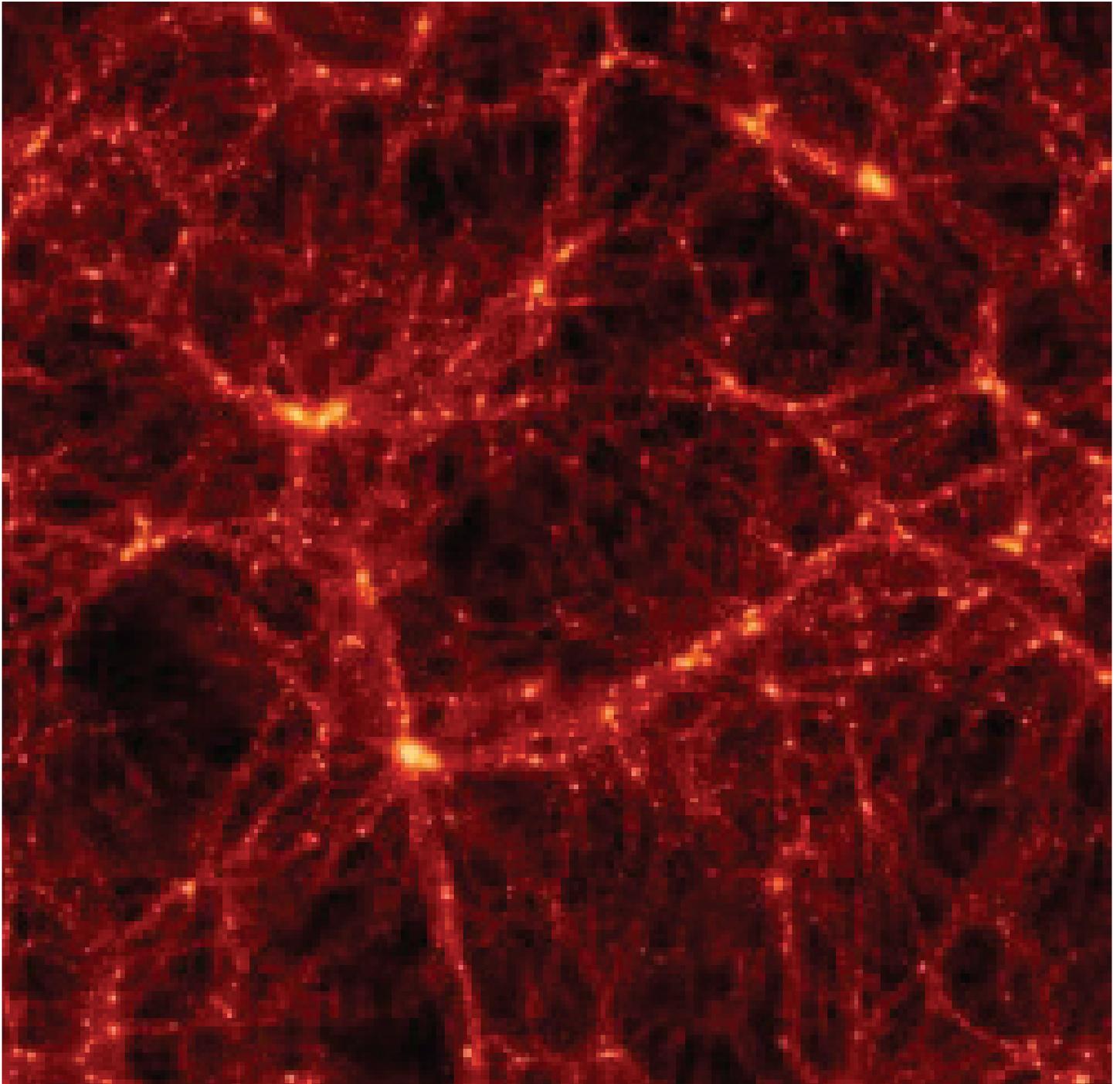




DARK MATTER

A JOURNAL OF SPECULATIVE WRITING



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DARK MATTER: A JOURNAL OF SPECULATIVE WRITING



Editors

Midar Balimuttajja
Najah Khan
Maryam Ogunkoya
Gloria Rivera

Advisory and Contributing Editors

Dr. Robin Davidson
Dr. Bradley Earle Hoge
Dr. Lisa Morano

Managing Editor

Dr. Bradley Earle Hoge

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Editors include students from the Natural Science Department and Faculty of the Natural Science and English Departments. Correspondence should be directed to Dr. Brad Hoge, NS Department, University of Houston - Downtown, One Main St., Houston, TX 77002-1001.

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Forward

I can't claim more than coincidence that the first issue of Dark Matter is being released the same week as the announcement of the likely discovery of the Higgs Boson. This particle that gives mass to the universe and offers the promise of confirming supersymmetry and explaining dark matter. And I can't help but reflect on how this coincidence highlights my own reasons for writing poetry.

I am a scientist. I am fascinated by the details of reality, the unfolding of explanation for natural phenomena. I am inspired by the cold universe, the music of strings played without need for consciousness. But I am also driven by a search for meaning, not mystical, but satisfying to my own mind. Whether emergent property or not, it is human consciousness that imposes meaning onto the quantum fabric of reality.

And this is where I find joy in speculative literature. The opportunity to predict what is beyond science, but still within the realm of reality. Not available to experiment, but not reliant on mystical thinking. Exploration of the unknown without restraint of theory, but without giving up on reason. The imposition of reason into discourse by questioning whether it is the Higgs boson that provides substance to our universe, or the thoughts and ideas that convert matter and energy into art.

There is occasionally found in poetry the claim that rejecting knowledge allows us to better appreciate beauty. That we have lost our innocence and connection to the beauty of nature as we have become more sophisticated and dependent on scientific inquiry. Though I appreciate the motivation for this claim, I can't help but bristle at it. I see only the expansion of opportunity for wonder from new discoveries rather than loss of metaphor. While we may use metaphor to describe our connection to the natural world, the natural world itself as discovered through scientific exploration, now provides metaphor for interpretation of experience and the search for meaning.

And if one considers the challenge of defining reality itself, it is certainly natural metaphor that will help us navigate our acceptance of new worlds and multiple universes. In a sense, there may be no such thing as reality, but only stories. Stories of particles dancing into order. Stories of rocks crumbling and forming, cycles of stars exploding, and children fulfilling promises. So many people with stories to tell. All of humanity's stories woven together to create the fabric on which the universe becomes meaningful.

Thus is born the impetus for Dark Matter: a journal of speculative literature. The stories, essays, and poems in this first issue provide wonderful examples of what we believe speculative literature is all about. We hope you enjoy them as much as we do.

Between the Raindrops

What is said between the raindrops?
What is uttered 'neath those spheres?
And above the falling droplets
What timeless mystery plucks the ears?

At the crossroads and the inbetween
Is where our life is living
At the chink & in the seam
both the parting and the giving

Can you sound the depth of silence
and to that rhythm dance unfeigned?
Hum the hush that, uncreated,
between life and death remains?

At the crossroads and the inbetween
Is where our life is living
At the chink & in the seam
both the parting and the giving

From Where Things Come

Fall will be here soon
the big west hill along the bay
now silhouettes just after five o'clock.

It's shadows play in the ripples at the water's edge
makes the ground squirrels whistle-happy,
geese anxious to fly sooner to evening's roost.

A piece of wishing fuzz, a seed of hope,
lifted from a cattail or dandelion—floats by
I capture it in my hands imagining
what I might do if luck were to be truly planted,
then send it over the bay on a silver whiff of wind.

The marsh wren considers it a good day
scolds me with sharp chirp and up-tilted tail
before returning deep into its reedy recess
within the safe transition of shoreline.

later, as I drive home, a swallowtail butterfly
flutters its powdered wings aimlessly
into the path of my windshield—Instantly
squirting into a long lemon curd.

There was really nothing I could do about it.

And at home, the radio is stating
that some 750,000 Somalis are starving
from a drought, the old and young
will surely die.

The weather forecast calls for a clear night,
no storms expected. The stars appear
silver and sharp, as if newly filed and painted.

Later, I'll read a book that arrived on my kindle,
wonder again about the news
and this feeling that follows me around
like the neighborhood mutt.

We will walk to the window and pull in my portion of sky
as if it were a fishnet, examining the catch for anything unique.
When I climb into bed the mutt jumps in too.
Hidden under the scent of clean, white linens,
we'll wait on the serendipity of dreams.

Double Moons

After my annual exam
you look at me like a sea sponge.
Do I still possess the organs
required to teach my classes
and digest my brown bag lunch?
Has cancer brisk as a wasp nest
formed in some dusty corner
where my intellect rarely goes?

A slick of November snow coats
the new road to the hospital.
I glance from your office window
and admire the woolly mammoths
browsing at the tree-line. Flaccid
as a pair of failed dissections,
daylight moons track a lazy arc
from this universe to that one.

You've never heard that the mammoth
went extinct several eons ago,
that paired moons mean deep trouble.
You whack me with your stethoscope
to get my attention, then brag
that your new folksinger husband
writes songs with end-rhymes dainty
as two brooks merging their flow.

I wish you the full enjoyment
of meal after meal of roast mammoth
and lovemaking by the ivory light
of double moons. The vicissitudes
of my body mean nothing to you;
but somewhere I've concealed a gland
that excretes an essence vital
to you and the landmarks you love.

The Neighbor's Cat

I am not Homer, but
I am blind.
My neighbor Schrödinger
told me he has no cat.
I hear the cat, though.
My neighbor insists,
insists, yes,
insists that if I cannot
see
the cat, there is no cat.

I have named
the nonexistent cat Pandora.
I call to her when my neighbor
slides into another neighborhood.
I hear her plaintive reply,
distant, muffled,
tangled in the ticking of
a Geiger counter.
My ears observe her
distress.
I think: perhaps
he should change her box.

Adoption

My identity was stolen
before I even had it.

Not fair, perhaps, but there it is:
my original birth certificate
locked away in a safe deposit box,
keeping secrets in its yellowed envelope,
holding names of strangers I never knew:
 one young mother
 one young father
 one April child.

If I decide to look at it some day,
what happens to the name I have had
for all but a few moments of my life?
What happens to the person
I've always thought I was –
 daughter, sister, wife, mother?

What if, after these many years,
those surnames on the document look familiar,
families from my small Ohio town?
What if the only upshot is regret
for seeking knowledge
that can never be un-learned?

Yet, I wonder about repercussions either way:
like the tree falling in the forest,
if my history is written, but I never open it,
will it still make a sound I can hear?

Isotopes

My proteins degrade in splitting cells
like that of any ordinary tree in the
5th century. I am a bath of charged ions,
a lattice of carbon bonds that walks to
the edge of where you're sitting and listens,
this time a trigger for a layer of memory.

My past is upstart growth, attack of a
heavy gall that drags my limbs on

the ground when I run to where you
are sitting, my favorite descendant of
an ape. Let us begin the evolution
of grooming again. We are a fraction of
this earth's gentleness, gone in the flow
of a brief instance. We whisper.

Our instincts surface in a blight of words.

We observe the history of the creature
in us, our thoughts' mitosis into past
and presence. Our skin signals too late.

My past stands hollowed out, burned
up through the core, a break from the rain's

persistent animus. I take shelter
in a body assembled from pieces, its
grain running headlong into the future,
where the isotopes I've used grow old.

The Golden Pattern

He thought about her as he dug through the trash. Coffee grounds, pasta sauce, rice, and bits of fish stuck to his hands. Her expression when he left shifted in and out of focus. Sifting through tainted vegetables and rotting meat, he reminded himself that he was on the right path.

An opening door scraped—a cook from the restaurant.

“Get the fuck out of here before anyone else sees you.”

The food wasn't worth an argument. He rode west for a few blocks. Royal stretched in front of him, intersected at right angles by streets leading north and south. Herds of tourists and a junky on the corner of St. Philip were figurines in a crumbling architectural model. Scratching feedback reverberated from condemned minds.

Latticework of interlinked shapes blurred in concrete. After taking a left down an alley, he found another restaurant. His hands, sweaty, slipped on grip-less handlebars. He stopped next to a few recently filled trashcans. Thoughts of his previous self, his previous awareness, surfaced. Before, he wouldn't have been able to differentiate between the acrid thickness of the day-old meals and the rich smell of a fresh fish dinner. Windows of telepathy and geometric patterns lacing roads now seemed normal. Heightened awareness of smell was subtle, and still felt new. He found a red snapper with a few pieces cut from it.

He sensed that he was about to get caught again. He put the fish in his bag and rode away. The fish smell slowly overpowered the stale, old-mayonnaise odor seeping from concrete in the quarter. Unease lessened slightly with the thought of eating. Work occupied him so wholly, he often forgot about food.

Immense rectangular prisms protruded from the ground. Dissonant noise of garbled thoughts faded in the looming quiet of downtown. He had gotten better about the focus of his receiving, but in densely crowded areas, people's thoughts often coagulated into walls of noise. The air felt thick in his lungs. He still wasn't fully used to the Southern Louisiana humidity. Riding with hands on his thighs, he sat up straight. He wiped sweat collected in his beard, smoothed his blonde hair, which was slicked back with grease.

An abstract line connecting patterns and equations hovered above him. A vivid sunflower appeared in his mind. Seeds wove together in irrational arcs, a design creating the tightest possible concentration of points.

Hidden in the arcs of the sunflower was a message he couldn't decipher.

Threatening eyes fixated on him. Looking around, he only saw concrete columns supporting the highway. He needed to get back to the house to make sure his documents were safe.

Torn houses loomed on both sides of St. Charles. To his right, an empty lot surrounded piles of rubble. Metal framework jutted out of concrete chunks. Splintered window and door frames constructed tangents, sines, and co-sines. Shattered glass, intermeshed with dirt, glinted

in the afternoon sun. He passed a few people that looked lost to him.

Turning at angles connected by a relationship too complex for anyone else to understand, he wove between streets. He stopped two blocks away from the house he inhabited. There was a man in front—a lifeless hulk muttering toothless stories. The bum was harmless, but he still had to be careful. He already had to leave three houses because of carelessness, because he compromised the safety of his documents. He didn't want to find a fifth.

He watched from behind a dumpster while the bum stumbled down Magazine, bulging grocery bags in each hand. His brain channeled a new number strain, which exhibited an increasing intricacy. He made sure no one watched, moved the loose plywood covering the backdoor, and went inside.

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust. Old dirt drifted through his nostrils and lips, sticking to his teeth. Kaleidoscopic shapes in rotting floorboards became defined. When he could clearly see cyclic, layered nets of squares, triangles, and hexagons, he navigated through his security system of fishing line. The line was tied to nails in the hallway, arranged by a seemingly sporadic, yet calculated design, a system he used to make sure no one tampered with his documents.

The room's familiar, musty smell comforted him. Needles of light from cracks in the plywood-covered windows cut through the room. His belongings—a sleeping bag and cup, work jacket and pants for cold weather—were tucked neatly in the left corner. He uncovered a hole in the closet wall, over which a piece of plaster fit snugly into place, where he kept his documents. Suddenly overwhelmed with certainty of an unwelcome presence, he checked the room. A cockroach crawled over torn and curled edges in the decrepit, floral-patterned wallpaper. He peered through slits in the plywood covering each of three windows.

He lifted the documents from their place.

He nearly collapsed as a sea of sunflowers filled his vision. He saw himself preaching, screaming, reciting golden equations, chanting decimal streams. Thousands of people crowded around him. They listened to his words with fervor, ready to embark upon the sacred journey at his command. Each person: a piece in the puzzle. Their lifeless bodies formed a spectacular rectangle.

The contrast between the perfect image and the room nearly made him vomit. Clarity of his purpose—the divine task he had been searching for—created urgency for him to leave. He remembered the fish, forced himself to eat.

Adjusting his loaded pack, he hesitated next to the curb. Faded, cracking pink paint created angular designs on the house's gray wood grain. Graffiti decorated particleboard covering the windows. Drooping branches from trees on either side connected to the patched roof in parabolic arcs.

The abandoned house perfectly contrasted the house around which his dreams once

revolved. The mind that inhabited that idyllic space, with her, seemed foreign. He knew leaving this abandoned house, progressing toward his journey's final step, would fray already stretched connections to his past.

Importance of his task surged through his spine like the beginning waves of an LSD trip.

He forced himself to pedal. Smothering sentiment, he thought about his cause. Numerical messages overshadowed his bodily existence. Eyes following him down St. Charles weren't as threatening. The weight of his documents in his bag—hundreds of pages filled with scrawling handwriting—comforted him.

A woman and two children, gaunt, with empty eyes, stared at him as he rode by. They stood in front of a mangled house, its roof collapsed, gaping holes in the walls. He saw wandering, impermanent beings, trapped in a gray corridor, oblivious of the golden realm. He pitied them. But the chosen ones would find him.

Streets and buildings sprawled, connected by fractions, angles, and equations deriving from phi. At a park downtown, he stared at a large live oak. Drooping sun bathed the tree in light. A thick horizontal segment intersected its trunk. The proportion of the horizontal segment to the ground, over the segment to the top, equaled the proportion of the trunk's entire vertical length, over the segment to the grass. Pointing to the sky, heavy perpendicular branches rose on both sides of the intersecting segment. Smaller branches swirled above in a globular labyrinth, spinning in mathematical dance.

He rode northeast. While he waited for the traffic on Franklin to clear, he heard yelling. The voice sounded far off at first. Tight fixation on webs of geometric interconnection drifted as harsh, unintelligible words from a crack-head polluted his consciousness. Looking at the addict, he thought about telling him how to sacrifice his body for entry into the golden realm. But the crack-head couldn't understand. Vacant eyes and gaps between his chemical-eroded teeth revealed an inner void.

The addict, like most others, would never see.

Houses with missing siding, broken and boarded windows, fallen rain gutters and overgrown lawns drifted into industrial warehouses on Marais. Looking at train tracks, he knew he was supposed to be there, at that precise moment. Weeds sprouted from litter-strewn dirt. Their roots trickled beneath the surface, eventually connecting with all other roots, continuing on until earth's core. Instructions for eternal life had always been present in the natural and artificial. The messages only needed a channel.

He lay down in the weeds and watched the sky deepen. An industrial moan from the train shook the ground.

Rust clung to his calves as the train gained speed. His bike slid, pedals scraping across layers of dirt and iron oxide. He tried to shift his focus off the train's drone. Disjointed

memories played in his head.

At first, he thought disease consumed his brain. He thought his sight was an illness rather than a gift. For two years he woke up, every day, convinced that he could overcome this illness with will power, with medication, that he could, again, learn to find meaning through human logic. The possibility of attaining his old dream—a life with her—faded with realization of the permanence of his new mental processes.

“I don’t see why you’re doing this. You just need help. Don’t do this. I’ll help you.” Her voice strained, hysterical. Burgundy strands of hair clung to her cheeks.

He tried to explain phi’s path. He had to devote his life to solving the equations channeled through him. She didn’t understand. He wanted to be with her, but it wasn’t like before. Knowing he would never see her again, he dropped out of a graduate philosophy program at the University of Denver, where he had been awarded a teaching assistantship, where he also met his fiancé, introduced by a mutual friend because of their similar tastes in music, stopped paying bills, left his car parked on the street in front of their rental home, abandoned his old life to decipher strains of numbers.

Memories distorted into a gray mass. He suddenly felt like he was viewing the scenes on a screen in someone else’s head. Weight on his viscera convinced him of the past’s reality.

Through a crack in the train-car door, he watched night swallow New Orleans. He pressed his back against the corrugated steel square of the car end. Rectangular definition of the car’s edges faded into darkness on the opposite side. Shadows wanted to erase him.

He forced his thoughts on the field. Ultimate unity drew closer. Masses of people gravitated toward him. He guided them with messages sent along telepathic highways. They were different from the lost faces roaming the decaying wastelands of America. Instead of blood, energy—beautiful light—emanated from them. Greens and yellows undulated. He and his followers were ready to do the extraordinary, to sacrifice their lives; the gateway opened.

The stench of shit and piss mixed with thick dirt and rust. He felt his bag, made sure his documents were still there. Dark figures of trees passed. Closing his eyes, he saw himself in the center of a golden sunflower, irrational arcs swirling around him.

Next to Nothing

The night is florid with stars and lightning cartwheels across the sky.

Winter flew into my eye
a splinter of ponderous aftermath

from the god of broken shells.
The no man's land of humid

morning shatters like the corset
of her skeleton.

Scattered claws of storm clouds
are demonic and low

like my acre of resistance.
I am bizarre: a harem

of milky sea glass a brothel
of quivers a wheeling garter.

The labyrinthine pier of your
mouth is in the hysterical stones.

Dragons of cumulus are gathered
into the hem of this storm

and I wish for you to unfold like
the drapes in the old house—

mystical and inappropriate, the sound of baroque knowledge about why

you are gentle after the pestilent hurricanes the calluses the reverent grasses the long
stretch of beach framed by the alphabet
of birds. When I am alone I can see
the god of broken shells wave his scepter across the strata of confetti along the shoreline
and stitch the shards together with nothing but air and salt—the stuff the soul is made of.

Pain Language

If something is wrong, hold in your muscles. If around the nerves you are swollen, and your tissue is upset or damaged, like a plate of spaghetti, grab a noodle. A sliding will happen. If the pasta's too sticky, don't worry, it's going to stretch. Sort of like, if I have a hose and I pull on it, the more I pull, the thinner it's going to get. It's a hurtful thing that you're doing to your body, this shooting pain thing. A pinched nerve, a sensation you would rather not have. Someone steps on your foot, then you suck on it, and the numbness becomes ambiguous. There are different types of numbness. I don't mean true numbness, the dull or sharp point, like an eraser or a pinprick, when you can't tell the difference. It's more like a nullness, for lack of a better word. It's in another category altogether. It's a very non-specific quality. It's blurry. My arm aches. Where exactly? It feels heavy. Now let's move on to injury...

Whisper, Whisper, Beneath the Leaves

The foundation is only a rubble now, gravel scattered across the floor of the glen as though a game of jacks. Leaves, a rustling like the tattered hem of longskirts, sweep over the compact floor of concrete and stone studs over cold earth. Here and there a brick or rusted nail, long forgotten, out of place among the pinecones but still clandestine, hiding, hiding, like the green woman should have when the blaze of torches drew closer. Nature takes back everything, and viciously, a chokehold of ivy leaves and kudzu envelop the remnant of a chimney, stretching furiously towards a sun blotted out by lashes of pine branches where once they looped a noose, leaving shadows on the leaves and acorns, a spell and a pall over the stillness of the ground. After the fire, the grass knives back up from the earth greener, more tender, brighter somehow from the beauty of the burning. Foolish fire, whispering from the leaves, a beckoning like the safe flickering lamp of hobby lanterns: drawing travelers from their safe paths, receding back into the dark whips of branches by nighttime. A ghost candle, burning down the wick in the thatches and rubble, set down on a forgotten table, set to sup with boiled bread, spiced with ergot, a mouthful of madness and mushrooms gathered from the glen. At dusk, she brings back a basketful of morels, ramshead fungi, both the fleshy fruiting bodies and the bodies of woody leather, to draw the knife across quarter-wise. The stew that will never be eaten, a dinner always interrupted by the torches of villagers. Toxic breads like honey fungus, beneath the stump: thrives on the dead as well as the living. The season's polluted blackstrap molasses is the will-o'-the-wisp, leading able men from their tables, their wives and daughters caught up in the thrall of amanitas, ghost fungus, and the death cap on rye, wheat and barley. In darkness, knots are fashioned by calloused hands. By the pale light of stars, obscured by treetops latched together like a steeple of fingers at prayer, the green woman turns black, at the end of a rope and an accusation levied without the aid or word of God. There is foxfire in the glen, bioluminescent toadstools and fairy rings, everything glows and crackles as the sky lights up as though dawn was arrived. The first rays of sunlight find cinders, a smoldering, only a foundation and a scarecrow, black now where once this forest floor was green. It feeds the crows, who bit by bit, scatter the bones and hair of the green woman for more miles than her legs might have taken her before. On a hundred fragile feet of the centipede, flesh is borne back to the dirt, the leaves, and the fungi of the forest, hidden now beneath all the things that live beneath the surface. From beneath a blanket of moldering leaves, a whisper, the bones of a witch, *I am still here, I am still here, I am still here.*

The Seven

Under the law of 13 February 1790, at the height of the Revolution, all monasteries in France were closed and their property confiscated by the state. Most monks and nuns dispersed, while a few embraced martyrdom. At the abbey of Cendres in the center of France, a group of monks pledged to stay together in exile. Six young men attached themselves to their abbot, an aristocrat named Augustin-Théodore-François Chasselieu, Comte de la Rue.

Disguised as a troupe of actors and jugglers, the Seven traveled on foot to Switzerland, where they sought refuge with the Carthusians. This arrangement proved impractical. The Swiss monks followed a strict regime of silence and fasting. The younger French were inclined to honor creation with a bit more *joie de vivre*. They moved on to Bavaria. The rise of Napoleon and the wars that engulfed Europe drove them from one place to another. This period of wandering endured for years. Naturally, they compared it to that of Moses and the Israelites.

At last, through the influence of relatives, the Comte de la Rue arranged for his little flock to emigrate to America. In the autumn of 1799, again in disguise, they reentered France near Besançon and tramped west. At the site of their abbey, which had been looted and burned, they paused for a melancholy hour. They searched the ruins for a souvenir. The result was a silver coin bearing the image of the executed King. They proceeded down the valley of the Loire. At the port of Nantes, they found a daring captain who went by the name of Rafleur and a fast ship, the *Délivrance*. Slipping through the English blockade, they crossed the Atlantic in the dead of winter and arrived in Baltimore, the premier Catholic destination.

It was a new year, a new century, and a new country. The exiles set foot on American soil and rejoiced. They made inquiries, regained their strength, and were entertained by notable citizens. Spring enlivened the Maryland landscape, as they traveled west by covered wagon. They struck the Potomac River at its confluence with the Shenandoah, at a hamlet known as Harpers Ferry. Which way should they go? The Comte de la Rue tossed the precious coin in the air: “*Que le Seigneur décide.*” The Seven boarded a shallow *bateau*, as the natives called it, and floated up the Shenandoah.

A few days’ journey brought them to an area of meadows and rolling country, with the Blue Ridge shimmering on the horizon. Covered by virgin forest, it put the monks in mind of their native France, the Loire and its fertile limestone terrain. The fledgling town of Hapsburg was nearby, but not too near. They contacted the owner of the land, an absentee planter. He was pleased to let them settle and improve his tract. They negotiated a lease that would eventually lead to purchase, and named the place after their beloved province of Berry.

The early years were filled with hardship. The Seven felled trees, built a rude structure of logs, planted their first crops, and started a dairy herd that would become the envy of the county. They overcame the suspicion of their Protestant neighbors. They formed friendly relations with the *sauvages*. They acquired a reputation for fair dealing with a dash of French style. The Comte de la Rue set the tone, helped by the fame of the Marquis de Lafayette and French aid in the American War of Independence.

Miraculously, none of their number succumbed to starvation or disease. On the other hand, isolated as they were by geography and culture, they attracted no new blood. They remained cut off from home until 1815, when Napoleon met his final defeat. Another moment of decision loomed. Should they return to France or pursue their destiny in Virginia?

The abbot was failing. He urged his brothers in exile to consider their future and elect a replacement. Amid tears and prayers that dragged on for days, they chose to stay. The abbey was now on a sure footing. They had replaced their log compound with a more conventional set of buildings. A simple church built of local limestone was their glory, followed by a much larger barn of hewn timber. The youngest would lead them forward, a sturdy *berrichon* named Adam. Even he was over forty.

In the fullness of years, Augustin-Théodore-François ascended to heaven. The community treated the event as a celebration, though each monk secretly grieved as for his own father. His was the first grave dug beside the church of Our Lady. A plain stone cross marked the spot.

By the 1830s, the gallant band was dwindling. The abbey farm was worked by tenants who spoke not a word of French. They and the surrounding population regarded the aging monks as eccentrics, prone to mystical trances. At last, only two were left, Adam and his spiritual brother Laurent. They signed the property over to the farmer who had served them faithfully for over a decade. The church and its five graves were to remain inviolate. Attired in full white habit, the two went for their customary afternoon walk, on the wooded bank of the Shenandoah. They were never seen again.

Berry Abbey fell into ruin. Forest reclaimed the cloister. Young people visit occasionally in their hot rods and convertibles. They leave beer cans, bottles, and trash. A scout troop from Hapsburg visits once a year to clean it up. They say that when the wind blows in the trees, it is possible to hear seven male voices chanting in unison.

Is Civilization Advanced?

Follow me down the rabbit hole and let's ponder something. We won't go to the good books or bright authorities. We will ponder civilization.

As I see it, civilization has one thing going for it: space travel. But even then it is only for the few and a spectacle for the many. Why do I not say longevity of life, hospital care and treatment? It is true in my micro-world with my family and friends, the hospital is a magnificent Pyramid or Great Wall or Hanging Garden, but, on the macro-scale, it could be unnecessary.

In both examples, space travel and hospital care, we have technology and technology is what is supposed to advance civilization. Let's not even touch Third World advancement thoughts. But I learned just as you did that the English were the most advanced humanoids, in the whole imperialistic world. That blacks, Jews, Asians, other Europeans were scientifically inferior. It was proven by how much property you had. And the pale knobby knees you had.

When we think of advancement now, we know better, don't we? We know it's not about color or imperialism. It's about good things like longevity of life, speed of travel and information. Like the fact we have light bulbs and electricity, the world before these things was way behind then.

I think the inventor has an erroneous idea: the invention that becomes so necessary to the world, i.e. computer, light bulbs, books, etc., is not advancement. More often than not, it's a convenience. Teleportation, like in Star Trek, appears to be an advancement of civilization, but really it just makes getting off the Enterprise way easier. Doors open now without handles. Is that advanced?

What I'm driving at is that technology is not an advancement of the species. Not even writing and reading. I don't care if you're Plato, Shakespeare, or Thomas Jefferson, your writing has not advanced the species.

I want you to step back and say, well, what is advanced? The Tao speaks of advancement. It was a way a long time ago, prehistory. Humans were in tune with their surroundings, their earth. They lived off the land and had direct connection with it. To counter intuitions even fur

ther, technology may be the exact opposite of advancing.

Bear with me. Even in the Bible, men and women lived for hundreds of years. What technology may have done is displaced many organic and natural attributes we would consider supernatural: psychic, tracking animals for hundreds of miles, telekinesis, telepathy, and who knows what. Of course this is speculation, but the present day technology atrophies muscles and mind, unless we go to the gym and read. This is how people counter the fact that we could end up never getting off the couch/toilet, with a sex-robot serving beer and vitamin-rich potato chips.

The point, however, is that what was “supernatural” may have been very normal practices before humans began illustrating images on caves, before wheels and fire. That raw food and rain would be not only bearable, but simple. Why do we hate rain so much? We don’t like the way it feels on our bodies most of the time. Being wet can weaken our immune systems. And rain can make driving dangerous. Let’s wipe the table clean of all these uncomfortable things, and say that not only did the ancients not feel and think this way, but their immune systems could handle rain, raw food, and diseases. I want you to imagine if that is possible.

So the next time you order room service and say this is the very height of civilization, I want you to ask what if technology didn’t exist, what if it did the opposite, and the ancients were much “wiser,” i.e., could live longer, more impervious to pain, suffering, diseases.

Lastly, I want to leave you with an image of a gorilla, the rather large muscular beast, who sits quietly in the jungle, with or without child. Patiently, in a Zen meditative-like state. And once there is a threat, the gorilla goes from non-doing to doing in split seconds, beating his chest, attacking the threat.

Stone

It's a long way back
too far to remember
sitting still, not yet torn to pieces,
not yet an individual,
but soon...
Throw them about, Themis cries,
little people will emerge.

And so, tossed at random
some sort of bacteria, then worms,
fish, birds, animals, and finally, man.

It's beautiful in this world,
but mostly unseen, unnoticed—
motion, development, the cracking open of stones.

So much time.

Then there was you, walking in your dark suit.
You had a lot on your mind that day—
the afternoon meeting, the conference call.
You walked right by when she held out her cup.
Please sir, she cried.
But you had forgotten.

It's a long way back
to a being stone,
not yet torn to pieces,
not yet a man.

Dark Matter

—90% of the universe is dark matter

It is what lies beneath
the surface of our lives.
We can't see it,
but we know it's there.
Like black holes,
it bends light.
It is what goes
unsaid.

It is the puddle
in the shadow at night.
It is the spirit of the dead:
Friend, father, mother, lover—
those who visit you
in dreams.

It clouds the dreams
you can't quite recall,
the memories that remain
at the edge of your mind.

It is the phantom pain
of missing limbs.
It is the white worm
in America's soul.

Cryonic scenarios

i.

Tired of sliding off rainbows,
two radiant children
discover an old Disney movie
in the depths of their computer.
Soon they commune—*pointless?*—
and turn to calculating the
cosmological constant.
Meanwhile, a museum curator
ponders humming tanks:
what to do with these relics.
Such primitive humanity,
roused, might corrupt.
Dutifully, schoolchildren file
past well guarded tubs:
Mummies down the hall.

ii.

Having sucked all life
out of mammals,
planet-ruling cockroaches,
finally break open the tanks
in hope of finding
a few more tasty crumbs.
Damn, their antennas quiver violently,
I hate freeze dried.

iii.

The sea gave up its dead;
even the Pit had coughed up
its horde. *What do we do
with these? ask the gleaming Angels,
they're stuck, and there's
a heavenly city coming down
at about a thousand miles an hour.*
With golden keys, they break the tanks,
and dust swirls where it will:
Sulfur Lake invites them in,
the brochures so glossy.

iv.

After the eleventh great jihad,
infrastructure collapsed;
cannibalism popular,
radiation disease rampant,
women barren,
a few fresh sperm
might save the planet.
In the room where lights blinked
and tanks hummed: a terrible stench.

v.

Planet of the Geeks.
*Okay, check this out,
If I cut here, splice there
and insert these electrodes
I can make him sit up.*
The students applaud.

One shouts, *can he hit a baseball?*
What's a baseball?

vi

Death is not death
surrounded by comfortable hums
and glowing buttons.
In the future
death will be in the past..

Silence

I can imagine,
barely perceptively hear

the tingling
at
the tips
of my fingers,
a light
tingling
after a sudden flash of lightning

a load drop,
accelerate
to
the
bottom of my feet,
slam
down,
as cars screech loud,
crash
into a stop

the elevator,
elate,
lift
in me to the top floor,
letting off
little passengers of happiness
when

rockets rise,
kiss
the sky

when there is silence,
just a second,
a sigh.

Mundane

it is me, in all my mundane,
my ordinary
and naiveté
and one day
i won't be here
anymore,
i won't be
anywhere,
i just won't,
i'll recede into
the void
i'll be spread
thin as atoms,
i'll die,
but i'm
here
now,
right? i'm
here,
despite all the millions
that will never be born,
of all the
ordinary masochists that
could
love you
i am the one that is
here,
i am the one that
loves,

am i crazy? am i upset?
i'm here,
right?
i'm here, of all the impossible lives i could live,
i live this one,
were i love you so faithfully,
is that worth celebrating?
i ask,
is that worth
the maturing intimacy of our bodies?
is this life,
of all the improbable lives
i've lived,
millions of other possibilities,
is my love worth it?
is this life wasted?
of all the many "me"s
i could be,
this one loves you
is that special enough for you?

Outside

In the crisp cold, I swish along beside the road, the sun through the National Forest speckling the creamy snow. The only sound is the clean slice of my skis through the unmarked snow—though not completely unmarked. Lacelike or rib-like patterns venture up towards trees. And the whiteness reveals tiny black pinpricks dancing in the snow.

But my mind is on the watery swish along the road, going and coming. At first there's nothing but the rushing sound, like a wind kicking up. But then I see and hear everything.

The black pickup has a couple of young guys smoking, the one with a tic in his face, leaning forward over the steering wheel. The other puffs in short bursts and sends jerky looks out the window. Their tires squeal as they take the curves too fast, their taut lean bodies pressed forward. "A'most there," breathes the driver, and then he coughs. The passenger tips his ribbed face up to driver, his mouth gaping open in something like a grimace to show yellowed chipped teeth. The last thing I see is the passenger pulling out a shotgun from under the seat.

A big white sports utility comes more slowly behind, going the same westerly direction. In it, a thin woman with long blonde hair is driving. Beside her is a three-year-old saying, "Can I have peanut butter and jelly? Look at my pict'ur." He holds up a sheet with colorful swags crisscrossing each other. "This our woods." The driver glances briefly as part of her constantly rearranging of her body. She lifts her shoulders and sighs, wincing a little. "I'm fifty," she murmurs to herself, glancing into the rearview mirror, assessing the facial lines, the hair more white than blonde. The child is shifting too but only to get out his book, which he falls into. The woman ferries her children back and forth all day, each time sloughing off more of herself.

Going the other way, a dark maroon van bolts by. A boulder-sized woman is driving. A smile flits across her face. "At least I have this hour to paint," she says unselfconsciously. "He won't call me. I can relax, and if I go to the store afterwards, I have even more time. It's when I get home (sigh) he wants this and that" – her head bobs side to side, in this much-rehearsed drama. "And dinner has to be earlier and earlier. He's afraid to let me go anywhere—ever since Millie, our beautiful sixteen-year-old, was killed by that drunkard bastard. I can talk to no one about this." One hand hits the steering wheel, and a deeper sigh flows out like a low horn.

I remove my skis, rushing into and out of the dark house for my car keys and a twenty-dollar bill. I head for the tollbooth lit up like an oasis. Since I don't have the right change, a human-like mechanical arm reaches out towards me. With the change made, the voice comes

on. It's the voice I wait for, the reward for passing through, needing change. I drive only a mile to the turn-around for the repetition back. "Have a good one," says the smooth, soothing voice. That voice's warm cuddle lasts me almost a week.

Fancy Train

There is nothing like sleeping in a train. A fellow traveler remarked on occasion, “Away from the past, and not coming to new problems yet.” Yes, I feel at ease while travelling. The train hurries fast in the night, and you sit there imagining, “Let me get off at the next stop; knock at an illuminated window to make a sweet girl open the door, as if she were waiting but me.” Surely I’d never get off and knock there, but it’s so pleasing to picture it.

Once in my car I met a girl of the kind, she was fantastic like light in the window at night. Only she travelled with her man and a kid, her husband was quite an ordinary man, a plain one. They had a sick boy, his illness not to be cured, and they came back from Moscow after visiting some major doctors at a certain clinic. The doctors said no good; they knew neither cause, nor medical treatment

When her husband went out for a smoke, I had a desire to offer the young lady to run away with me. For no reason I was sure, that it were possible to cure the kid when she were with me, and that she’d be happy then. But the man was back too soon, he didn’t finish smoking even. He smoked not a good cigarette; he was a plain guy for a better one.

Towards evening they alighted at a small station, he was a farmer in the country, a tractor driver or something like that, an upright person nevertheless. As for her... She was so fair, and looked innocent like a nun. I knew only nuns to have such a radiant face though she was inflicted such a pitiless penalty on. It seemed to me then that they didn’t make a pair, they were essentially different, and maybe that’s why it happened so to their kid.

Another day I had one more girl in my compartment, a blond one. She was heading for a far city, I think she studied there. She sat up half a night over a book covering her face with it, shielding her eyes from the others. Just beside me she was reading a human anatomy manual. She didn’t enter into conversation with the others. But because of her it was so quiet and peaceful in the compartment, as if a cat has rolled up into a ball in the house. She never opened her lips, but I’d rather have traveled beside her as far as possible, never letting the train stop. Still she stayed there in her city while my train hurried further in the night.

The train took its regular course, in the compartments travelers went to sleep one by one. Some

restless passengers made their way to another sleeper. You know such wanderers; they can't stay long in one place even in the train following its route.

It doesn't matter whether you go forwards or backwards in the train: one gets to his destination according to schedule. Still trains are late sometimes, it happens so. Then one can miss the bus and fail to be in time for a wedding, or even be late for a funeral. It never late to get married, but a burial comes forth against all expectations. You know Death when you see it. So a train runs fast, passengers, young and old, are eager to reach their destination. And among them Death finds room for herself, sitting near. She has a woman's appearance and wears white on like a shroud.

A woman was walking along the car with the folks feeling sleepy and she was looking out for someone. Her eyes sparkled in darkness and scorched one's heart whomever she peeped into the face, while they shone red like live coals. I identified her, when she passed me when all fell asleep. Dressed in white, Death was walking along and peering into travelers' eyes as if searching for someone. She went past me and I felt as if being poked by one's pointed finger under my left shoulder bone. A few steps away she glanced back and I caught her eyes; it was like a doublet shot...

I woke up, and it was dusk outside, where lights were flickering.

The Funeral

If there's one ritual that has stood the test of time it is the disposal of the dead. On Friday, 11 May 2012, I will be attending the funeral of my husband's grandfather. This ceremony will, no doubt, have a permanent place in my memory and will certainly be emotionally charged; not because I'm religious - I'm not – but because it forces me to confront the tremendous loss of someone I thought very highly of, as well as my own mortality. I am not the first funeral goer though. Bones from over 200,000 years ago have been found at the bottom of shafts¹. Neanderthals seemed to have preferred dark caves in which to store their dead². It's something that appears to be linked to a brain complex enough to understand death and reflect on it.

A neighbour died recently and a few weeks later, I saw his family stood in loose circle in a nearby field, tossing fistfuls of ash from a large white plastic bag on to the grass. The field, now given over to grazing and dog walking, used to be a landfill site. Before that, it was a prisoner of war camp. Its next existence will be as the home ground for the local football team. Perhaps he was a big football fan and his relatives wanted to get make sure he had a pitch side seat for all eternity.

Almost every other animal on the planet will either walk away from the body of dead relative or eat it, apparently unaffected by the loss. We humans though, attach enormous meaning to it. The sense of loss transcends the religious platitude that the dearly departed is now skipping around in wonderland though and very few seem genuinely happy to see them go.

Those Neanderthals, carefully placing their loved ones to rest in a cave, had no religion that would be recognised today. Their view of what happens after death is just as informed as a modern Muslim's or Christian's is. They would certainly be more used to the sight of death and yet it wasn't treated as some everyday thing.

Many people don't like the idea of tears and fuss at their funeral. Francis Bacon famously said 'When I'm dead, put me in a plastic bag and throw me in the gutter.' I doubt many of his relatives would have felt they'd done the right thing by honouring this wish and probably anyone using the pavement would need to be convinced too. Personally, I plan to donate my body to science; I like that someone somewhere could be looking at my bone marrow or brain cells on a microscope.

As a rationalist, I struggle to justify why we *should* care the amount that we do. The machinery of the brain that manifested as the personality has stopped or, if you prefer, the soul has left the building, only its wrapper remains. Is it purely the selfish loss then? Like knowing they're not going to make any more episodes of *Lost*? Is it just the brain wrestling with its oxytocin receptors? Certainly the dead feel no better for all the tears.

I think that we will come to understand fully the feeling of loss and the brain changes that occur during and after, and we will probably discover that funerals are the healthiest method evolved for channelling those strong and potentially damaging emotions. Humans' uniquely complex social interactions depend on our ability to empathise with each other and the strong sense of loss might just be the price of our social cohesion. The funeral ritual might therefore be one of the most essential to our society and our sense of community.

Hume warned us though that we cannot infer meaning from the bare facts of the universe. His guillotine clearly prevents us from creating meaning based on observation of nature. However, we can come to understand ourselves better and this can certainly help us through something as horrible as grief. Grief isn't wanted or asked for; it's presented to an individual 'as-is' with no instruction manual. Loss is a change in the brain that the funeral helps to heal.

Ritual and meaning don't need to be supernatural or divinely justified then. They are natural products of evolution and social development. That guy's family in the field were altering their brains; their very selves with their ritual, reinforcing the bond between those who remain. If meaning is anything worth having, it is in its ability to bring people together and be there for each other, I think that the brain chemistry supports this idea and the want to find meaning in things.

¹ <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/ba/ba66/feat1.shtml>

² <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/ba/ba66/feat1.shtml>

JACKDAW, IN RAIN

for Gannon Blue

There are many more
Windows than mine,
Still open:
The skies drop suddenly, this time of
Year,
And this black busybody is
Simply searching for
Somewhere to dry its'
Stick feet and slick wet
Feathers.

All along this avenue,
There are attic panes never
Replaced, and so it can just
Pull up its' murderous
Collar,
And seek out the neighbors.
I'm not getting involved:
I am watching for
Sunlight, the scalded
Morning.

Red Lobster

When we want to feel finite and fancy, we get the lobster.

The first thing I ever learned about
these creatures was that they mate for
life. The second? They are *delicious*.

I can't tell if I'd have preferred the other way around.

My mother always said to ask for
forgiveness rather than permission.
My sister always named each
lobster in the tank to keep us from
asking at all. My father reminded us
they couldn't get into heaven.

I thought he meant they were going to hell.

I wanted to ask him, *is this*
the name we've given to our insides? The flaming
pits we throw our favorite things into
after we destroy them?

THE EVIDENCE OF SPIRIT

*Embodied spirituality requires an understanding
that nature is not inanimate and less than human,
but animated and more than human.*

*- George Lakoff and Mark Johnson
Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind
and Its Challenge to Western Thought*

Here is my spirit:
hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen,
and carbon-based, night regions
spirally bound and ringing
the center of the soul,
DNA phosphatefully linked,
rich in ribose,
but nothing sugary is coated
into the elements
crafting sweet civilization
from the culture of the Earth,
an integrity of integument,
a membrane of species,
10 million cellular expressions,
family connections--
only 1.5 million named.

Even in this postmodern game,
the brain form
contents itself with relativity,
ecologies of morals,
and textual journeys; myth
may define boundaries,

may define boundaries,
but edges depend on electrons
stitching the soul
into an evolutionary weave,
the universe animated
by that exquisite electrogenesis
where dwells the nature
of human spirit.

Ars Moriendi (Parable Fourth)

“If there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like the victims burned at the stake, signaling through the flames.”

—Antonin Artaud

It is worse than just a ghost town; even the memories are worn away. They were taken by wind and sun and time. He isn't sure what he is doing here, or even where here is. With the broken buildings behind him, he looks out across the desert to the horizon. He feels like he is standing in a forty-five degree angle made by two lines, the sky a diagonal to the earth; a piece of pie cut out of the Great Nothing. Nevertheless, his resolve to stand in a slice of meaningless space and time with nothing but light, color, and dirt to disguise the abyss is almost soothing.

Turning his back on the distant meeting of the heavens and the earth, he looks at what is left of the town. A gray haze of deteriorating wood buildings lies in front of him. A shoddy group of skeletal remains clustered together as if to shield themselves from the desert, death, and time. The town is a tombstone whose inscription has worn away a long time ago. Walking towards the town it appears to him as an oasis in this desert.

Within the ring of buildings, he surveys the deceased. The body of the town has decayed with the weight of such time and tempest that no real discerning marks remains. No text, no image. No remnant of human interference is present except for the frail hollow structures and one day they too will be gone. He stands tall at the center of town, the dry gray shapes leaning in towards him. From his left pocket he draws a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes and slides one into his mouth. Putting the pack away where it came from, he draws his lighter from his right pant pocket and pauses about mid-chest. He hates smoking, but he has built up the habit in preparation of death. Any moment a shot could ring out or a curtain could Fall and he must be ready.

His father died in Mexico, by firing squad, many years ago. He was just a boy but he knew the story well. Growing up he retold himself as a mantra, numbing the brain and stirring the soul. Before they tied his father to the post in the courtyard, they offered him a last cigarette to smoke in his cell. His father requested a Lucky and though hard to obtain, they obliged him out of respect. The last cigarette before death was so cherished that in absolute silence he sat and smoked it, drawing slowly and releasing even slower. As the Lucky burned down with no filter the sentenced man held on with his fingernails and continued to smoke. After his last long drag, burning his lips, he let the remains go to burn themselves out on descent, landing as nothing but ash and smoke.

He lights the cigarette and clutches at the memory of his father. Standing in the center of town, he tries to take in his surroundings. He wants to know the death it knows. The cigarette hangs from his mouth like a broken branch as his arms slowly extend outwards. He spins slowly to his left blowing smoke and searching. The speed he spins is slow enough to keep from dizzying yet fast enough to keep the smoke out of his eyes. The spin is drawn gradually down like a corkscrew into a meditative sitting position with legs crossed. The words trickle from his lips amid streams of smoke:

*“A Death blow is a life blow to some
Who til they died, did not alive become-
Who had they lived; had died but when
They died, Vitality begun.”*

The words, so human, so alien, caused a creak amongst the boards that made up this ghost town. The splintering resounded audibly. He first read the poetry of Emily Dickinson in college. Poem number 816 always stood out the most. It made him want to be an artist. So, he studied his history. From Dada, he learned that the only true art is murder and that destruction is the most powerful face of creation. Thus his apprenticeship began.

To kill was easy, he started with bugs and moved up to small mammals. But soon he realized that it wasn't the mere taking of life that made art. The killings he performed were rudimentary and craftsman-like, but there was no art to them. He almost covered the spectrum of species before he understood it wasn't what he did, but how he did it. And as understanding grew, he knew his subject must be human. He also realized that the actual killing became less important than how it must be performed and the performance must involve totality.

He could not just take a human life; he had to erase a human life. Make a human being, a human life, God's own joy, so it never existed. Many scenarios were planned and many attempts were made only to fail from the limitations of his intellect. The Muse was yet to smile. He was constantly faced with the mystery of human involvement. He fell mesmerized by the endless chain of human connections to other people and to the earth. To take one person's life and wipe that one person's memory and impact from the face of creation he would have to destroy millions of people and square miles of land. The degrees of separation spanned a multitude of links and doubt began to grow of his artistic potential.

Amid a dirty wind, he cries the first tears he has cried since his father's death and continues to smoke with the cigarette sheltered in his cupped hand. The silty wind sticks to his wet

face and his tears become like quicksand pulling him down further. The ghost town is no longer still; a torrent is mounting, fierce, primal, and invisible. He remembers how he got here. He remembers his son and his last chance at artistry. A year ago he came across a virgin runaway and the Muse finally smiled. They moved out to the desert and he soon impregnated her. For nine months they lived alone and no one knew she was pregnant. Fortuitously, she died during childbirth as he delivered the baby out of doors with minimal medical skills. He wrapped the baby in only one blanket and placed the baby on only one table. No one was around to hear the baby cry. He then built a great fire and was careful to burn the mother's whole body leaving no sign of pregnancy. Next the table, blanket, and baby were all burned.

It took the whole night to burn out every facet of his creative process, stoking the flames and grinding down the ashes into dust and then air, but he felt a satisfaction in suffering for his art. He now truly felt himself an artist. He had thought of everything. Nothing in the world bore any sign of his son's existence, no name, no trace. Complete destruction of a human life, wiped away like a sandcastle into the sea. The art of death, of true totality in destruction is achieved. A person, a life existed, and is now gone and no one knows. No one, except him, of course. The realization broke his consciousness with the dawn and satisfaction was replaced by a fit of rage. The rage was brief though and followed by empty resolution as he walked out into the desert.

His walk brought him many miles, and finally to this ghost town. He would have to die for his creation to live. He would have to die to be an artist. The sandstorm dissipated and the ghost town exhaled its resuscitated breath only to remain empty and dead again. He remains still, sitting, trying like hell to savor his cigarette. There is no sound.

Many artists experience fame posthumously. There is always something left until there isn't, he thinks, as he looks out to the horizon where it seems the heavens are getting closer to the earth. The forty-five degree angle is getting smaller. His art is of a fourth dimension. Space ends with time.

DEAD

Alejandro knew he was dead but that didn't stop him from wanting to come to America. His body lay on the dry dirt exactly where he'd fallen, the muscles rapidly losing their ability to stretch out and contract. His mouth was fixed, oddly enough, in a permanent grin.

He had a terrible urge to speak to someone, really anyone would have been fine. A young man of twenty-four, Alejandro hadn't been the least bit prepared for death and wanted to make sure his assessment of the condition in which he had unexpectedly found himself was correct. When he'd considered death before, at the rare burial service he'd attended or times the priest traveled to his village of Teptapa and mentioned the word during mass, he imagined that something fantastic, such as flashing lights or crushing pain, would occur to signal the act. You might say, at this moment, that Alejandro felt a little disappointed.

Perhaps this was all a poor man from a dusty Mexican village so far south it could barely be measured in miles could expect. Yes, he began to scold himself. He could hear his wife Elena's voice now, lecturing him about relying too much on what he could not see, except, of course, if he was placing his blind faith in God, Jesus or the Blessed Virgin. Elena's voice, which started out low, grew louder as she reminded him that he had made a mess of his life this time. As if he needed any reminder. A mess? He would have laughed, if he'd been able to move the muscles in his jaw that had frozen into a stiffness no amount of effort was going to pry apart. Not only had he failed to get to America, where he intended to make a better life, he had died. Even more shameful, his corpse lay a breath away from the border.

What would happen to Elena, he wanted to know. Of all the crazy things he had done, he'd gone and left her with a child growing in her belly. He imagined Elena holding the child on her lap, and telling him that his father had traveled to America to give them a better life. But, unfortunately, she would say to the small boy, *Your father did not make it*. Then she would watch tears form in the child's large brown eyes. Since he was too young to understand, the boy couldn't help but toss the words around in his mind, like weeds tumbling through the fields when they were dry. One day, much later, he would understand. His father, like most of the village men, had left for that mythical place known as *The Other Side*.

Alejandro wasn't ready to accept death yet. Without a priest nearby, he had no idea what might happen to him in the afterlife. Sure, he was a poor man. Why else would he have walked all this way to die, without a single soul to witness his passing? A poor man had one thing, Alejandro recalled, and that was his dignity. Right now, lying in the dust, Alejandro only felt shame – to die without the priest's blessing, his clothes soiled, even his shoes caked with dust.

All around, there was silence. Even the wind failed to make a sound, as in that heat, it couldn't find a reason to blow. The temperature hovered around a hundred and ten. By the end of the afternoon, it was expected to hit a hundred and seventeen. Alejandro didn't feel the heat anymore, which was a blessing.

The desert stretched for miles in every direction. It was said that bodies were strewn across the dust like cactus, and scorpions sometimes nested in their ears. Alejandro hadn't known about the vastness of the desert and what it took from a simple man, who only wanted to sample the riches everyone in his village claimed would await him on *el otro lado*, the other side.

If anyone had been here to see, and no one was, a man suddenly began to lift himself up, at the very spot where Alejandro had fallen. The man had on a pair of cheap sneakers no longer white and pale blue polyester pants., Alejandro watched the man, as he stepped next to the border fence, and felt proud that the man he had once been was going to try and make it across.

They heard the story first in San Diego. Then the story spread north. In Los Angeles, in a tiny restaurant where the smell of grilled beef and onions wafted out the open door, men repeated the tale. They lifted bottles of Corona to their lips, after squeezing in a bit of lime, and said, "Have you heard?"

Miles up the coast, in San Francisco, the young *cholos* stood on the corner of Twenty-Fourth and Mission, their pants too large, and red and navy blue scarves tied like headbands to keep their thick black hair down, and watched girls walk by. Even they began to tell the story. These kids, most of whom had been babies when their mothers sneaked across, felt proud. This Alejandro, they would say, smiling and smoking cigarettes pressed between their first two fingers and thumbs, had *balls*. The guy *died*, they said, slapping each other's palms and rocking back and forth on their expensive sneakers, and he still made it across.

The Sharer

When I was seventeen I didn't have a place to stay. The heat made everyone angry and I was put out. I found a place where the houses were large, the emptiness filled by holographic foliage, cooled by city blocks of air conditioning systems. I got a job in pain sharing after a physical and hours in a metal chair answering questions. When I was deemed good enough to bear pain, they gave me an employee identification card. Homeless, I was put in a shelter. I started sharing the first week.

It went like this: I was bused to houses with three, four, five stories. Houses with cooled yards, elaborate holograms of trees with tire swings. Houses with glossy floors and spiraled staircases. I sat in dark rooms. I spent six-hour shifts enduring the stabbing, burning, crying, twisting effects of things neuropathic, depressing, and nociceptive. I wasn't told what they had. I swore I knew when it was cancer because my organs felt choked. Sometimes it was very bad. It came at me as a great white membrane splitting out everything. It left my mouth agape, my chin bathed in spit.

After a few months I was put on full-time in house sharing. I did this only once. It went like this: I was given a room in an upstairs bedroom. I met a set of parents who were pale, gaunt, and tense. I met blank-faced relatives. I met maids with eggshells for feet. The house was the beginning of a shrug, upraised and perched with nowhere to go but down. My shifts were erratic. I shared when the patient was conscious so that he could interact without pain, worry, or sadness. His name was Sean. I felt him along with drips of acid behind my eyes. His pain was a prism. It made me nauseous.

I thought of a girl I didn't know named Claudia, her black hair, her cleft chin. Claudia tasting tulips. Claudia on the ground in a rainstorm, the sky blackened, droplets shimmering around us, wetting nothing, falling nowhere. She stroked at the dry ground, tried without success to penetrate it with her finger.

This is my favorite hologram, she said of the storm. It turns into a tornado. Have you ever seen one, Sean?

I hadn't.

We laid on the ground as the storm roared around us, spun, heaved itself into its own spiral of eternity. Claudia held my hand for a little while, and I decided that her hand was a sky, her droplets of perspiration the only raindrops left in the world. She allowed her hand below my waist for a little while until my head swam, my breath caught.

There were days that I thought of the parents; only they weren't pale in these memories,

There were days that I thought of the parents; only they weren't pale in these memories, but as bright as slapped newborns. I thought of a thousand mysterious faces. I thought of a face in the mirror that wasn't mine: shadowed eyes, shaved hair in the sink, hands on a bald head. I thought of Claudia tracing words on me with her lips beneath a crisp sheet sky, clear with white stars. She programmed them to glow on me.

Several weeks later the mother visited me. She told me about plans to remodel the house. She told me that she was interested in a lake hologram, perhaps even with ducks. Nothing extravagant, she said. Her hands shook. I asked her questions until my throat got dry. When it seemed she would leave me, I asked her questions that I knew she would like to answer.

One day she asked, Where's home for you, Oliver?

I descended a few nights later after my shift. I ate dinner between a few nephews. The mother and father didn't speak to me. Alone in the dining room was Claudia alive and real and I understood the truth of what I thought. She sipped something. She looked frail. I didn't speak to her. I took dinner a few more nights. I stopped when a family friend inquired about who I was and no one answered. The maids brought me things, cleaned away my vomit. The mother brought me things. I pretended that she entered my room one day and saw me bursting with angry, lustful cells. I imagined Sean somewhere in the house opening his eyes, sitting up, remarkably rested, and remarkably well. I imagined the mother and father tearful at my funeral.

Once, the father invited me to the porch to play cards. The holograms were off and the ground was an uninterrupted unspoken that stretched into darkness. We played children's card games. He told me he once went hunting with his father as a boy and shot a quail. They brought it home and put it in the freezer. The quail stayed in the freezer frozen solid for months. It stayed and kept staying as hands went in to remove frozen meals and chicken wings, ice cubes, bags of mixed vegetables. It stayed until his sister threw it away with everything else that was of no use.

Before he could collect the cards, I hid one in my pocket.

Between shifts, I pretended to descend the stairs. I imagined taking a seat among the family. I pretended that they asked me how I handled it, what it was like. Did I really feel everything? Was that all that happened? I imagined Claudia intrigued that I was connected to Sean, that I carried in my mind the corporeal misery of his condition.

After a shift where the pressure behind my eyes made me curl into a bundle of scraped nerves shaped like a hook, the mother and father came to see me and I didn't raise my face up. The room smelled of vomit. The mother was quiet. A maid came in to clean up. The father rested a hand on my back. My head swam, my breath caught.

Your pay for this month was dropped off. He sat the money on the counter. He said, Where's home for you, Oliver? I had to scrunch up my face then open my eyes wide to keep them dry. I couldn't speak. He touched my back again.

It's okay, he said.

On the way out the mother said, If you feel better, you should come to dinner. I pretended that I took a seat at the table beside the mother and father. I pretended that same question was asked: Where's home for you, Oliver? And I said, There isn't one anymore, but I'm all right. I imagined a concerned aunt taking my hand and a skeptical uncle with raised eyebrows saying, I was on my own at that time too. It's a rite of passage. I pretended that the mother said, No, everyone needs a place to stay.

After my shift the next day my mind became full of faces looking down at me. Through a window I saw that the holograms were off. I cried out against the barrenness, against the helplessness of my body. My heart made violent flickers and I cried that it didn't pound. I cried out for my mother, my father, my lover. I cried out for anything that could keep me from disappearing.

I came out of this for a little while, and thought of Claudia atop me, nose to nose. I saw her standing at the edge of the world. We looked down into the abyss. She programmed millions of fireflies from the depths.

That's a neat effect, I said.

What else can we add?

The fireflies spun into a tornado and the sky grew black. They became spinning stars.

Lightning? I said.

Can your body be a lightning rod?

Yes.

And can I be the hand that holds it to the sky?

Yes.

I thought of tulips arriving by mail. Real tulips with a real smell in tender cups. I thought of Claudia programming petals of a tulip around us while she clutched her real ones. The high walls were creamy and pink. She held out a tulip to me.

We're in one of these right now. You and me. Us.

One day, I wasn't visited to have a shift. I saw faces dissolving. I saw myself fragmented and smeared. Places in my mind peeled away in deliberate strips. Later, the father peered into the room. I couldn't see his face. His voice was clotted.

I don't know if anyone's told you. Sean's died. There's an urn. Tomorrow at six we'll

I don't know if anyone's told you. Sean's died. There's an urn. Tomorrow at six we'll play a slide show. Spread his ashes. Here at home.

I went to the top of the stairs and peered down. The family was strung together around a single spot. The tops of their heads were a bundle of beads. The following evening I dressed in the best thing I had and descended the stairs. I searched out the mother and the father with my eyes. I searched out Claudia. There were no empty seats.

Watchers of Sky

know skies are children of wind,
tangible as passion and where
gold's from—
dying stars that scattered

That a sunrise or sunset
marks time more kindly
than mirrors

At Dixie Caverns

Moon stone is
earth stone is
my stone is
your stone

and dust
of course
is the same.

Bone wings beat
in dark caves.
Dark blood beats
in dark waves

and sleep
is all
that I crave.

Open Windows

Red flowers appear
like cuts in the air
of one crowded apartment.
An atheist hears those bells.
A woman in another,
as old as I'm becoming,
flings out an exhalation
like a ring an ex buries in the sea;
coughs, disconsolate sobs,
yells in accents and languages fly,
cries during sex between two
who thought they loved others or no one,
who ate up the kiss
for the hunger on their lips and tongues.
Each day at six, silverware clinks without voices—
a solitary tenant? A silent couple? A wife eating alone?
We strangers breathe in the smell of her casserole,
which is delicious,
knowing that certain bitter taste
that could be sticking in her throat.

Fumes

An old car arrives in my lube pit, holes
in the rusty floorboards.
Through the floor,
I see the driver's long pale legs, inches
above me, safe in the pleats of her khaki skirt.

Years ago, my friend Kyle
had been wearing a khaki shirt,
in our classroom turned shooting gallery,
bright red oozing out of the bullet
hole and dyeing the cloth.

The mechanic's blowtorch
points at me for a second. I could be
incinerated in this pit, shaped like a coffin.

The woman's car is dead now.
Her engine oil stinks of burnt carbon,
unlike the new gold blood I inject.
Her coolant oozes out pinkish and

I replace it with orange liquid, but first,
curious, I lick a drop. It is sweet.

I finish the job, wipe the oil
off black greasy cuts on my hand,
wounded like my faith.

The woman's car roars to life, the nutrients flowing.
She pays, the wind nips her
receipt out of her hand and

she's gone, just a customer, a piece
of receipt paper now,
carried away like a voice in the wind,
like Kyle, like the fumes of this pit I live in.

Contributor Notes:

J. J. Anselmi is a nonfiction MFA student at CSU Fresno. I have work upcoming in *The Writing Disorder*, and published in *Connotation Press*, *Jackson Hole Review*, and *Pulp Metal Magazine*.

Allie Marini Batts is a graduate of New College of Florida, meaning she can explain deconstructionism, but cannot perform simple math. Her work has appeared in over eighty literary magazines her family hasn't heard of. Allie calls Tallahassee home because it has great trees to climb, and conveniently, her husband happens to live there, too. She's pursuing her MFA degree in Creative Writing through Antioch University Los Angeles and.....oh no! it's getting away!

Robert Boucheron is an architect and freelance writer. His academic degrees are Harvard, B. A. 1974 and Yale, M. Arch. 1978. Since 1987, he has lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he writes on housing, gardens, food, communities and the people who build them. His work appears in *Bloomsbury Review*, *Cerise*, *Country Living*, *Echo*, *Mouse Tales Press*, *Northern Virginia*, *Piedmont Virginian*, *Real Estate Weekly*, *Rider*, and *Virginia Business*.

Vincent Caruso currently lives in Miami, FL, where he works as a freelance writer. He graduated from the University of Miami with a degree in Creative Writing, focusing on poetry. He adds, "I owe my life to my parents and Rose".

Victoria Chadwick says that she is the offspring of a Lady Slipper and a Venus Fly Trap, her windswept island childhood beckoning her just around every next bend. A sharpshooter with Juniper berry and water balloon, she ventured undaunted, Hitting Soap Boxers head on, listening intently around hobo fires. Lollygagging with librarians, singing with seagulls, dogging Doppler, she danced mid ruins to the drum of the great Pacific; finding, not searching. One time, her spirit was almost choked at the roots by the monstrous maw of a bus named Desegregation, but she ran away and joined a circus. She's been an unsegregated clown explorer ever since, and still quite hot shot with water balloons.

Nicholas Cittadino holds a BS in Forestry from the University of Idaho, an MA in Psychology from Chapman University and am currently working on an MFA in Creative Writing at Eastern Kentucky University. I work as an academic counselor at Solano Community College. I currently live and write from the bay area of Northern California. His work will appear for the first time in *Aurora Literary Arts Journal* later this year.

William Doreski teaches at Keene State College in New Hampshire. His most recent book of poetry is *City of Palms* (2012). He has published three critical studies, including Robert Lowell's *Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals, including *Massachusetts Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Alembic*, *New England Quarterly*, *Worcester Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Modern Philology*, *Antioch Review*, and *Natural Bridge*. He won the 2010 *Aesthetica* poetry award.

Billie Duncan has had a long and varied career as an author, reporter, entertainer, photographer, artist and political activist. She is the author of three full-length books of poetry and is included in many journals and anthologies. Her first book, *Beneath the Desk*, was chosen for inclusion in the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays at Brown University. She is currently working on an art series based on Hugh Everett's many-worlds interpretation (MWI) of quantum physics and on a book-length epic poem about the LaSalle expedition to the Texas Gulf Coast.

Susan Gundlach has been teaching and writing forever. She has published articles on topics ranging from family history and puppetry, to the epic of Gilgamesh, and her poems have appeared most recently in the anthology *A Light Breakfast*, and in the cement walkway of the Evanston Public Library! In rare free time she has been exploring the relationship between text and visual images through creating handmade books that include art and poetry. Currently, she is finishing a collection of seasonal poetry for young readers.

Tim Kahl [<http://www.timkahl.com>] is the author of *Possessing Yourself* (Word Tech, 2009) and *The Century of Travel* (Word Tech, forthcoming). His work has been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Indiana Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Journal*, *Parthenon West Review*, and many other journals in the U.S. He appears as Victor Schnickelfritz at the poetry and poetics blog *The Great American Pinup* (<http://greatamericanpinup.wordpress.com/>) and the poetry video blog *Linebreak Studios* [<http://linebreakstudios.blogspot.com/>]. He is also editor of *Bald Trickster Press* and *Clade Song* [<http://www.cladesong.com>]. He is the vice president and events coordinator of *The Sacramento Poetry Center*. He currently teaches at *The University of the Pacific*. He currently houses his father's literary estate—one volume: Robert Gerstmann's book of photos of Chile, 1932)

Anne King is working on my doctorate in poetry at Georgia State University, and I teach first year writing at Clayton State University. My most recent publications have been featured in *So to Speak*, *The Unroean*, *Antithesis*, and *Stone Highway Review* literary magazines. I was off-

ered a fellowship by the Summer Literary Seminars to attend a writing program in Lithuania in 2008. I have also been recently published academically in the *Ellen Glasgow Journal of Southern Women Writers*, as well as in *The Apalachee Review*.

Mira Martin-Parker is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing at San Francisco State University. Her work has appeared in various publications, including the *Istanbul Literary Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Mythium*, and *Zyzzzyva*.

Ed Meek has had poems recently published in *The Sun*, *Spillway* and *Chronogram*. He also has poems in *Mobius*, *The Prompt*, *Baseball Bard* and *Poetry Quarterly* and has poems coming soon in *War*, *Literature and the Arts* and *Muscle and Blood*. He has a story in the current issue of *Per Contra*. His last book of poems *What We Love* is available at Amazon, and Barnes and Noble. He teaches at Austin Prep and lives in Somerville. He runs with the Somerville Road Runners whenever his knees are up to it.

Robin Amelia Morris' poetry has appeared in *American Literary Review*, *The Lowell Review*, *San Pedro River Review* and a forthcoming issue of *Blueline*. She earned an MFA in poetry from UMASS and continues to live in Western Massachusetts, where she teaches college writing skills to students all over the world, via the internet.

Olive Mullett is a retired English Professor of Ferris State University, Big Rapids, MI book reviewer for *newpages.com* and local newspaper and library newsletter short story publications: "Les Voleurs" in Michigan State University's *Red Cedar Review*, winter 2002 issue; "No One Showed" in *sliverofstone.com*, Fall 2011, 3rd issue; "The Watched Pot" in 1st issue of *The Cossack Review*, Summer 2012.

Ben Nash is a new poet. He has had a few poems published in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *PANK*, *Pilgrimage*, *The Shangri-la Shack Literary Arts Journal*, *Literary Juice*, *Bijou Poetry Review*, and the *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*. After spending many years trying to be a political scientist, he has spent the last few years reading and writing poetry, as well as enjoying time with his daughter.

Valery V. Petrovskiy is a freelance short story writer from Russia. He is a Chuvash University, Cheboksary graduate in English, graduated VKSch Higher School, Moscow in journalism, and

earned a degree at Kazan State Technological University in Psychology. He has his prose published in the U.S.A.: in *The Legendary*, *DANSE MACABRE*, *The Other Room*, *Apollo's Lyre*, among others; in Australian journals *Going Down Swinging*, *The Fringe Magazine* and *The Skive*; and in *RYGA* journal, Canada. Valery lives in Russia at a remote village by the Volga River. His work is available at: <http://www.proza.ru/avtor/valerka>

Liam Pezzano is a student at St. John's University in Queens, NY. His poetry also appears in *Stepaway Magazine*.

Rhonda Poynter has recently had poetry, essays and other writings published in "Minnetonka Review", "Frontiers", "The Wascana Review", "Freshwater", "The Tipton Poetry Journal" and other journals and anthologies. She was most recently nominated for the Pushcart Prize through the Tipton publication, and the Minnetonka Review awarded her its' Editor's Prize in 2009, for a set of three poems.

Erik Rice hails from the Twin Cities and is a co-founder of the Portland-bred Sparrow Ghost Collective and Press."

Jordan A. Rothacker is a PhD Candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Georgia. His fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *Mayday Magazine*, *Red River Review*, *Stone Highway Review*, and *As It Ought to Be* while his journalism has graced the pages of magazines ranging from *Vegetarian Times* to *International Wristwatch Magazine*. Rothacker's first novel, *And Wind Will Wash Away* (awaiting representation), explored his interests in the New South, Aztec revival cults, sacred prostitution, and Pez dispensers. He is hard at work on a second novel involving late stage capitalism, environmental destruction, and bridges. He does it all to impress his wife. For more see www.jordanrothacker.com."

Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb's poetry has appeared in the Canadian anthology, *Science Poetry* (Neil Harding and Zara McAlister), *The BlueLine Anthology* (Syracuse University Press), *Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built and Natural Environments*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Red River Review*, *Wild Earth*, *Concho River Review*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *Spectrum*, *Evening Street Review*, and many other journals. I hold an interdisciplinary MA from Prescott College and am co-founder of *Native West Press*--a 501(c)(3) nonprofit natural history press.

Carol Smallwood co-edited (Molly Peacock, foreword) *Women on Poetry: Tips on Writing*,

Teaching and Publishing by Successful Women Poets (McFarland, 2012). Her poetry received a 2011 Pushcart nomination. *Women Writing on Family: Tips on Writing, Teaching and Publishing*, with The Writer's Chronicle editor as foreword writer is from (Key Publishing House, 2012)

Claude Clayton Smith is Professor Emeritus of English at Ohio Northern University. He has authored seven books and is co-editor/translator of an eighth. He has also published more than fifty poems and a variety of short fiction, essays, and reviews. He holds a BA from Wesleyan (CT), an MAT from Yale, an MFA in fiction from the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and a DA from Carnegie-Mellon. His latest book is *Ohio Outback: Learning to Love the Great Black Swamp* (Kent State University Press, 2010). He lives with his wife in Madison, WI.

Patty Somlo has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times and was a finalist in the Tom Howard Short Story Contest. Her first collection, *From Here to There and Other Stories*, was published by Paraguas Books. Her work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review*, the *Santa Clara Review*, the *Jackson Hole Review*, *WomenArts Quarterly*, *Guernica*, *Slow Trains*, *Shaking Magazine*, *The Write Room* and *Fringe Magazine*, among others, and in several anthologies, including most recently, *Solace in So Many Words* and *Being Human: Call of the Wild*.

Carolyn Steinhoff has published poems, articles and stories in various journals and magazines over the years. Most recently her poems have appeared in the *Lilliput Review*, *And Then*, and *House Organ*.

L. E. Sullivan is a native of backwoods Louisiana, but has an interest in exploring cultures far outside of her own. A writer in training, she currently works as a reader for the literary journal *RE:AL*. Additionally, she has a weakness for all things art related and explores her passions through electric bass playing and photography. She currently resides in Nacogdoches, Texas, and her work has appeared in *Theocrit*, *Sphere Literary Journal* and *The Southern Poetry Anthology*.

Frank Symons PhD lives on a large lake in southeastern Ontario with his wife and dozens of ducks, geese, ospreys, hawks, eagles, grackles and other small birds, and of course beaver, deer, coyotes, the odd bear, and Jake, his cat. After a career in the federal government and the UN, he applied his scientific expertise to the local land trust which covers the wetlands adjacent to the oldest operating canal system in North America. When he's not thinking about critters or poetry, he typically goes off sailing, visiting his vintage car friends, or cross country skiing.

Darren Taggart is a 33 year old freelance writer, poet and YouTuber from Bristol in the United Kingdom. In 2010 he co-created the *GraverThanThou* podcast which focuses on politics, religion and freethought. He is currently writing an online sketch series which will be published in the Fall.