I think her name was Debbie. She went on Maury Povich. Her introduction music was the instrumental version of 'They Might be Giants' "birdhouse in your soul." Everyone thought she had manufactured it. Then the audience members were invited to take a closer look. They saw the wood welded to her hairline. There wasn't even any scabbing. A few months later there another outbreak: a realtor, (many jokes were made at his expense,) a tax attorney, a librarian. There was no pattern. Fear set in. Experts were called. The government set up county quarantines.

Wood Crafters Labor Union 87506 protested for the next six months, wondering where this lumber supply was coming from. Then one day five builders woke up with the beginnings of a foundation along their scalps. They got pretty quiet after that. The colors were feminine, Easter-like: eggshell blue, lilac, buttercup, and periwinkle. Some of the burliest men I knew had a small raspberry colored birdhouse situated above one of their ears. When vast populations of both urban and rural communities joined the fray of forming birdhouse development syndrome, there were so many cases the experts couldn't keep up. There were lumber specialists, psychologists, surgeons, ecological scientists, all left grasping for answers.

I was one of the Super 8's. My house was the first to grow taller compared to the usual protrusion. My wife Susan couldn't take the media attention and she left me. I don't blame her- I had trouble focusing- literally- but also on completing tasks around the house. Sometimes, I was told, while sleeping, my eyes would pop open and stare straight ahead. It freaked Susan out. I think that was the main reason she left me. We went to therapy to deal with the helplessness, the anger, the alienation. Susan stared at the therapist's own frontal lobe olive birdhouse and felt biasness creep in. One group of people out west seemed immune to the growths. Susan, having never sprouted, eventually went out there to live. They try to tolerate the medical tests to the best of their abilities. I am alone with Rufus. He licks the side of the house. He enjoys the little goldfinch that makes repeat visits in the summer time.

We've begun sanding down the houses. If a sparrow isn't invested in the structure already, it only hurts for a few minutes. There is an unsightly base that is still visible but I've begun dating again. She is a nurse, her name is Helen. Her house is coral. I have learned to be more tolerant of peoples' differences. I enjoy little things. Someone stroking the back of my weighted neck is very, very nice. We have learned to live this way. We went back to work. We play sports- maybe less ball oriented sports, but we like to row. The backward forward motion is soothing. I am forgetting what it was like before the birdhouses. Helen threw away my baseball caps but I found one she missed the other day. I held it for a while, stared at the word, Mets.

## **Ghost Fairy**

*Jennifer MacBain-Stephens*

Like a dying Mercutio she dreamt a plague on our house and it materialized in the light bulbs. She turns on the bedroom chandelier at 4:30 am. It is not faulty wiring. Dead static wanders through colonial walls like gossip, explodes into mail box dandelions and mint aromas. I hear her crying when I am alone in bed. When I open the door to the hallway, the crying stops like yanking out hair from a zipper. Her Philip Pullman dust brushed off, tortured under a microscope. Her sadness no longer locked in a safe. I expect to hear crying nightly now, so I am a cold hearted bitch. A stomach growl is louder than my empathy. I envy my gastrointestinal tract. Yearning mounts in the gut, coveting nutrients. To hold something delicate, and then relinquish all bits and bubble wrap, absolved of responsibility.



## **My Friend Meg's Response to the Ghost Fairy**

*Jennifer MacBain-Stephens and Meg Tisinger*

Phantoms covet modern conveniences. Electricity is a wonder. Pipes: a dream.  
If your lights are flickering, it's just curiosity. Outside, rose bushes are hacked to thorns.  
Your ghost will prefer a fireplace to central heating. Apparitions claw dry wall. I just roll over.  
My bone marrow is full of frost. I feel scattered, dwelling with crazies. Who knows best how to  
play bad cop/good cop? It's the live ones that fret all day. I feel scattered, crazy with dwellings.  
It's the live ones that eat toaster pastries all day. I dwell with scattered crazies. The old ones  
crow: I feel dwelled, scattered, and crazy. The crazy ones scatter. The young ones eat more,  
sleep more, eat more, sleep more. It's the live ones I worry about. It's the live ones that dwell.  
We wake every day to tourniquets and maimed limbs. Wear ear plugs.

## Legs

*Dominique Wagner*

He gripped her ankles & swung  
her from bed to bag  
in quiet in motion.

Why is the body ruling this poem?

With hand: fumbled fitted  
sheet off mattress, cradled  
her neck.

How else does one move a body into a body bag?

*Careful, careful*, he said.

# **One Hundred Words Written Near Winter on the West Side of Cincinnati While Several Dogs, My Wife, and Most of the City Slept**

*Les Kay*

That was the night of  
mothlike snow circling rain  
of circling back to almost  
mothsize life: that first-

love filled with vowels  
though that was no love  
only larvae of what

love might mothlike be  
with one-day physicist,  
one-day writer, one-day  
whatever holding quark

hands beneath gunmetal  
monkey bars—figments,  
all, of circling, of probabilities

of playgrounds. That was  
the night of police flashlights  
circling neighbor yards,  
glaring cheap glasses,

as dogs slipped past the  
Asian honeysuckle to bark,  
of circling block patrol

cars with roof-mounted  
flood lights lit. That was  
the night of one hundred  
words. She missed Tehran.

## Self-Portrait as Cipher

*Les Kay*

The knot on the right side of the neck,  
the neck that has never been to Connecticut,  
only through it, the neck that tilted,  
as if inward, into live news updates,  
live streams, above a laptop on the thousand  
mile away kitchen table. A bubble bath,  
single-malt scotch, powdered donuts,  
the simulation of violence (a separated shoulder  
popped back into place—possible concussion).  
Reality is a tricky subject. Similes are  
as cavities. Everything is a cavity.  
I have never been to Connecticut,  
only through it.

I am a hesitation,  
an analogy. I would like to end dry aches,  
explain. I would like to be as prophylactic  
as quinine, as low-dose aspirin  
in a middle manager's bathroom cabinet,  
as an apple a day on a teacher's desk,  
I have never been to Connecticut.

Dense rocks orbit stars, galaxies  
of pain and knotting muscles.  
Every day. On every continent.  
I have never been to Connecticut,  
only through it.

And you? What do you  
want to do with all that love that latched  
itself to anything—even imaginary  
Connecticuts where rivers, foliate rainbows  
stand for something, something as impossible  
as everyone's knotted muscles.

## **Before the Future**

*Howie Good*

From the caged porch of the psychopathic ward, children with their heads wrapped gazed disbelievingly at a splendid view of Paris on loan from a French billionaire. Later, when the hospital was being used by the military, German psychiatrists strode down long hallways lined with maudlin tears. The building and grounds are now open to the public. A world made of ghost particles isn't just some theory, it really does exist. That was what I was thinking as I sleepwalked along. At the top of a worn staircase, there was a shattered window from which one could still watch the beautiful decay of a hanging red heart.

## **After the Future**

*Howie Good*

The sky was full of random flashing numbers – 86, 93, 54, 88, 467. I hurried home to warn you, a sleeping woman with a blue vase, but you were already gone. “Shit,” I remember thinking, “so this is how fire was discovered.” It was all part of the inconvenience of being me. That winter I would miss the sex and your iridescent glance, and have to settle for the knowledge that geologists who don’t predict a deadly earthquake aren’t killers.



## Making Flurries with a Chainsaw

*Brandon J. Lefebvre*

*The prologue to an outing with me:*

a pleasant conversation about the weather

It was snowing in October,

I was a child, pine trees breaking and cracking under the weight:

a reason to worship

Speaking of God for fear of the weather

each snowflake can be seen once stuck to the outside of the windows

each has a particular

morality

to impart

the trees explode when their insides freeze, the sap as amber

the kind that is unfulfilled, that is,

it possesses no fossils

# Family Portraits

Brandon J. Lefebvre

## 1) Reading *look up* in the dried cement

and lifting my head to gaze

through the chlorophyll into a stain glass high noon and  
realizing that I am hungry

*People often speak of stolen childhoods, I stole my own and tied it to a rocking horse that  
sits in a basement where my great grandmother would store canned pears*

*I worry about what we're preserving for the future children*

Do we declare the air vent that lifted Marilyn's skirt a historical monument?

## 2) *How many times do I have to tell you to finish your dinner?* **my mother asks me**

I hate meatloaf, but I am as famished as a little red wagon for a child's weight,

begging to be pushed

down to the point that it can feel the friction when its wheels move

the relationship between two objects, the causation of feelings

**purpose**

as the mother begs for the missing child, lost in the woods, in the wild, in life

"come home"

*For years my parents would call me in and then pretend that they had forgotten what they  
had wanted, they enjoyed watching me get upset at this blatant waste of my time: poking  
the bear in the zoo, but always remembering to feed it before bed*

## 3) **You imagine all conflicts as something biblical**

Pulling out the same scalpel that was used on the primordial slab,

the one Adam used after selecting which of his ribs would be cut out

to make the perfect Eve,

you cut the tire swing down during the twilight of late October, I had just blown out my  
birthday candles

*A noose will always hang from my family tree,*

*warning people that might desire*

*to participate in this cesspool of*

**ego, love, and tradition**

*after looking up the definition of cesspool*

*I thought it best to learn to float, I still want to be a part of it*

When I visit my family I'm a ghost that haunts the house, doing the things that I did when I

lived there

laundry, dishes, cleaning, finding the keys and the television remote,  
lost,

where people left them

Were I a politician being asked about family values this would be my response:

Dogs will piss on your bones and forget that they are supposed to be your best  
friends unless you pet them enough

#### **4) A self-orphaned child has a 50% chance of practicing solipsism**

I am the oldest I and imagine that I am God

hollowing out bibles to fill them with escape plans:

gun borrowed from the soviet firing squads,

bottle of pills on loan from an insomniac who never learned to love the bomb  
sense of entitlement

*you say "you" in place of "I"*

*I say "you" in place of "I"*

*misteaching myself that I have no brotherly love, no paternal bond, nor any motherly instinct*

*That is: an author choosing to be disillusioned with its own creations*

## **Porchia**

*E. H. Brogan*

*Some things become such a part  
of us that we forget them -*  
like when'd I take the last pill, can  
I take the next pill, should I  
be controlled and plan for forty-eight  
hours worth of tired, do I need to hold  
that kick back, wait for work, or has  
enough gone past that it'll last me  
well into the morning? I can do all these things,  
juggle six tri-colored bowling  
pins and balance a seven-inch knife  
on my nose while up and down  
my legs go on the pedals, red and white  
striped unicycle, I can do it sober  
it's just I don't. I have magic  
concentration. I have instant effort but  
I write still every day with powder  
or slow dose or nothing strange along  
my bloodstream for, oh maybe, six  
days, nothing strange at all. Who  
would turn down plug in turn on,  
TV full blast laugh track ecstatic,  
Andy's on the money tonight honey, all,  
and you sweep your chips back  
with each bet, your fingers dusted  
with a little magic, stringed coincidence,  
every girl and gem and feather reflection  
on the point exactly while your mind  
loosens up for once. It can finally shrug its shoulders,  
slip off its jacket, relax. The show is  
what movies want reality to be tonight  
while the director watches, so hard  
with satisfaction he steps back to watch  
the parts all turn as planned. They're pearl.  
Life with medicine. Without, countless orders,  
angry bosses, cues off half a beat and grind,  
much grind and choke. Life has sandy gears.

The audience won't know a shift unless it's for  
the worse: the stilt-man trips, the sword-man flinches,  
the clown forgets the punchlines for all his jokes.  
You can't have that. So take this. It'll aim you.  
All it does is line up every odd and end,  
guarantee a dime of every show.

## Excavation

*Brian Keathley*

Dig into bedrock and confetti  
the sorrow of coffee grounds  
blinking dusk and dawn in unison.  
Dig into brazen September  
my chest a cavern of intricate fire

Toast the innocent drumkit sabotaging  
the quiet medicinal and warm  
to the touch of sunrise insurrection  
collecting in the gulf our backyards.

Taste the angel of the floorboard  
night like a songbird in costume  
Feel me tuxedoed trans  
-lucent, -gendered, -atlantic and tired  
bored of punctuation and underpinnings  
of the crescents and the wounds.

Send me a flyer to exhibit on ice  
ashes aligned in multitudes of frost  
sipping from the tipsiest cup  
coupling a long stretch into forest.

Acknowledge my organ  
that reads music and the swaying  
of candy hips a scavenger nibbling  
the sky a mile of salty dogs  
bathing their tongues  
cupping water in reverse.

Feel me slow motion in your eyes  
constructed from sand  
Feel me starlit and sweaty  
muscles of rock bathing  
pestilence from flesh in a hot tub.

Feel me raising the gravelight before you  
escort me to tables of violet dining  
your neck a pulse in a grid of excavation  
Feel me request the touch of your gauze



# **I remember you best**

*Donna Vorreyer*

on summer afternoons - the flint seed  
light, chimes that shiver but don't quite

ring. The dross and the laundry done, the startled  
sob of waking already hours away, I watch the neighbors burn

branches downed by last night's storm. Cinders cluster  
like mayflies then sizzle, short-lived, in the damp grass.

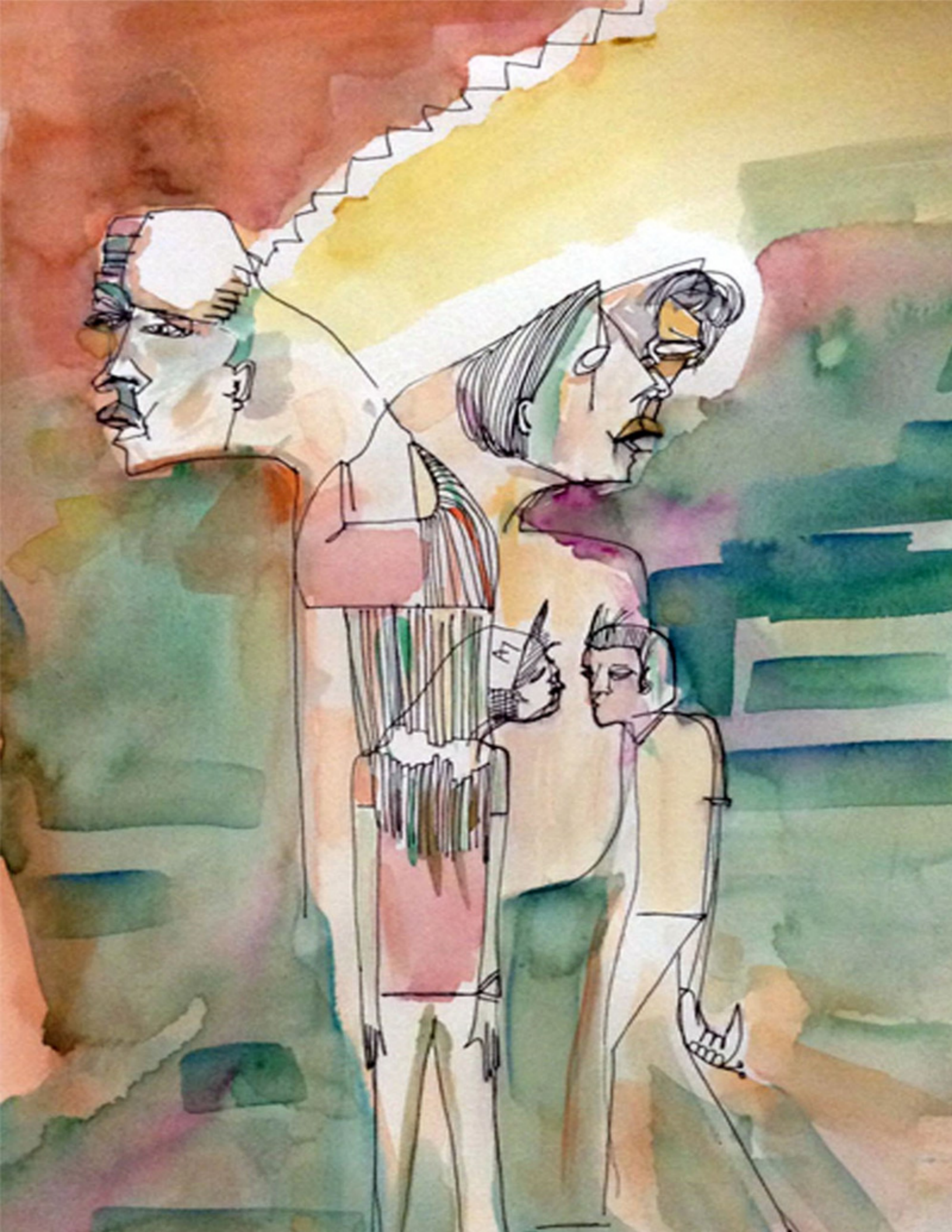
As dusk approaches, I ignite  
torches against the sting. Inside,

the winter coats, pockets loaded with ice, laugh  
at my sundress, its straps and froth fleeting.

You hated the cold. Outside, the yard percusses  
with birdsong, subtle instrument hammering

memory to my backbone. The wind  
can only sputter, my breath a caul

in the humid air. Night's guillotine offers  
no quick misery. It lowers its blade all too slow.



## Garden Party of a Thousand Yesses

*Anna Lea Janciewicz*

As the rim of the glass met her mouth, she could feel the cold of the ice weighing on the fine hairs of her upper lip. At the same time, the soles of her feet smoldered on the hot flagstones. Wisps of smoke curled around her knees. She watched him, dark and long, a dragonfly threading through the crowd, vibrating in the interstices between those bodies more human. Those bodies in excruciating shoes. Those bodies with chins tucked down, rheumy eyes pasted to little screens. Those with varnished fingernails, cufflinks. These are the things that set us apart from the beasts. But there was something about him that was unclean, something that made her belly growl low and loose. She imagined him as a river swollen with rain, every rock a wonder. She imagined him eating frog legs by the light of fireflies, scraps of dull skin caught between his teeth. She wanted to catpaw behind him, all silent ripple and vegetal hush, and give him a concussion. She wanted to extract him like a golden tooth from a dead man's jaw and keep him hidden in the deep pocket of her thrift store dress.

He caught her glance from across the pool, his startled eyes the color of eggplant. She had a bundle of brown curls and long summertime legs, reminded him of the older girl who lived in the apartment upstairs from his when he was six, the girl who was studying Library Science and believed in ghosts. He was compelled to weave his way to her, whisper the Dewey Decimal digits in her ear like a litany of love poems. He thought he'd like to haunt her bathroom, light upon her toothbrush with spindly spectral legs, hover in the space between her cotton shower curtain and its plastic liner. He imagined her in her kitchen, crushing coriander seeds with a mortar and pestle, singing along with radio songs. He imagined her washing strawberries, dismembering a chicken, dropping cubed potatoes like diamonds into a steaming pot of boiling water, all at once like a many-armed Hindu goddess. He took a slug of his whisky sour and hoped. But he knew even then that the hope was unnecessary, knew it like a whale knows wet. Like a muscle has memory.

He walked to her and clasped her hand wordlessly. She clasped back. When he opened his mouth to speak to her, it became a bursting sac of baby spiders, silk strands streaming bride-white on the wind. One thousand yesses, borne aloft. She ran across the lawn, her laughter buttercup yellow, jumping to catch each one.

## **Spinster**

*Jose Angel Aragonz*

You want me to tell you about life here: there was a castle where a woman was buried within a wall as a sacrifice. They knew nothing about her except she loved to dance. Later, there was a law against dancing. You knew when someone was breaking the law because the castle would begin to shake. Mother called the woman a saint: only someone who was pure could root out those who wronged. The night my father left, the castle crumbled down. Granted, this is only partly true. It was told to me and I tell you, not because I believe in dancing castles. I believe you have come here wanting stories, and all I have learned are reasons not to dance.

## **Oceans**

*Jose Angel Aragonz*

The oceans have not always been here. First, there was a man who grew up feeling out of place, who felt a pain he could not name and could do nothing about. He thought it could be love, for he had seen love acted out in others, but when he looked at the faces he knew, he did not see love. One night, he had a dream where the moon talked to him, called him to sit with her. When he said he could not, she turned away slowly, and he entered a darkness that woke him up crying, unable to move. The man kept crying for days, his tears drawing up around him, lifting him, and when he felt himself rise, he decided to keep on until he made the moon come back, and she did, slowly. The oceans have not always been here. First there was a man. Then there was sorrow.



## **Staircase to the Study**

*Lora M. Straub*

Your light is on. Open the door until there is a room to enter. Sink into—polish—the floorboards. The staircase steepens, wobbling the banister, your lifting grip. A note is made each step. At the top, another, and to your left, a spiral case; your right, smooth planes. Knock on one. No one. Seal your ear against touching silence. You've lost your ears and throat—

What else can you do, but turn and ascend the cloaked stairs? In the center there is darkness. It climbs and climbs. You are still, climbing, a leveling light absorbs you. Unlike sunlight, it has color, see? On your hands and sleeves. You've never seen light red like this, without returning black into an earthly glass. And even that was inside a screen. Your hands turn over—is this truly your texture?—and over. You smell, not mildew or dust, not anymore, but your sweat, your throbbing head, and someone else. It's so like you, isn't it, all of a sudden. Not it. If only you could find your face. This light, you've thought, is yours.



## **You Go Through the Window Only to Find the Door Unlocked**

*Ron Burch*

After you sleep with her, she tells you that she is married. Why didn't you say something? you ask. Because I wanted to fuck you, she said. We don't wear rings. My husband never wanted to. At first it bothered me but now I enjoy the freedom. She holds up her left hand, her fingers evenly tanned as if it were sprayed on instead of gained from the sun. This bothers you. You wanted to sleep with her. You very much wanted to sleep with her when you met her at the closing night party at the art museum, and maybe you had hoped this would not be the only time.

She says, I am a broken plate, not one safely stored in the cabinet. That I have sharp edges. That I cut. That I make others bleed. That I should be thrown away. Then she laughs.

You're being a little hard on yourself, you reply, not knowing what exactly to reply but replying with the first thing you thought of.

I do not want to be responsible for the break-up of your marriage, you say. She laughs. You won't be, she answers. But, still, you don't like it. This is how your marriage ended. The only marriage you thought you would have. Another man entered your house although your ex claims that you yourself were the other man, which is why she ended up sleeping with someone because she knew that that would end it. That, out of all the things, the drugs, the alcohol binges, the totaling of two cars, that that would make you say, Enough. Enough. Enough. She did not have the guts herself to do it. She merely used another man as a pawn to set you off so you would end because she knew that you couldn't go back to her after an infidelity.

You tried but, ultimately, you couldn't.

But you swore to yourself that you would never do that to another marriage. You didn't like having it done to your marriage; you would not inflict that upon someone else.

But yet you did. Unknowingly. And you find yourself in bed with another man's legal wife.

You could tell her to get the hell out. That she should have told you beforehand. That, yes, you could have fucked her just to fuck her and not thought about it again. But your experience has changed all that. You

wish it hadn't. You would like to fuck her again. And then again after that. She is too beautiful not to. And it was such a nice time you two had. A time you haven't experience in several years, not this kind of connection, not this kind of conversation, not this kind of intimacy. Not since your ex. And so you're disappointed and angry. But she puts her arms around you and strokes you and those feelings go slightly away and you kiss again.

You know you have to do something or this will continue and continue and continue because you are weak. You have always been weak when it came to love and sex and you don't trust yourself with her. You have been alone too long.

She excuses herself to go to the bathroom and you wonder if she's even told you her real name. You see her purse next to the bed and you dig around it in, where you find her driver's license floating around, and it is her all right but you find something else. You pick up the phone and dial. The phone rings on the other end as the toilet flushes in your bathroom and as she comes back into the room, a man answers, a man who sounds tired and worried and perhaps sad and as she charges to you, you say into the phone, Hello, I'm really sorry to tell you this but I have just slept with you wife as she lands the first blow to your head and you understand and you appreciate it.

# Acceptance

Jason Peck

That afternoon I drove our old dog to the vet's for the Big Shot. Afterward, they handed me his ashes in a box shaped like Chinese takeout. My hands shook. Explaining this death to my stepdaughter fell to me.

My friends had coached me beforehand on the proper tone of voice, told me to speak of a dog Heaven filled with organ music and slow-footed squirrels. Tell her the needle's quick, they said. The poisons didn't burn.

And buy her ice cream, someone added.

My stepdaughter's grip tightened on the vanilla cone until it cracked. The fur-spotted dog blanket still covered the back seat of the station wagon and filled the space with his scent. She cried with shrieking sobs and a runny nose while the ice cream melted and stained the fabric. By the time I got a word in, she practically had a milkshake.

Dogs have so little time, I told her. If lucky, they live to be teenagers.

My voice sounded distant, all-knowing like a Discovery Channel narrator. Her sobs halted and she looked to me. My eyes held hers with a slippery grip, and I looked away often.

They get seven dog years to our one, I said. We humans live far longer. So if you still have questions, then don't worry...

Her eyes were watery and cracked through with red, watching with expectation – down to her last sniffle, but the silence seemed more imposing.

...you have time, I concluded in a cotton-soft voice.

And then her aunt died.

We got the call at dinnertime. My wife exhaled, her shoulders sank and she motioned me over. We've ordered out every day since, the table now covered with the solemn Hallmarks of the well-wishers, with directions to the funeral home, reservations for out of town relatives, bills for the cemetery plot.

I can't handle this, my wife whispered. Break the news to her the way you know how. The way you did last time.

So here we sit, my step-daughter and I – same station wagon, same ice cream flavor. The stain's still present, along with the dog blanket. So too is the *My Yellow Lab is Smarter Than Your First Grader* bumper sticker that she wanted, oblivious to the irony. Except this time, she's angry and silent and I don't know why.

I tell her death is beneath the concern of a six-year old. That we needn't give it time or thought, but live our lives. That her aunt passed peacefully the way she wished, and watches down on us from an afterlife more in line with TV than the Bible. Without her haunting the house, I quickly add.

Her eyes still glare. Why so mad? I ask.

Aunt Janine's getting flowers and the whole family's coming to see her in church, my step-daughter replies. And she was mean to us. But no one cared about my dog.

I'm silent. The ice cream melts down my hand.

Why *should* we fawn over Aunt Janine? I now wonder. The dog stood between my step-daughter and her drunken biological father in the days before I entered the picture. The dog took a kick in the side, and my

wife left her old husband for good that night, just the three of them – mother, daughter and hero. The dog stared me down with suspicious eyes when I first moved in. I won his approval with time, and his respect honored me.

Bored, the girl crunches her cone while I ponder. I need an answer, but nothing comes. What did Janine ever do for us? What did she stand for?

Janine didn't stand, in fact. She sat instead, the better to double-fist 40-ounce beers and condone my wife's ongoing abuse. Years after the divorce, she mailed letters about the lives my wife had ruined.

Yet Janine gets flowers in the hospital. The dog got a lethal injection. Even elementary school kids can notice my poor priorities. The old lines about mortality don't answer my questions either. But I try them regardless.

Now I tell my stepdaughter death takes time for understanding, along with other complex concepts like algebra, Jesus and the Dow Jones. I use these examples because I don't grasp them either. And when she asks how long before she herself achieves that understanding, I stumble and pick an arbitrary number.

Ten years, she repeats after me. We'll be ready by then?

"*We'll* be ready?" I ask aloud, but she sees through me as always and I nod yes. Ten years. Breathing room for us both.





# CONTRIBUTORS

---

**Heather Simon** is a California native with an MFA in Creative Writing and Literary Translation from Queens College where she currently teaches. Her writing and visual art often converge, drawing inspiration from the ocean, mythology, astronomy, and skateboarding. Recent print and online publications include Ink Brick, Nomadic Sojourns Journal, Blunderbuss Magazine, and The Rumpus. See more at [www.inkmonster-ink.com](http://www.inkmonster-ink.com).

After a wildly productive life as an alchemist, **Carol Shillibeer** retired to read tarot, stalk Hierocholoë odorata in the lands west of the Pacific cordillera, and consider the implications of post-human materialism. Marginally more information (including her publication list) can be found at [carolshillibeer.com](http://carolshillibeer.com).

**Mathias Svalina** is the author of four books, most recently *Wastoid* from Big Lucks Books. *Civil Coping Mechanisms* will publish his collaboration with photographer Jon Pack, *The Depression*, in 2016. He lives in Denver & is an editor for Octopus Books.

**Jill Khoury** earned her MFA from The Ohio State University. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous journals, including *Portland Review*, *Arsenic Lobster*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Inter|rupture*. Her chapbook *Borrowed Bodies* was released from Pudding House Press. You can find her at [jillkhoury.com](http://jillkhoury.com).

**Jennifer MacBain-Stephens** is the author of *Every Her Dies* (ELJ Publications), *Clotheshorse* (Finishing Line Press, 2014,) and *Backyard Poems* (Dancing Girl Press, forthcoming 2015.) Recent work can be seen / is forthcoming at *Toad Suck Review*, *The Poetry Storehouse*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Yes, Poetry*, and *Hobart*. Visit: <http://jennifermacbainstephens.wordpress.com/>

**Meg Tisinger** is a graduate of the University of Iowa. Her poetry has been featured in *Revolution John* and her photography has been featured in the chapbook, “*Every Her Dies*” (ELJ Publications, 2014). She currently resides in Iowa City and likes to disappear into the forest to hunt for snozzberries.

**Dominique Wagner** is currently an MFA candidate at Columbia College Chicago & has been previously published in *Apiary & Hyphen Magazine*.

**Les Kay's** first chapbook, *The Bureau*, is forthcoming from Sundress Publications in 2015. His poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in a variety of literary journals including *Cider Press Review*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *The McNeese Review*, *Redactions*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and *Southern Humanities Review*.

**Howie Good** is a fellow of the Daley Wisely Center for Advanced Poetics.



**Brandon J. Lefebvre** is 25 and doesn't write nearly as much as he should. (S)he instead imbibes digital elixirs and discusses politics with a stuffed Cthulu under the glowing masks of horror films.

**E. H. Brogan** is a graduate of the University of Delaware with a B.A. in English. She has poetry in or forthcoming from Star\*Line, Cider Press Review, Bop Dead City, and others. She blog-runs and co-curates for Kenning Journal. Her house is built of books. Tweet @wheresmsbrogan for more.

**Brian Keathley** recently received his M.F.A. in Creative Writing from The University of Tennessee. He has previously been published in Eclectica. He currently lives in Tulsa, OK, where he teaches 9th grade English.

**Donna Vorreyer** is the author of *A House of Many Windows* (Sundress Publications, 2013) as well as six chapbooks, most recently *Encantado*, a collaboration with artist Matt Kish from Redbird Chapbooks. She is an assistant poetry editor for *Extract(s)*, and her second collection is forthcoming from Sundress Publications in 2016.

**Anna Lea Jancewicz** lives in Norfolk, Virginia, where she homeschools her children and haunts the public libraries. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming at *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Citron Review*, *theNewerYork*, *Rivet Journal*, and elsewhere. Yes, you CAN say Jancewicz: Yahnt-SEV-ich. More at: <http://annajancewicz.wordpress.com/>

**Jose Angel Araguz** is a CantoMundo fellow and has had poems recently in *Pilgrimage*, *Salamander*, *RHI-NO*, and *Borderlands* as well as flash fiction in *NANO Fiction* and *Star 82 Review*. He is presently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Cincinnati. He runs the poetry blog, *The Friday Influence*. His chapbook, *Reasons (not) to Dance*, will be published summer 2015 by FutureCycle Press.

**Lora M. Straub** is a working writer living in Cambridge, MA. She received her BA in Literary Arts from Brown University and was awarded the Judith Lee Stronach Scholarship for Excellence in Poetry by St. Mary's College of California, where she earned her Poetry MFA. She considers her writing to be hybrid genre and is in the finishing stages of her first book. Her work can be found in *Brown Alumni Magazine*, *BlazeVox*, *Wild Quarterly*, and *Wave Composition*.

**Ron Burch's** short stories have been published in *Mississippi Review*, *Pear Noir!*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Pank* and others. His first novel, "Bliss Inc." was published by BlazeVOX Books. He lives in Los Angeles, where he is Co-Executive Producer on a TV show for DreamWorks Animation. He is also a produced and published playwright. Please visit: [www.ronburch.net](http://www.ronburch.net).

**Jason Peck's** fiction has either been published or is forthcoming in *Crack the Spine*, *Fabula Argentea*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Cheat River Review* and *3Elements Review*. He also serves on the editorial board for *After Happy Hour Review*, which recently celebrated its second issue.

