

RUST & MOTH

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Lyric in the Sprawl of Wound

The Christians are playing
their anvils again
outside the Planned Parenthood

& like the clanging things
I too am black &
have been wrought

& so I grab a mallet
to beat myself & feel
what it's like to be heard

& the mallet can't believe
what it's been asked to do
& the sound I make

is out of tune & untamed,
is reverb & flame
the way riot is flame,

the way bloom & bud
& blood are flame &
when they stop their play

to watch me like I am the sun
and might do anything to anyone,
I realize this is the only way to live.

To put your voice to song
and wrap the song in fire.
That is what is required.

evidence for the necessity of my removal by child protective services

For example, there were holes
in my mother's faded blue jeans, the edges frayed
like the uncombed hairs lining her forehead.
This is how she answered the door.

For example, the contents of our refrigerator:
beer, an onion, three Capri Suns, and milk,
expired four days. The sky in my drawing
hung black at the top of the freezer
because there were no sky-colored crayons.

Our walls didn't have pictures. What they did have
were cockroaches. I wasn't old enough to be afraid
so I made a game of folding mail into paper planes,
aiming for the poor ugly things.
The corner behind the kitchen table
looked like an airport.

For example, I puffed on my inhaler
and watched the unnamed smoke creep
under my bedroom door as the music and
the loud voices boomed down the hall.
I knew never to call 911.

For example, I remember my mother
sitting on the sofa at night
doing coke and listening to Alicia Keys
by the glow of the TV. We slow danced to it.
Those were my favorite kind of nights.

Llorona

She wails a white handprint
where the riverweeds dance like claws
no snow but river sand

a white voice singing to the children
Weep with me, niños,
dress washed white as salt

river-white moon bleached
Weep for the pale moth
a mouth at each drenched breast

ten tiny fingers clutching her hair
Weep for ice rime and mother's milk
ground up like bonemeal

white in the water
dragging the little ones to sleep
burns the lungs like frothy fire

October Morning

I stopped to watch the leaves fall—
not overly sentimental—appreciative
merely of their slow drop through a suspension
of autumn. Of course, leaves fall

every day, but these were so perfectly
straight, so unwavering in their path, like plumb
lines clearing channels to some far-off
shore the wood alone will reach.

There are windy days when they are hawks,
sporting with each sullen thought of wasted
summer and empty sail, of the piles
rustling like vultures at the feet

of trees. It is so tiring. Windswept
and talon-marked, I admire
all things that find the straightest
way down.

Shelter. Cage.

Somebody made it elliptical, not angular:
Things that start one-where end
elsewhere. You keep trying, even if thwarted
when, on a grey day, the sun won't work
as a talisman. Might as well be in a maze.

Trumpetvine, wisteria, plus princess flower.
Bougainvillea, with its irksome papery tidbits
dusting the ground. Jasmine that startles you
when its musky hints appear. And what a bother:
a tiny pink rose is mostly eclipsed, too high to see.

What do you think you are doing here,
behind such a complex hedge? A gardener
deals with the tangle, but what a strange
idea to cluster these motley plantings
around the patio. And then allow a serpent of ivy in.

Married Almost Fifty Years

Had she known
they'd be here
for so long,
she'd have brought
more with her.
But she didn't.
And they're stuck
with what they have.
Years tangled
into a tight ball
they roll between
them. Small fists
of winter rubbing
the windows
in the morning.
Dollhouse days
where they move
from room to room
to room
in search of food.

My Grandmother was Once a Girl

When you turn her hands over to reveal palms,
you will find death almost
pretty in tender holding.

If you turn them over again, you will find paper
skin, veins knotted with caducity.
Her face is a wetted dress

brought from the attic
to dry among the tall grasses,
her home

a reused casket
with windows to fields
to small holes made by

blind creatures
with curved teeth.
Will you tie me to you

as we descend?
I keep telling her, in my soft voice,
you were meant to be painted

mid decomposition
with colors of fallow,
not a young thing

to be found but the song
of birds hithering spring
while we hang mirrors

in the trees to watch
red cage mushrooms grow,
each hollow heart emptied

at the mouths of flies.

Roman à Clef

Summer days my dad was drunk by dark,
firing his shotgun at the grackles,
those golden-eyed phantoms whistling in the hemlock.
Later, ma would send me
into the blackness to find him,
lost in Crawford's orchard,
mumbling to himself in the dirt.

I was sixteen when Suzanne the beekeeper
peeled off her spacesuit
on the green bank of the Pacolet,
a 9mm tattooed on her right breast, a bible on her left.
I spent July & August
worshipping the pistol & the good book,
came to on a slippery rock,
bloody & bone-bruised,
when she left for Murphy in September.

I still picture my parents as the shadows I knew
when we lived in that rickety house,
the creaky bones, colander roof, staircase
moaning like an out of tune cello:
dad, who died sober a decade ago, pacing in the woods,
ma, whose memory dried like a creek bed,
floating through a blue room with a vacation smile.

Some nights it's like I ride those wings
back to the river & the evergreens,
Suzanne towering in the wet grass,
hands slapping at the moon.
My body flares with the din of the grackles,
their manic jazz, one savage horn rising over the rest.
In dream after dream, it's the music I always wanted,
& before I wake, starlight
spills over me, over everything.

Apologie

Some people listen to French
lessons in their sleep.

They wake up to say *bonjour*
to the cat and scramble an *oeuf*.

Years ago, we said *je t'aime*
in place of *I love you*—a placeholder,

a meter long—a distance
we needed then. And now,

Tu vas! I whisper to you
as you sleep. Go!

Go, when what I mean is
don't you wish, *encore une fois*,

we were young again, or I was,
or for that kind of beauty.

If He Has to Go, Let Him Go on Horseback

At the divide my father breathes in, then out, the north wind
lifting the land under us, a sheet shaken out and laid on a bed
with the moon half full out the window.

Pines tremble along the ridgeline, creeks back up, all the world
waiting for his next breath. When it comes it carries my name with it
saying Look:
and I do—

but all I see that way is the shadow of an afternoon thunderstorm
making its way toward us, and closer in—below the river's cleaving—
the wreckage of an old fire.

The Uphill Side of the Story

That rusting, ragtop Mercury was all we had to get us there.
Muffler wobbling low enough to tattoo asphalt on a tight turn,
loops of clothesline holding fast the hinged-wrong, rear-right door.

Coldest December since God was a boy, the crabber warned,
as he bought us beers in the back booth of the Hideaway.
Heap-a shit you got out there won't make it to Leonardtown.

The bar was warm, lulling, but you were all balls and fuel,
so we peeled out on Route 5 with a jaw-whacking clatter
fit to wake the staid Catholic ghosts spinning in St. Mary's soil.

Despite the wind that blew in salty, keening from the river bend,
we cranked down our windows to thin the carbon monoxide fumes,
while our teeth and bones rattled like cartoon skeletons.

In Hagerstown the snow stung in slantwise on raw faces, knuckles,
but the car shuddered steady as a lover who'd been faithful for years.
It wasn't till Hancock that the grinding bucked us, the black smoke rose

up over the hood in snaking coils and roiled inside our breathing.
Still we very nearly made it before the muffler fell off in the snow,
before the motor popped like cleft glass, then faded away to nothing.

We left a trail of blowing boot prints that last steep mile into town.
Never again would I be as sure of who we were as that night we walked
together, up into the blue Alleghenies and over the Cumberland line.

Lines Written On the Third Thursday of November

The curtains were yellow.

The bedroom was blue from the light, like a continental shelf
in the sea. Reaching for the blackout
shades, I spilled a glass of water on the sill, soaking
the pages of Woolf and Tranströmer.

Out the window, I saw a man charge
another man, shove him into a car. Across the street,
a gawker closed his glass door.
I did not want to wake you.

In lieu of wildfires

There is so little to call ours except caution,
a little myth, the pan

of stuffed duck cooling on
the counter. I zip myself into bed. My grandmother

wakes up at 4 am to exercise. Call it an exercise
in faith, how she bets on dawn. Meanwhile

Mama colors her white hairs. Then she stands
before the topography of unwashed dishes

and breathes with her chest. The tomatoes
are ripe now. Go look—they're growing out the garden,

in the pot with a peace sign
tattooed in the clay. The mothers I miss

shrug off their jackets, leave them folded
by my door. I cut off any loose threads,

heat them up with my palms, & cling.
When I look up, the sun is gone. Remember

to never leave visions unattended.
I mistake California in fall for

apocalypse. The clovers here have
too many leaves to count.

Apostrophe With Jbrekkie and Mom's Spaghetti (September in Brooklyn)

Here in a seventh floor doctor's office waiting room I wonder what the hell
is crab stuffed shrimp and how one stuffs a shrimp and how

all these cooking videos can't beat Mom's spaghetti which is not really
spaghetti but *guà miàn* topped with spiced ground pork and

eggs scrambled with tomatoes which Mom and I call *xī hóng shì chǎo dàn*
and my partner calls *fān qié chǎo dàn* and we laugh and I could really use

their smell here in my tiny shared apartment where someone decided to eat
the constituents of a ham and cheese sandwich over the bathtub.

It is the season of letting my guard down, the season of forgetting
to cover my ankles with sunscreen. My friend brings me pears

from H Mart and suddenly I think that every care is the first song
of a concert, that edge of bursting when Jbrekkie sings *the body is a blade*

and I want to believe her but sometimes I think mine is more
like a butter knife which is meant for cutting through soft things and not
this

New York City where the cars are always screaming and the starlings
don't give a damn, when crying feels like the best

sex ever, when a single word from a stranger makes me fall
into confession and I remember how I love that I live in a world with crab

stuffed shrimp and mom's spaghetti and pears and pears and pears and
pears and pears

This Is How I Want to Die

—after “*The Starry Night*” by Anne Sexton and Vincent Van Gogh

Sucked into the black hole of a new moon.
Boiled into roiling clouds over a silent town.
Devoured by hungry stars, seeking due dust.
Ravaged by the rushing beast of the night.
Birthed through a wormhole into who-knows.
Nexted into no-cry, no-country, no-God.

Firefly Sacrament

In the grass, reliably damp in the twilight blue beneath
our naked feet, their limply blinking abdomens
seemed missionaries of the stars. With reaching hands,
clasped like prayer, we stole their frail bodies,
rendered relics of holy flame. They clung to one another.
Our desperate hands ushered their accumulation,
a living hourglass of light and crumpling wings.
We thought ourselves gods with saints on our fingers,
but now, in this new grass in the maw of the sky with you,
I see that we are fireflies, not stars but fragile bundles
of wings and lungs that need space more than heaven, need air
more than fire, release more than love. Left blinking
for our sleeping gods, we suffocate. Sacrificial living things.

the butterfly is a symbol of gender transition

but i'm scared of butterflies

scared of breaking down
to scattered memories of a girl
eating herself alive
until there's nothing left

scared of wearing self
as a thorax wears wings,
hiding the horror of this body
between gaudy spectacles
of dirted orange or faded pink
beating dead against the wind

scared of mothers crying
behold, the beautiful you!
before whispering of the ugly
caterpillar i once was, gifting
their daughters with knowledge
that they were born whole

scared of flying away
into the bloom'ed maw of forever
and never seeing the darkness
of my cocoon again

my god, i'm scared of flying

letting go

you cross out
names that do not
feel like home

until you run
out of names
or out of ink—

Roadside, ghost

When I swing the dust-
 throated door into summer
 prairie weather turns my breath to ash.
Language here is distance, then thunder—
 the heat a slow murder.

In a ditch outside town
 a flowered cross
 all white lilies and violet thistle
marks like prayer another gravel road death.
 Painted horses at the fenceline
 eat the gunmetal sky
 knee high in wheat, in wind.

I cross the rust-
 threaded barbed wire to feel
 the brittle grass of this field beneath me, to feel
 the pull that tethers our feet to dust.
That old fence howls and your name burns
 my eyes like lightning.

Bone cottonwoods so crooked
 in this place built on straight lines
shake free their dark starlings.
 They gather in flight
 a shape I nearly recognize.
Further out, a buckskin pony
 is galloping hard into opening air

 is becoming a book of feathers.

I wanted to slay the dragon for you

Under fluorescent lights in the aisle of Funyuns, you read Bazooka Jokes, lingered over baseball cards, shook Cracker Jack Boxes the same way the dragon shook you. Your arms, caramel corn and jack cuffed in his iron grip. How you rattled against his beefed bones. Cringed at the stench of cigarettes on his breath. And even when he couldn't shake anything out of you but dad's pennies, his nostrils flared. A firestorm escaped from the lair of his mouth and snaked around the stacked Skippy all the way back to the ice cream sandwiches where I hid. Only your sister and a few years older, what could I do without a sword, but crawl inside. Play dead and let the freezer bite into my skin.

Escape

the way the jesus christs rose

the way they mangled the car even more

to get the remains of the body out

the christs circling like carrion crows

the way they mangled the body even more

to get the remains of the car out

the bloody ravished ravaging christs

each wound the petals of a rose

pulled to pieces by hands of loves

and loves-me-not till the severed stump

remains the jaws of life the spine

christ the stretcher like a bloody shroud

the cross a stem plucked free of petals

the puzzled glass the mangled glass

the gown of glass on the ground with a hole

the size and shape of a thorned crown

the crows smeared like tire tracks

across the remaining lanes of sky

testifying to christ the inability

the inability to jesus the fucking

jesus christlike inability

to stop in time

Distributary

I want to tell you how I found a clock
hidden by a quail egg

& slowly, shaking, lifted it toward light
to see the life inside it shift

like underwater smoke. But before I could
my father's rifle shattered silence

& sent the swallows weaving through
a storm cloud.

Perhaps I'm only half
retelling the truth around the egg

& how the light was not light
but the brooding dark that gathered

over homes with chimneys
& erased, as it will, the trees, & if not the trees

the creek that gave us koi to catch
if one was willing to surface.

So few that if I swam its depths
I'd catch a single fin of copper flash

& follow where a culvert cut the field
& spilled into a graveyard.

I held my father's hand there once
& gazed into a hole in the earth.

He was weeping while he cleaned a gun
& squinted so his sight

could travel the barrel with a quartered
rag & wipe away residue.

This before the sick that ate his blood
& turned him to a shadow.

Before his boy would lift an egg to look
for life & find inside a single spider

wrapped in human hair. When he
died I watched my sister curl into herself

& whisper his name again & again,
as if time could too be stopped by voice

& the rain reversed. Denial the root
of decay.

The Week in Longing

There is so much ending and beginning
just this week alone

and I can't catch any of it,
not to keep, or truly know.

Deep under an ocean full of longing
they've found part of the belly
of the space shuttle that blew
back when I was in high school,
another part added to the vast
stores of wonder, debris
and heartache NASA catalogues.

In deep space they've seen a neutron star
pulsing on the darkest stage
for more time than it should,
described its pure neutron shell,
as though we could reach out
and brush its surface longingly.

The astronomer who described
these stars as "such weird exotic objects"
found a spot in my brain
few other news stories reach,
like the rosy tentacles of the shy
Pacific octopus tenderly enclosing
a diver in what must surely
be a form of longing,
its warmth and trust
holding for nearly an hour.

The same sense of security
ensnared a rufous hummingbird
with unseasonably warm air up north.

Missing the cues to migrate,
she was stuck when the air
suddenly turned chill.
Overcoming her suspicion
of a clear box that held food
she found herself on a long drive south
where a woman released
her at the Canada-US border
hoping the bird's instincts would kick in.
And I am caught by each
of these endings and beginnings,
their familiar sorrows. I pine
for nothing new in a restless world
that's nothing but new all the time.

Power Outage: Office

None of us knows how
to make small talk.

So we watch the rain loosen
its tie, begin a slow sashay.

All week grey hung
like a low angry fruit.

Now every window weeps,
is a taped off crime scene.

Horns in the distance—
traffic lights are down.

One by one we drain
our link to the collective.

This could be the end
and none of us knows

how to tell. Someone,
bored, unearths a book

along with the memo
on going paperless.

Diagnosis: Eye Strain

I'll need special glasses, to filter blues.
Less fluorescent glare to glare into.
And every twenty minutes, the doctor says,
focus on something twenty feet away for
twenty seconds. It won't crystallize,
won't make everything perfect again.
That wall will resolve into a wall.
The parking lot outside your window
will still map out who is doing better.
Or worse, what has stayed between
the lines. But maybe it can ache
a diopter less, the way a hardness set
before you divides, is less solid,
a kind of ghost only kind of haunting
wherever you choose to look so long as
you choose to look through it.

Inheritance

On the night of my mother's disappearance,
I sat wedged between two classmates
on the way to my first dance, wondering
if I'd be pretty enough to be visible.

Her abandonment should have undone me,
but the terror of this impending appraisal
eclipsed the dim unease of her missingness
so fully, she disappeared into it.

At the dance, I watched as the other girls
were peeled from their places along
the wall by boys whose new power jangled
in their pockets like fresh-minted coins.

I stared straight ahead as my not-chosen-ness
became more and more conspicuous,
the wish-to-be-visible morphing into
the wish-to-be-invisible, which is

the wish-not-to-exist awakening—
a wish with a grip strong enough
to open a bottle's lid and enough hunger
to swallow everything inside.

As I leaned against the wall of the darkened
gymnasium, my mother sat on the edge of a bed
in a hotel room, dropping pills down the well
of her throat, wishing herself out of her body.

What a strange inheritance, this not-enoughness,
this auctioneer's call—*will ya give me,*
will ya give me, will ya give me,
going once, going twice,
gone.

There Was a Time

There was a time when there was time—

time was everywhere—escorting falling leaves,
polishing puddles so we could jump back in.

We'd romp back home with buckets of
moments in our rainboots, moments
stretched across our faces, moments
seized by Daisy's tongue and wagging tail.

Time jammed our bloated clocks—see, every
second contained sixty
minutes so thick the sun had to plough
through the day like an icebreaker—

so much time was crammed
in the S's and R's and double-O's
of mama's bedtime stories seasoned
with Daisy's bedside wheezing

and the small hours of the night were fat and full of stars.

In the dawning snow I unburied a thirteenth year.
Then the vet said it's time
and mama told Daisy good night
with a very thin double-O
and all the clocks in our
lives started ticking.

About the Authors

Aliyah Cotton is a queer poet of color from the Northern Virginia/Washington DC area. She earned her MFA from Boston University and her work has appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. Aliyah lives in Charlottesville, Virginia where she creates music under the moniker October Love.

Jonathan Lenore Kastin (he/they) is a queer, trans poet with an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. His poems can be found in *Mythic Delirium*, *Goblin Fruit*, *Liminality*, and *Abyss & Apex*. His short stories can be found in *Cosmic Roots and Eldritch Shores* and *On Spec Magazine*.

Reyzt Grace is a transfemme Ashkenazi poet, essayist, & librarian working in English and Yiddish, with writing in *So to Speak*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Limp Wrist*, and Pushcart nomination lists. She appears herself in the mastheads of *Cordella Magazine* and *Psaltery & Lyre*, in the aisles of vintage clothing shops, and on a small circuit of café terraces.

Annie Stenzel's (she/her) collection is *The First Home Air After Absence* (Big Table Publishing, 2017). Her poems appear in *Atlanta Review*, *Chestnut Review*, *FERAL*, *K'in*, *On The Seawall*, *Lily Poetry Review*, *SWWIM*, *The Lake*, *Thimble*, and *Third Wednesday*, among others. She lives within walking distance of the San Francisco Bay.

Maria Surricchio is originally from the UK and now lives in Colorado. She began writing poetry in 2020. Pushcart nominated, her work has been published, and is forthcoming, in *Pirene's Fountain*, *The Comstock Review*, *Lily Poetry Review*, and others. She is an MFA candidate at Pacific University.

Kelly Gray lives in a very small cabin with her beloved family. Her writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Permafrost Magazine*, *Northwest Review*, *Trampset*, and *Under a Warm Green Linden*, among other fine journals.

John Amen is the author of five collections of poetry, including *Illusion of an Overwhelm*, finalist for the 2018 Brockman-Campbell Award. He was the recipient of the 2021 Jack Grapes Poetry Prize. His work has appeared recently in *Rattle*, *Prairie Schooner*, *RHINO*, and *American Literary Review*. He founded *Pedestal Magazine*.

Michelle Hendrixson-Miller received her MFA from Queens University of Charlotte, where she served as poetry editor of *Qu Literary Magazine*. Her poems have appeared in *Thrush*, *One*, *Josephine Quarterly*, *Poems and Plays*, *The Moth*, *Adirondack Review*, *Still*, *The Fourth River*, *Harbor Review*, *Mudfish*, *The Museum of Americana*, *2River View*, *One Art* (January, 2023), and others.

Jeff Ewing is the author of the poetry collection *Wind Apples* and the short story collection *The Middle Ground*. His poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *Southwest Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Willow Springs*, *Subtropics*, *Utne Reader*, and *Cherry Tree*. He lives in Sacramento, California.

Melanie McCabe is the author of three collections of poems, most recently *The Nights Divers*, as well as a memoir, *His Other Life: Searching For My Father, His First Wife, and Tennessee Williams*. Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and many other journals.

William G. Gillespie lives and writes in Brooklyn, New York. His poems have appeared in *Eunoia Review*, *boats against the current*, *Red Eft Review*, and *Olney Magazine*. He is a graduate of Amherst College.

Mackenzie Duan is a high schooler from the Bay Area. Their writing has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, the National Youngarts Foundation, and The Poetry Society.

Jingyu Li immigrated to the states at age three, and grew up in Wyoming. She graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and now resides in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is interested in myth and metamorphoses. Her work appears in *Okay Donkey*, *Humble Pie Mag*, and is forthcoming in *Palette Poetry*.

B. Fulton Jennes is Poet Laureate of Ridgefield, Connecticut. Her poems have appeared widely in literary journals and anthologies, and her collection *Blinded Birds* (Finishing Line Press) received the 2022 International Book Award for a poetry chapbook. Jennes' poem "Glyphs of a Gentle Going" was awarded the 2022 Lascaux Prize.

Emily Jaster is a poet, essayist, and student of architecture from Cleveland, Ohio. She lives in Cincinnati.

Jennessa Hester is a transgender poet and scholar working out of Lubbock, Texas. She serves as a managing editor for the *Iron Horse Literary Review* and as a poetry editor for Wrong Publishing.

Emily Ruth Verona is a Pinch Literary Award winner and a Bram Stoker Award nominee. Her fiction/poetry have been featured in anthologies and magazines including *The Pinch*, *Lamplight Magazine*, *Mystery Tribune*, *The Ghastling*, *Black Telephone Magazine*, and *Coffin Bell*. She lives in New Jersey with a very small dog.

Lane Henson is a writer of poetry living in Duluth, Minnesota. His words have recently been published in *Oakwood Magazine*, *Great Lakes Review*, *The Thunderbird Review*, and *Midwest Quarterly*.

Rashna Wadia's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Terrain.org*, *Yellow Arrow*, *Salt Hill Journal*, and elsewhere. She was the recipient of the 2020 poetry prize from Kind Writer's Literary Magazine. She reads for *Chestnut Review* and resides in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and two cats.

Kent Leatham is a poet, translator, and educator. His work has appeared in dozens of journals and anthologies in the United States and abroad, including *Best New Poets*, *Ploughshares*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He facilitates the Monterey Bay Poetry Consortium. He is proudly pansexual.

Luke Johnson's poems can be found at *Kenyon Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, *Florida Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Thrush*, and elsewhere. His manuscript in progress was recently named a finalist for the Jake Adam York Prize, The Levis through Four Way Press, The Vassar Miller Award, and is forthcoming fall 2023 from Texas Review Press.

Dagne Forrest's poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared in journals in Canada, the US, and the UK. In 2021, she was one of fifteen poets featured in Canada's Poem in Your Pocket campaign. She is an editor with *Painted Bride Quarterly*, as well as a member of its podcast team.

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Suzanne Langlois's collection *Bright Glint Gone* won the 2019 Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance chapbook award. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Quarterly West*, *Whale Road Review*, *Scoundrel Time*, and *Leon Literary Review*. She holds an MFA from Warren Wilson College, and teaches high school English in Maine.

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