



DARK MATTER

A JOURNAL OF NATURAL METAPHOR

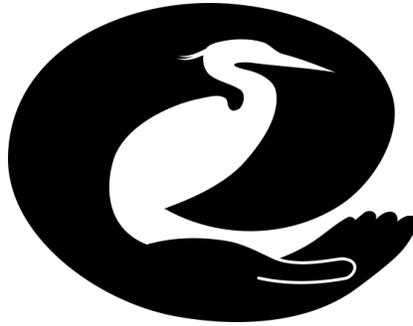


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DARK MATTER: A JOURNAL OF NATURAL METAPHOR



Editors

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

Student Editor

UHD Honors Program Students

Managing Editor

Dr. Bradley Earle Hoge

Dark Matter is a journal focusing on natural metaphor produced by the Natural Science Creative Writing Club at the University of Houston - Downtown. Dark Matter is published twice yearly in both PDF and ISSUU formats, and is available through the Dark Matter Website. Past issues will be maintained in the website archives.

Editors include students from UHD Natural Science and English Departments 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.

Dark Matter reads poetry, fiction, essays, and musings throughout the year. Selected pieces may be published on the Dark Matter Website at any time with author permission. Material selected for the print version is at the discretion of the editors. Electronic and printable versions will appear in Summer and Winter of each year.

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Forward

It is with significant sadness albeit also great pride that I am writing that this is the final issue of Dark Matter Journal. This journal began through the efforts of students in the Natural Science Department at UHD who were interested in the connection between the science they were studying and the poetry they loved. The journal was envisioned as a way for these students to grow as both students and writers by serving as co-editors. I am proud to say that many students have served in this role since the first issue was published, and that they have benefited from the experience of helping select the wonderful poems and stories we have selected for each issue.

I am equally proud of the journal itself. The work submitted to Dark Matter has been of an especially high quality, represented many interesting viewpoints, and produced eleven wonderful issues. We will continue to provide access to all past issues through the website archives, and ISSUU.

The work in this final issue proves that we are not ceasing publication due to any waning of interest or quality in the mission of Dark Matter. It is simply due to my accepting a position outside of academia which does not allow me to continue as Managing Editor. At this time, there is no one else situated to replace me, and so we must make this the last issue.

I want to sincerely thank all of the contributors to Dark Matter. Especially the stalwart contributors who have graced the pages of more than one issue. Their work has truly been of exceptional quality and has helped us achieve our goal of exploring natural metaphor in new and intriguing ways.

I hope everyone enjoys this issue as much as we have enjoyed putting it together. And thank you for being readers of Dark Matter!

Sincerely,

Bradley Earle Hoge
Managing Editor

I Am Going to Start Living Like a Zen Priest

Slipping into my cork-soled sandals,
I enter the garden through the tall gate.

If I step and bend with the right
posture, I believe the scarlet tanager

will reveal itself to me again, having no
ambition beyond letting its crimson

profile and dark wings fill my eyes.
Two tasks present themselves to me—

wrestle some plants, first, into the twin
window boxes at my hut, ones tall

and spiky, and flowing ones, purple as rich
robes of an emperor. My other,

harder, task is to bring a cascading flow
of coolness into the range of my ear.

My failing is getting ahead of myself
at times—I have the tall fat-bellied pot

in muted gray, and I've balanced the bamboo
fountain in it, testing the electric pump.

The base must be built—a masonite square,
treated pine lengths for the sides, and tumbled

black polished river stones. These will be set
on edge, lined up in rows in clean sand.

My brain rests like water, calm, clear—
I gather trowel, watering can, and go.

The Home I Could Give A Tree

I watch him sleeping and I want to plant his little feet
in the dirt, thwart his dreams of escape before they have time to foment
keep him safe. I would be a better mother to a tree, I think

something that lived in my back yard, grew slowly and predictably
didn't mind my daily visits to the garden, to sit on a little bench beside him
to ramble about the passage of time. He could get older and older out there, in the yard

and I would probably remember to come out every day
to check on him, even in the middle of winter, I know I could do this much
keep the mulch off his roots, remember to water his roots until he was big enough

to do without me, and even then, I would still be here
and he could not leave.

My eyes look out the window
to endless skies and possibilities

Looking to the infinite blue sky
I imagine aliens

travelling at lightspeed past
the Milky Way

to realities no human could ever
experience

The closest we ever come to new worlds
is the art we create

Art
to escape the feeling

of being trapped
on this large

blue rock
Beautiful as it may be

eyes can't help but
travel into the great beyond

Listening to the Universe

About a year ago, the universe told me to quit my job. I hated my job, but I needed the money to pay my bills. The universe didn't care about that. It just said, "Quit and be happy."

So I quit and became broke. Then I became despondent. Then I started drinking a lot.

One gloomy afternoon I found myself sitting on my kitchen floor staring out the window, asking for the universe to give me further advice, when just at that moment the clouds opened up, letting the sun pour through the glass and warm my face. I was happy the universe was speaking to me again.

The next thing I saw was a cloud in the shape of a Roman chariot. At first I thought the universe was telling me that I should be an actor like Charlton Heston. Whenever I see chariots, I think of him in *Ben-Hur*. Charlton Heston was the best actor of his time, so naturally I thought the universe was telling me that I should be the best actor of my time.

"But I've never acted before," I said to the universe.

That's when it dawned on me that the cloud I was looking at was a harness buggy, not a chariot. The universe was telling me to go to the racetrack and lay down some bets. I had never been to the harness races before, so I decided to call an old friend who designed a certain type of buggy made out of a lightweight material—I think it was the same stuff they make tennis rackets out of nowadays. He said his buggy was going to revolutionize the sport of harness racing.

I was now more certain than ever that the universe was telling me what to do because this friend of mine also happened to be a mystic. He was one of those New York Jews who smoke fat cigars and never work but are extremely spiritual. I hadn't seen him for years, not since he had gone on the witness protection program.

To be honest, I wasn't entirely confident that the universe wanted me to call him. I told myself, as I hunted in my junk drawer for his number, that if the universe did want me to call him then his card would still be in the pile.

And there it was!

Sure enough he answered on the second ring.

"Hey Leonard, it's me," I said. And then I asked him if he had ever built that harness buggy he was always talking about and he said no. And then I told him the universe was telling me I needed to bet the horses, and then I asked him if he knew of a good place to go and do that.

He told me I should go to Los Alamitos.

I asked him if he knew which bus went from Tustin, which is where I lived, to Los Alamitos, which is where the racetrack was.

“I’m thinking 37,” he said.

Are you sure?” I said. “If there’s one thing I can’t stand it is getting lost on a bus that’s going somewhere that I’m not going. “

“There is no certainty, but this is the number that I see.”

“Does it look like a number that might be on a bus?”

“Perhaps,” he said.

I thought back to the time that Leonard had floated above the Earth. It was during one his out of body experiences. He was really good at that. He’d project his being across the universe at any given moment, traveling to other planets and back, sometimes hovering over people’s houses and looking in windows to see what they were doing in there. He used to do it all the time, but then he stopped.

“Why did you stop?” I had asked him one day.

“It got old.”

I told him if I knew how to project my being like that I would still be doing it.

“It’s just like anything else,” he said. “It’s fun at first, but then it gets, well, here...” He took out a piece of paper and wrote down the name of a book he said I could read and then see for myself.

The book was called *How to Perform Astral Projection in Ten Easy Steps and Not Get Bored*. The book was over seven hundred pages! Imagine that, seven hundred pages to explain ten easy steps. Needless to say, there were a lot of extra passages, unnecessary, just a bunch of verbiage, really. The book was so boring that Leonard had never got to the chapters about not being bored when you were astral projecting.

I only got to page 137. That’s when I read: *In order to astral project you must rid yourself of all fear*. As soon as I saw that I knew I wasn’t going anywhere.

Anyway, it was nice to hear Leonard’s voice again. We had been fairly good friends at one time. I say fairly good because there was always something between us I couldn’t seem to traverse. Maybe the fact that he was the type of person that would get bored astral projecting

told me to keep my distance, emotionally speaking. If he could get bored doing that, how quickly would he get bored with me if I became his best friend?

As long as I had him on the phone I figured it wouldn't hurt to ask if he had any feeling about what horse I should bet at Los Alamitos.

"You're going to have to ask the universe directly about that one," he said. "I've been so out of touch, so disconnected. The signals just aren't coming like they used to."

Then I asked him if it was lonely being on the witness protection program.

"At first it was," he said. "But then I found a good support group."

"Boy," I said. "There's a support group for just about anything nowadays."

"Yeah," he said. "But, to be honest, this one can be really hit and miss. People are always coming and going and the meetings keep changing locations."

"I can see how that would be frustrating," I said.

I was glad I said this, seeing as I had called him out of the blue just to pump him for information, which, I have to admit, was a little self-serving on my part. I mean, it wasn't like I was calling him because I missed him and just wanted to talk.

On the day that I was all geared up to bet the horses at Los Alamitos the universe pulled a fast one and told me that this was a stupid idea. The universe had only been testing me, testing me to see how far I would go before realizing that there is no easy route in this life, and that if I were ever going to make anything of myself, meaning, if I were ever going to earn some money, I would have to work for it like everybody else.

The universe told me this when I was waiting at the bus stop on the corner of Harbor and 19th street, waiting for three hours in the midday heat without a single bus 37 in sight. That's when I asked an old lady standing next to me what time the bus to Los Alamitos was coming and she said I'd have to take a bunch of buses to get to Los Alamitos because Los Alamitos was no where near here.

"But it's the closest racetrack around," I said.

And then she told me I should get a job, that betting horses was no way to make a living. I hadn't even told her I that was my plan! She must have been one of my angels. The universe

gives everybody three angels, and I had yet to use any so far. It was funny because she didn't look like an angel; she looked like a regular old lady. But that's how you know for certain that she is your angel.

My boss was okay with me coming back to work. He was more than okay, actually. He had this smug look upon his face.

I hated being there from the moment I sat back down at my desk. But then it occurred to me that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I knew this because there was a pile of work staring back at me that the universe was telling me I had to get to. As soon as I got to it the universe shut the hell up.

The Elm Tree

The July midnight two years ago when our old elm tree
came crashing down in a roaring storm,
falling so hard that its smaller branches
impaled the earth, in a backward remembrance of its growth,
so deeply that they couldn't be pulled out –
our old elm tree, after surviving for over a hundred years,
landing on our porch up against the front door –
before ushering in sirens and flashing lights
that cut through the misty aftermath,
and then ominous silence –
that old elm tree came knocking to say “goodbye.”

The eerie nighttime scene proved to be
a strange prelude to the next morning,
to what happened in the light of day,
a cheerful sunny day, in fact,
full of noise and activity and spirited shouting
by the tree-removal experts with their
monstrous vehicles and tools, as they labored methodically,
first to saw and clear the carnage on the ground,
and then high up to whittle the remains of the elm
down to a manageable size,
the trunk finally reduced to a half-naked totem pole with no faces,
a faded monolith that had lost its memory,
left with no eternal stories to pass along into the future,
on this morning of mourning –

there would be no joyful swinger-of-birches moments here
in the now shadeless yard with its gaping hole in the air,
even as the workers did their job so carefully and completely,
removing the heart of the heart,
leaving only slices of one branch remaining as relics,
thick round pieces of wood with their beautiful rings and curlicues,

all that was left of our towering tree:
a few suggestions
of its centenarian life
and shadows of its
instantaneous,
unexpected
farewell.

Sally + Mike

Beneath the balcony, Sally + Mike is spelled out in clumps of dead palm bark and seaweed on pale sands. Its author used these same crude materials to draw a heart above their names. The moon climbs its ladder over the Atlantic. Its light unrolls a royal carpet across the surface composed of diamonds that travels from one worn-edged corner of the earth and leads to this specific section of shoreline below my hotel window. I think I see Samuel Taylor Coleridge walking on the water, bringing bread, fish and a big dead sacrilegious bird to everyone on shore.

Why have I not seen this before? The way a full moon transfigures the breakers into shadowed horses galloping to their death on the shoreline. The madness of white-capped ghosts and clouds at breakneck speeds left to right across this water color painting drip drying off an Earth-sized page. Waves jot their formulas down on an endless blackboard, followed by their solutions – simply erase the problem. If the stars were our tonight, the beauty might be too much to bear.

Walking along the coastline, the high hotel windows behind me flicker and flutter television nightlights, staving off fear of the dark and of sleeping alone. Me, I'm watching the ocean's programming schedule tonight cause it's much funnier than a sitcom and truer than reality TV. The voices in the waves say, "If only you could hear the stories we hold. Your little problems would mean as little to you as they already do to the world and us."

For now, it is enough to stare into the ocean like a bathroom mirror and say I love you but you can be so much more than this. Realize you're not important to the world and most in it and you will be everything you've ever wanted. "Watch me," says the sea. "I will teach you why these things are true."

I watch. An apt student. The world shifts in its seat and begins to slip away from vision as breakers dissolve like a billion Alka Seltzer tablets. Nothing can be more important than this. Than watching everything disappear and come back again, this show on endless syndication.

At dawn, Sally + Mike still waits in the sand, but its creator is nowhere to be found.

At the Grave

A milky way erupted, an upward ribbon
of breath in, breath out, stars dark to blue-bright,
to an orbit of shapes, of circles morphing random
to red lips, grey granite letters, shards of ashes.

And to a path beyond clouds, sharp crystals of ice
to grab first clear scarlet blood of the not-body,
then the hair, its milk to be braided, once, twice,
till its creamed white becomes solid dark matter.

But he'll never know I looked for steps up this slope,
sought pity in the stars, an air bubble in space,
beyond his two-body discussion of muons, protons,
possibilities, posits. Now just polite grass in earth.

History

To the silent man who could not speak during his own execution.

Fifty years ago, the End of the World was a barren place. It had no inhabitants. The enormous waterfall was the only distinguishing feature there. A scientist happened to be conducting seismic experiments in the region and discovered that this place had the weakest infrastructure on the planet. It was a hundred times more volatile than the San Andreas Fault. An earthquake as minor as point three on the Richter scale could trigger the destruction of Earth. Journalists soon found out about the scientists findings and reported the story in the major newspapers. People flocked to the End of the World for various reasons. Suicides thought this was the easiest place to come to die. Adventurers and thrill seekers saw it as the ultimate challenge. Writers and artists came here to capture the atmosphere of the place in their novels and paintings. Some people came because they were excited at being at the site of a major catastrophe. Soon milk bars, supermarkets and restaurants were built for the growing population. Architects were commissioned to design tall office buildings. No city had been created as quickly as the End of the World. Poets called it, ‘the gold rush of the Soul.’ The people here lived on the edge of a razor blade as though each day were their last. It’s the only place where someone burgles your house and leaves a note of apology. Bank managers work for free. When a woman signs at the End of the World, it is like a high-pitched note of a saxophone, like a cat screaming, like the last sound you will hear as you leave the world.

*God Bless you from
the choirboy with the slingshot
in his hands.*

Darksome

“Here, Rufus. I have a present for you.”

The pale light of the fading fall afternoon came in scattered beams of hazy illumination under the rickety porch. The smell of last fall’s dried and crumpling leaves permeated the darkness. That and something else. Something more animalistic, a strong spore of something wild, something dangerous.

“Rufus, come on now.”

From the corner, where the light never reached, came a rustling. Dried leaves and what sounded like the snapping of twigs but was more likely the light and brittle bones of previous dinners.

The feline cleared its throat.

“Good kitty.”

Rufus rose, a darker shadow, and stretched.

Glenn, on hands and knees, dust clinging to his sweaty forehead, balanced himself on one hand so he could offer Rufus his latest catch.

Rufus moved smoothly, languidly towards the small creature, still breathing but paralyzed with a broken neck, in Glenn’s shaking hand. The cat’s grace was unearthly. Glenn shivered.

Rufus sniffed the bird, twice, then looked up at Glenn. A faint purring sounded from the thing.

“I love you, Rufus.”

Glenn set the bird onto the bed of dried leaves.

Rufus rubbed up against Glenn’s anchored arm.

“Good kitty.”

Rufus bit Glenn, sinking long, crooked teeth deep into his forearm. Glenn, in turn, bit his lip but did not flinch away. This was the animal’s way.

Glenn felt the blood trickle down his arm, soaking into his flannel shirtsleeve. He tasted the copper and felt the blood pool in his mouth, spilling between the gaps of his teeth.

Rufus disengaged his mouth and turned towards the bird.

In the last moment before Rufus and the offering disappeared back into the blackness of the deep pocket underside of the porch, a place so small and close that Glenn could not follow, Glenn saw the twin black pools of the bird’s eyes find his own. They were alight with

something Glenn thought faintly resembled human expression. He tried to find them again but Rufus, bird now in tow, padded back into the darkness.

-

Counting steps in two's and three's, Glenn danced down the crooked steps of the walk. When he reached the street, he turned back and looked at the porch, leaning and barely standing. The house behind it was boarded up, the paint peeling, the front door crisscrossed with two-by-fours nailed haphazardly to the frame.

124 Main Street had been abandoned for as long as Glenn could remember.

He turned back and started for home, in his unusual usual gait of counting steps in twos and threes.

“Rufus liked this offering especially.”

Glenn nodded his head.

One, two, three.

He saw the bird's little eyes staring up at him.

One.

Rufus was such a magnificent creature. Such majesty. Solid and yet somehow a liquid too.

Two.

He existed in a plane just outside Glenn's understand but that was ok. That was just fine. Glenn was patient. He could wait. Rufus would show him.

Three.

Glenn saw Marcus' car in the driveway. He paused just off the sidewalk, wishing the car and its owner away.

The sharp bleat of a car horn startled him and he stepped up onto the sidewalk, out of the street as a minivan slowly drove by. Glenn turned to watch it pass. He raised his left hand in an unmoving sign of salute. Blood, sticky and thick on his palm and in between his fingers, shocked the driver, a woman who appeared to be somewhere in her mid to late thirties.

The woman braked, bringing the minivan to a squeaking stop. The red of the brake lights changed to the white of reverse. She pulled the van up alongside Glenn.

“Hon, are you ok?” the woman asked through the open passenger side window.

Glenn let the smile, always just under the surface, spread slowly across his face. He felt it like removing a scab, letting the wound breathe and bleed.

The woman's face changed. The concern there mutated into a different kind of concern.

"Devine," Glenn said, his hand still raised.

The woman faltered, opened her mouth to say something then nodded and put the car back into drive and slowly pulled away.

Glenn heard the click of the van's doors being locked.

-

"Oh, great. You're home."

Glenn walked by Marcus without answering.

"Mom," he called.

He smelled the overcooked noodles and as he entered the kitchen saw the water boiling over and out of the pot, hissing onto the burners of the stovetop. He turned the burner off.

"Mom," he called again.

"Mmhmm."

Glenn turned the corner out of the kitchen and followed the sound of his mother's confused voice down the skinny trailer hall to the master bedroom. As he passed each of the three rooms he saw the lights were all off. His bedroom was dark. The bathroom: dark. The second small bedroom, in which his mother kept all of her "special souvenirs," was also dark. The last door stood cracked.

Glenn stopped just outside.

"Mom?"

"Mmhmm."

The light spilling out into the hallway was nearly blinding after the darkness of the narrow hall and the adjoining rooms.

Glenn placed his right palm on the door but did not push it inward.

"Mmhmm."

"Mom," Glenn said, his voice softer now, in as low a register as he could get his twelve-year-old voice to go, "I'm home."

"Mm--Glenn?"

Glenn slowly pushed the door open. Light flooded his vision, blinding him. Sharp and

white, Glenn blinked and strained and squinted into the brightness.

“Are you ready for school, honey?”

Glenn felt his mother’s hands, cold and fluttering, find his arms, his elbows, his shoulders, his neck up to his cheeks. They never rested in one place for longer than a second. Goosepimples chased after her fingertips as they fled.

“Mom, the noodles were still going.”

“Mmhmm.”

He felt her shrink away and heard the springs of the bed to his left. Glenn rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and felt the dried blood crinkle and dust off onto his left cheek. He shielded his eyes from the lights and moved towards his mother.

“Glenn, honey,” she said, her voice airy, lilting in some off-minor key, “are you ready for school?”

“It’s nighttime, Mom,” he said, coming to the edge of her bed and sitting down. “It’s fall break. I haven’t had to go to school in four days.”

He felt the bed shake with his mother’s movements, the building up of another great outburst.

Here it comes, he thought.

His eyes were gradually adjusting to the light. All twenty-three lamps were burning bright as was the overhead light. Sweat prickled his skin. That many lights on in such a small space was unbearable.

“Mmhmm, hee.”

“Mom.”

“Mmhee, hee, ha.”

“Marcus is here, Mom. He’s waiting in the living room. Did you let him in?”

“Hee, mmhee.”

“Mom, I need you to keep it together. He’s here. Where’s Grands?”

She didn’t answer but Glenn felt the bed really shaking now. She was trying to keep it inside but Glenn knew she couldn’t hold it forever.

“I’ll call Grands,” he told his mother.

He stepped over two lamps on the floor and slid the phone out from behind three more on the nightstand. He dialed the number and closed his eyes. He could still see the lights burning

bright through his eyelids. It made everything a ruddy red that bled away the dark. The phone rang three times. Grands answered just as the fourth was starting.

“Hello?”

“Grands.”

“Glenn, honey. I thought you were at a friend’s tonight.”

“No, Grands. Marcus is here. The social worker.”

“Oh, Christ. What’s your mother doing?”

“She had noodles going on the stove.”

“Christ, I’ll be there in a minute.”

The line went dead and Glenn opened his eyes and placed the phone back on the receiver.

“Grands is coming, Mom.”

He heard the squeaking springs of the bed settle down a bit.

“I’m going to go see about Marcus.”

“Mmhmm, hee ha.”

Glenn stepped over a handful of more lamps, all equipped with bulbs of much greater wattage than recommended by the lamps’ manufacturers, toward the partially opened bedroom door. He stood there for a moment, his back to his mother and all of her bright lights, squinting into the darkness of the hall toward the kitchen. He could just make out Marcus’ head peering around the corner of the kitchen down the hall.

“She’s back here, Marcus. She’s not feeling too good. Headache, I think,” Glenn said, easing the bedroom door shut behind him. Just as the door clicked shut, Glenn heard the strangled sounds of his mother laughing.

“Grands didn’t know I was here tonight, Marcus.”

Marcus was nodding but looking quite uncomfortable.

“You’re not supposed to be unsupervised,” he said, his fingers fiddling with the leather handle of his battered briefcase.

“It was a misunderstanding, Marcus. Grands thought I was at a friend’s tonight.”

Marcus lifted his eyebrows.

“It was a misunderstanding. She’s on the way now, Marcus.”

They stood there, awkwardly silent and not wanting to look at each other, in the yellow light of the tiny kitchen.

“Where were you?”

“Down the street.”

“At a friend’s?”

“Mmhhh.”

Silence for a beat then, just barely audible to Glenn, he heard his mother’s bedsprings shaking.

“How are you enjoying the fall break?”

“Great. It’s great. Why don’t we step outside to wait for Grands?”

“Ok.”

Glenn led the fumbling social worker out of the kitchen and living room onto the small wooden front porch. The sun had just set and the sky was awash in a deep purple fringed with a royal September blue.

“Report card come in yet?”

Glenn shook his head and scanned the road for headlights.

Come on, Grands.

Marcus beat an uneven beat on the rail of the porch.

“Anything fun planned for the break?”

“Nope.”

“Ah.”

The light of his grandmother’s headlights topped the rise of the ridge and descended toward them.

“There she is.”

“Good.”

They watched the battered Lincoln Town Car pull into the driveway beside Marcus’ nondescript sedan. The dented driver’s side door belched a shriek into the night as it opened.

“Hello, hello,” Grands called out as she stepped out into the deepening dusk.

“Hi, Grands.”

“Hello, Mrs. Golden. How’re you doing this evening?”

“Grand,” she said, letting the heavy metal door slam shut. “Just Grand.”

-

Glenn watched the fading lights of the social worker’s car pull off into the night. They

looked like twin beams of inadequacy: not quite white, not quite yellow, not nearly bright enough to shine more than a car length or so in front of the sedan.

He listened to his grandmother yell at his mother. He did not try to pick out individual words or phrases but, instead, listened to the strange dance the cacophony of an aggravated, exasperated human voice made as it rose, lifted, settled then rose again.

He watched the darkness around the small, isolated trailer strengthen as his grandmother turned off each of the lamps in his mother's bedroom. The dark felt like something he could wrap around himself, steeling himself in against the light, against the probing light of everything he didn't understand and didn't understand him or his family.

Eventually, Glenn's thoughts returned, as they often did, to Rufus. He was such a beautiful creature. So mysterious, yet so familiar.

When he'd first discovered the cat, he wasn't sure it was even alive. He'd been sneaking around 124 Main looking for a loose board or weak spot in the crumbling walls, trying to find a way inside. Glenn was sure there was something cool inside the derelict, abandoned house. He'd taken to crawling on his hands and knees up under the porch, hoping to find a hatch or window leading into the basement. Instead, he saw the matted rib cage, just barely moving up and down, of the biggest cat he'd ever seen.

"Oh," Glenn said. "Hey, there, little fella. You all right?"

The cat didn't even lift its head or flick an ear. No sign it had even acknowledged Glenn's presence.

Glenn approached it slowly, knowing full well a wounded or strange animal was something to caution. When he was hovering above the cat, which he saw was skinny to the point of starvation, it still didn't move or show any sign of attacking or running from him.

"Oh, you poor thing." Glenn reached down a hand and gingerly stroked the cat's fur, just behind the ears.

The cat's eyes opened, searched blindly directly ahead, blinked several times languidly, then turned to Glenn.

He'd never felt anything like it before. A connection as strong and as powerful as a volt of electricity. Those yellow eyes saw Glenn for who he was. They saw his loneliness. His anger. His drive to find the darkness, to shuck the responsibilities inherent in the light.

Glenn blinked first. Even behind the skin of his closed eyelids, Glenn saw those eyes, felt

them drilling into his soul, searching his being.

When he opened his eyes, the cat was sitting. In its full height, under the porch with Glenn on his hands and knees, the cat's eyes were level with his own.

The breath caught in his throat and he had to fight the urge to surge backwards, away and out from under the porch. His chest heaved and he felt sweat prickle out of his pores and begin streaking down the back of his neck down the valley of his spine.

"Oh," he said. "Hello."

The cat's gaze was unflinching. Its eyes never left Glenn's.

The voice, the one Glenn fought to ignore every offhand second when his mind was unoccupied, spoke up.

"Do not fear."

Glenn reached out a hand and the cat, slowly, casually, sank its yellowed teeth into his wrist.

"Why'd you come home, Glenn? You saw that damn social worker's car. You should've stayed out until he left," Grands said, letting the front door slam shut as she stepped out onto the porch.

Glenn traced the blinking path of a satellite as it passed slowly across the deep blue-black canopy overhead.

"You know your mother ain't right. She ain't. She cain't help it." Glenn nodded but didn't look away from the satellite.

"They'll take you, Glenn. You know that don't ya? I'll do my best to take you in when they do but I got past charges and if you don't start paying attention and using your goddam head, they'll take you. Just up and take you away."

Glenn didn't say anything. He watched the slow moving, blinking light disappear over the ridge. He hadn't heard the heavy heave of his grandmother's car door opening but he heard it slam shut. The engine turned over once, twice then roared into life, belching smoke in the red of the sole working brake light. Glenn and the porch of his mother's small trailer were inundated by the Town Car's headlights and the smell of burnt oil. He narrowed his eyes and used his

left hand as a shield but Glenn did not turn away.

-

The night scrapped by, trickling with noises from his mother's back bedroom and the night noises of the surrounding forest. Glenn stared up at his bedroom ceiling, counting cracks and tracing the river of a water stain. It resembled some mythical map, something akin to Tolkien's Middle-earth. The pale light of the night sky coming in through the narrow open window, gave the scene a post-apocalyptic feel. Sauron had taken hold and his influence was spreading.

"Mmhhh."

Glenn felt tears well up in his eyes and he forced them away. He squeezed his hands, his left still crusted over with the dried blood he didn't bother to clean away, into fists and they shook with his effort. He wanted to scream. He wanted to wail out into the night. He wanted to keep the light at bay. He wanted the darkness to deepen, wanted it to wash over him and his mother and leave them be, shield and protect them from the prying eyes of the light. He wanted Rufus near. He wanted to understand.

At long last, in the growing haze of a morning he knew he'd miss, Glenn found sleep.

-

He stalked the warbler as it flitted from low hanging branch to ground. He could tell it was a momma by the way it gathered small insects, mostly the large fire ants and a few caterpillars, and disappeared into the boxwood shrub, where Glenn knew she had to have a nest. In a book from the school library, which he'd stolen just before school let out for fall break, he'd read that Kentucky warblers kept their nest near to or on the ground.

He'd followed her from the trailer, where he saw her bouncing around near the overturned garbage cans picking up worms and pill bugs.

The flash of her yellow feathers was just visible inside the shrub. Glenn stood as still as he could, listening to the sounds of the midday woods: calls from other songbirds, several more Kentucky warblers, meadowlarks, and, somewhere close but not close enough to really track, a cawing raven. He listened and could just make out the hungry sounds of the warbler's chicks. He counted four distinct little chirpers

Rufus will feast today.

He stepped closer, sucking in his breath and biting down on his lower lip to assuage the

pain of hearing the noise he was making. He wished he were lighter. He wished he had Rufus' keen, feline hunter's grace.

A twig snapped under his foot. A flash of yellow swept out of the bush and disappeared up into the boughs overhead.

"Shit."

Glenn rose to his full height and looked for the bird. He saw nothing but the gentle sway of green turning golden with bits of Judas red becoming more and more apparent.

"Well four chirpers is still a feast," he said, taking the five strides to the bush.

He reached inside and felt around until he found the little nest. He closed his hands around it and pulled it free of the shrub.

Five little heads bobbed and jerked and looked up at him. Little beaks parted and small, strange squawks sounded. They looked confused and bewildered at the sudden change of venue. They seemed to squint in the bright light filtering in through the oaks overhead. They did not seem to recognize or even acknowledge Glenn's presence.

The songbird mother spilled off a rapid descension of notes that moved from branch to branch above Glenn's head.

Glenn smiled and started off for 124 Main Street.

-

"Rufus, come here, buddy," Glenn said, awkwardly hauling the nest of little, noisy warblers with one hand and using the other to pull himself forward, deeper into the recesses of the space under the porch. "I got something for ya."

Glenn's smile stretched across his face like a gash, something made quickly and with a sure hand. His eyes scanned the darkness, seeking out the deeper black amongst the shadows.

The little birds' heads all shook in tandem with each of Glenn's awkward lurches forward. Dried grass, long since dead, crinkled under his knees and his right palm. The smell of the porch washed over him, flooded his senses with sensations of sleep and eating and waiting.

Glenn crawled until he could no longer. The top of his head brushed against a stray nail sunk through the thin wood overhead and he felt a small trickle of blood slip through his oily hair down onto his temple where it slowed to a crawl and became clotted with exposure and the dust and dirt floating freely around him.

"Rufus? Where are ya, buddy?"

The bravest of the little birds gave it his all. He shrieked but Glenn wasn't sure whether it was for his mother or for more sustenance.

He settled himself onto his stomach and inched forward, extending the nest as far as he could reach. He moved until he was very nearly stuck then set the nest down and pushed it deeper with the tips of his fingers. It struck something and would move no further.

A trill of recognition sounded. The flash of the great feline's eyes opening and the smell of Rufus' breath as he opened his large mouth and yawned descended onto Glenn.

“Good morning.”

Glenn squinted into the darkness but could only make out the dim light of the cat's eyes. He felt the swift rushing intake of the cat sniffing both his hand and the nest of, oddly quiet now, birds. He felt the rough, dry yet wet sandpaper of the cat's tongue as it dabbed onto his knuckles.

“Good boy,” Glenn cooed. “Yes, I brought you breakfast.”

The cat started purring and it seemed to Glenn that it resonated from all four corners of the porch at once. It permeated the place every bit as much as the smells did.

The cat's tongue flicked between his knuckles again then he felt the top of the cat's forehead rub affectionately against his fingers. Glenn reached blindly into the darkness and his fingers found the cat's ears. He tested them gently, kneading them between his tingling index and thumb.

A peace washed over him. He gave up seeing in the dark and closed his eyes. He let his head drop onto the dust and dried leaves, the dirt clinging to the blood and sweat of his left cheek. He sucked in a gratifying breath and felt the grit of the small, close place in his teeth, on his tongue, coating the inside of his cheeks.

Glenn heard the crunching of little bones. He felt the cat's head's movement as it went about its meal. The purring never ceased.

-

The trail was little more than a deer's path, a seldom used one at that, but Glenn used it frequently. He was careful not to step too near the edges, leaving it small and nearly invisible from the road, unless you knew where to look. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and watched his feet, clad in dirty, too small Converse shoes, trace a straight line down the curving path. His steps came in two's and three's.

Two.

There's gonna be another hearing next month.

Three.

Marcus is gonna tell the Judge about yesterday.

Two.

Rufus sure liked those little ones. Maybe I should try and make it a point to find more nests.

Three.

I should go check on mom.

Two.

The cawing of a raven broke Glenn's train of thought and brought him to an abrupt stop. He craned his head to the side, held his breath and waited for the bird's call again.

Tok!

To the left. Cain't be more than a few dozen feet or so away.

Glenn stepped off the narrow path into the thick poison ivy and wild grass.

Tok, Ca-Cruck!

It sounded much nearer now. He took his steps carefully, picking them out one after another, avoiding downed branches and briars. He scanned the trees overhead but saw no raven.

Cruck!

This time it sounded a bit further off but straight ahead. Glenn picked up his pace and chased the sound.

Tonk-Cruck!

He began to jog.

Cruck!

Glenn was running now. The raven sounded so near but as he ran after it it didn't seem to get any closer.

Tok!

Sweat swept down his forehead and stung his eyes. He lifted his arm to wipe it away but his right foot caught on something and Glenn went down, eyes closed and mouth agape. He hit the ground and all the air was knocked from his chest. He bit down on his tongue and felt his mouth fill with blood.

Glenn heaved and clawed out around him, desperately trying to refill his lungs with air. He sputtered and silently screamed for help. He rocked himself forward on his knees and wrapped his arms around himself.

He found a tiny breath, finally, then another then another and, gradually, he was breathing again, shaky and unsure but breathing.

Ta-Tonk!

Glenn shot his head up and saw that he was at the edge of an unfamiliar clearing. It wasn't very big, maybe thirty feet by thirty feet and shaped in an unbelievably perfect circle. He turned around and saw that he'd tripped over a downed river birch at the very edge of the clearing where the wild grass and the tree line ended abruptly and the not quite ankle deep grass of the meadow began. The place had the appearance of a manicured lawn or private garden.

Tok!

Glenn turned back to the clearing and saw the raven. It was gigantic, bigger than any raven he'd ever seen. It was flapping its massive wings in long, downward strokes keeping it four or five feet off the ground near the middle of the clearing. Just under the clenched talons, a small fawn stood staring slightly down at Glenn, still on his knees.

The raven dropped down onto the fawn's back.

Glenn marveled at the sight. The fawn didn't flinch or move and the raven slowly stopped beating its wings.

Tok!

Both the fawn and the raven stared at Glenn. Their eyes seemed like twin sets of glistening black pools. They looked like the same set of eyes on two different animals. Glenn found he was holding his breath and allowed himself a small, shaky intake and release of air.

The raven's beard rose up from its chest as it emanated a sound unlike any Glenn had heard come from a bird. It was, at once, taunting and beaconing. The raven flexed its talons and Glenn saw the fawn blink once then several paths of nearly black blood drip down its back onto the grass.

"What?"

Tok!

The raven beat its wings and lifted up into the air. It turned in the air, the thick, black wings beating faster and faster, seeming to rotate on some invisible axis suspended by strings. It

croaked another call then turned and flew toward the far end of the clearing.

For a moment, Glenn was sure the thing was flying upside down.

The fawn seemed to jerk awake. It shot one last look in Glenn's direction then hopped and flounced off into the forest.

Glenn didn't move for some time. He sat there on his knees, feeling the cool of the soil so close under the grass soak through his thin jeans. Goosebumps spread across his body and he felt them like the tickle of static electricity. He felt the hair on his neck stand then fall.

Gradually, his breathing returned to normal and he rose to his feet. He looked around the clearing with a deliberate and slow turning of his head. He was alone. The forest was unnervingly silent.

Glenn made his way to the exact center of the clearing, doing his best to look in all directions at once. He felt exposed and naked without the cover of the trees. He felt unseen eyes follow his progress.

In the middle of the clearing was a stone. It was nearly flat, seemed to have been worn so but by what Glenn could not tell. Three drops of thick, congealing blood from the fawn made a strange set of circles on the stone's surface.

Glenn knelt and carefully dipped a finger into the nearest of the circles. It held a faint warmth and stuck to his finger like a weak glue. He moved his finger away and watched it pull at both the stone and his finger as if trying to bind the two together. Glenn allowed his finger to move away from the stone and watched the dark red, nearly black, shrink back to the stone and settle.

He brought his coated finger to his face and studied it minutely. He pinched it with the thumb and pointer finger of his other hand. It was drying much faster now and held no more trace of the warmth it had formerly been graced with.

Do not fear.

Glenn brought the finger to his mouth and sucked.

-

Glenn reached the trailer just as dusk was spreading its full shroud across the ridge. Stars, already bright enough to twinkle out in the in-between light, felt like eyes watching Glenn as he carefully made sure Marcus wasn't anywhere around before stepping out from behind the old maple.

The front door was standing partly open. He stepped up onto the porch and pushed it in. A still darkness hung around the place. Not a single light was on.

“Mom?”

No answer. He looked to his left, towards the kitchen and, further down the hall, his mother’s bedroom: darkness. Stillness.

“Mom? Are you home?”

This darkness did not feel comforting. It felt waiting. Weighing. Full of unseen pricks and proddings. Dangerous.

Glenn stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind him. He fumbled for the light switch, found it, flicked it up and down but to no avail.

He blinked in the dimness, impatiently waiting for his eyes to adjust.

“Mom?”

Do not...

“Mom?”

be afraid...

“Mom!”

Glenn heard his own voice crack. Goosebumps went rippling up his arms and the back of his neck. He took a long pull of air and tried to settle himself.

Do not be afraid.

Glenn let his feet carry him since he still couldn’t see all that well. He made his way from the living room through the kitchen and into the hall. He stood at the foot of it squinting down into the darkness. His mother’s door was shut. He could just make out the yellow dullness of the golden knob.

He took one step.

“Mom.”

Another.

“Mom, I’m home.”

Another.

“Why won’t any of the lights come on?”

Glenn passed the yawning mouths of his bedroom, the bathroom and his mother’s souvenir room: all black, all empty, all still. They felt like holes to crawl into and hide. Glenn resisted the

urge to do so. He felt drawn to his mother's bedroom. Some strange magnetic force, a black hole, unseen but with reaching, pulling tentacles of a gravitational force unavoidable, pulled him closer.

Glenn lifted his hand to turn the knob but stopped short.

"Mom? Are you in there?"

He rested his palm on the surface of the door. He couldn't tell if it was shaking or he was.

"Mom?"

His voice cracked again. He felt tears running down his cheeks.

be afraid

"Mom? Please answer me."

His voice sounded like the child he was. Glenn registered this and blinked back another set of burning tears. He gulped down what felt like a mouthful of mucus and turned the knob.

A darkness more blinding than any light he'd ever seen flooded his vision. Not a single light was burning in the room. Each of his mother's twenty-three lamps were piled together in the center of the room. All of their cords were strung together, his mother in the center. The faint burnt scent of scorched skin and burnt hair still hung in the air. A smell not completely unlike the ozone preceding a tornado.

"Mom. Oh, mom."

Glenn wanted to run, both, away and to his mother at the same time. His eyes had fully adjusted and he saw that she was gone. No rise and fall of her chest. Her mouth torn slantwise in what could've been the grimace of pain or the flinch of ecstasy.

Strangely, Glenn found that the tears were gone. A great sense of calm swept over him. He had the sensation that he was being quickly covered up by the fall leaves, golden, red and crinkling, of his previous self. Glenn felt he was shedding the skin of the child he'd been not three breaths before. He carefully studied his mother: her face, her stained nightgown, the lamps surrounding her. He moved on to the room at large: the overflowing ashtray, the empty pill bottle on the nightstand, the naked paneled walls.

He stepped over to the phone, sitting beside the ashtray and medicine bottle. He set his hand down on its cool, plastic surface. He lifted the receiver but set it down again. Glenn didn't know what voice he would hear when he opened his mouth. This frightened him. It filled him with a stinging anticipation that he couldn't bring himself to address yet. He stepped away from

the phone, around his mother and the twenty-three lamps, and backed out of the room.

-

The woods were full of shifting shadows. Branches clicked and rustled together overhead. Bits of light from the stars and pale moon broke through their cover in random patterns.

Glenn took the steps slowly, taking as long a stride as he could. He walked and walked. His thighs burned, ached then could've ceased being at the numbness that overtook them. The crunch of both old and new leaves underfoot eventually became too much for him. He stopped at an unfamiliar, fallen log and removed his Chuck Taylors. He left them sitting, side-by-side, in the dew-dampened grass and barefooted, the soles of his feet soaking up the naked closeness of each step, walked on.

As the night came on fully, the shafts of moonlight filtering in through the tree cover intensified, creating great columns of crystalline brightness. Glenn let his hands trace the outlines then dip inside the light, his hand appearing as foreign and far too child-like in the light to be his own. He felt like he was peering into a microscope at some microbial body, some prehistoric virus or single celled organism nearly completely unrelated to his person.

The forest seemed suffocatingly still. It felt familiar, like being under the porch of 124 Main with a bird waiting for Rufus. A growing sense of anticipation; the heavy weight of the wait. For a fleeting second, Glenn had the nearly overwhelming urge to run back to Rufus. To make sure he was still there. To track and catch the cat another meal.

Glenn stopped and looked around. He realized he had not even the faintest clue as to where he was and, untroubled by this knowledge, walked on. With each step, he found the urge to return lessen until it held not even the weight of the dandruff on his shoulders.

Some things must work themselves out, he thought.

Glenn walked on into the night.

The sky is painted a lifeless gray/blue
the trees deep in slumber.
My fingers stiffen as the air thickens, as
the temperature drops.
The old memories freeze in time as time
freezes in old memory.

Don't let this one go, hold on to you
like I hold on to you,
my light fill your darkness.
Don't call for the monster this time, let
him go alone.

Unfreeze from your memory of hurt and
melt into a memory of glee.
Lose yourself in a cloud of inevitable
joy
where hurt is nonexistent and pain
but a myth

let the wind whisper beautiful
utterance
let the wind become you as it
dances on your skin.

Drive to Survive: The John Day Fossil Beds

It's May on San Juan Island, just south of the USA-British-Columbia border. The loons and buffleheads of winter have given way to bald eagles nesting atop the tallest Douglas firs. Kingfishers bicker back and forth between our dock and the neighbor's disputing the frontiers of their territories. Harbor seals follow me when I row our skiff around Brown Island, whether from curiosity or to guard their nearby seal nursery I don't know. I've spent the week struggling to scrub winter's algae and moss from our decks and patios – the moss and algae don't surrender easily. Life. Tough. Resilient. Profuse. Prolific. Driven to survive.

A day or two past, I noticed a pair of swallows hovering beneath the boom of our sailboat. The boom, which supports the bottom of the mainsail, is aluminum and hollow inside and now, with the sails still ashore, a circular underside hole is exposed. I suspected the swallows might be surveying the hole as a nesting site. Sure enough, I found grasses and feathers on the boat's cabin top. I duct taped the hole closed. With their green, iridescent breasts the swallows swooped back and forth around the boom like airborne emeralds. For the next several hours they returned again and again. I was sad to evict them, but a sailboat boom is a no place to raise swallow chicks and the nest droppings would stain the boat's fiberglass. Still, despite my reluctance to host them, I admired their intensity, their ability to remember where their nesting site was to be, their difficulty comprehending its loss, their determination to find a safe spot to hatch their chicks – what swallows do, what all life does. For the last 550 million years, from the dawn of living things, life has shaped the air we breathe, the earth we walk on. Life and the planet. Inseparable.

Recently University of Washington paleontologists announced the discovery of the first dinosaur fossil ever identified in what is now the State of Washington. The fossil was found on Sucia Island only a dozen miles or so from our San Juan Island home. Because the geology of the Northwest has been so recently violent – volcanos, lava flows, ice-age floods – most dinosaur fossils, if dinosaurs ever lived here, were buried or washed away. So this fossil – a thigh bone to an ancestor of T-rex – likely arrived already fossilized on one of the island arcs that the Pacific Plate jammed into the North American Plate. It lived as long before the last T-rex died as we live after the last T-rex lived. The earth is so ancient and life has lived here so long that the enormity of its years defies easy comprehension. Still, I warrant this: the Sucia Island T-rex must have sought nesting sites for its hatchlings with as much vigor as do my swallows. The drive to survive is as ancient as life itself.

Dinosaurs have such a prominent place in our imaginations that we sometimes forget that any creature that lived can fossilize. A fall or so ago my wife Susan and I visited John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. The monument is located south of Washington State in Central Oregon, not on one of our normal tracks across the Northwest, but we'd read a tourist brochure that showed John Day's varicolored canyons, the layers atop each other in pink and blue-gray and tangerine-taupe, and we decided to see the place. Central Oregon has had a geologic past as violent as Washington State's. The layers at John Day reflect this. Each signifies an act in Oregon's geologic drama. But prominent typeface on the John Day National Monument website proclaimed this: "NOT DINOSAURS."

If not dinosaurs, then what?

We arrive at John Day just as the sun is rising. October shadows lie long and low over the dry hills. The Visitor Center lies in a valley that is almost a canyon. The John Day River carved this valley and it still courses down its floor. Black, basalt cliffs tower east of us, the basalt bisecting clay layers that are blue and pink and tan. Riverbank cottonwoods are turning gold. Since the Visitor Center isn't open yet, we opt for a guided trail only a short drive north up the road. The trail is called the "Island in Time Trail." We park our rig – black SUV, silver Airstream trailer – in the trailhead parking lot. We ascend a narrow ravine. We're climbing between blue-green badland hills. The hills are clay that's mostly ash from the Cascade volcanos of today – Mt. Hood, Mt. St. Helens, the former Mt. Mazama that blew its top 8000 years ago leaving behind what is now Crater Lake – but also from the proto-Cascade volcanos that preceded these by millions of years. Signs along the trail call attention to what we should notice. Most surprising are the fossil replicas, enclosed in plastic and concrete boxes, not real fossils but what fossils looked like when the paleontologists began to excavate them – white, barely discernable (to me) rib cages, vertebrae, jawbones with sharp teeth. The names of these animals are unfamiliar to us – long Latinate names difficult to pronounce and impossible to remember. The fossils at John Day populated the Cenozoic Era, the age that followed the Age of the Dinosaurs – why there are no dinosaurs here – the era that includes us, and that has lasted the last 66 million years. Each specie's respective times on the earth were often millions of years apart. Their coming to life, and, in most cases their extinction, was triggered by the wandering continents and the climate change that accompanied such wanderings.

On our return to the Visitor Center, a young ranger is hoisting an American flag. She wishes us a “Good morning” and invites us in. We discover the Visitor Center is more than a museum; it’s also a working paleontology lab. We view the lab through glass windows, the microscopes and sample tables so clean and bright they could be a hospital operating theatre. But the real meat of the Visitor Center, at least for us, turns out to be the murals that back the fossil display tables. These depict the animals and plants that lived in each epoch for which there are fossils at John Day.

Susan and I wander from mural to mural. The trees and plants, unlike the animals, look familiar, although they differ mural to mural. Over 44 million years, the climate changed and the plants did too. Sometimes they look like Mississippi and Louisiana in the United States today, sometimes like the savannah grasslands of Africa, the youngest like the dry pinion pine, sagebrush, and high desert grasses you see outside the Visitor Center now. But the animals portrayed in the murals are a different story. The animals are a bestiary quite unlike Noah’s Ark, creatures extinct before the mastodons, evolving over and over again, millions of years apart. Some evolved into the animals we know in our own time. Others became evolutionary dead ends. Mural to mural we discover creatures we’ve never heard of: Entelodonts, also called “Hell pigs” that were pony-sized carnivores with heads like rhinos and teeth to match; Meohippus and Mesohippus, precursors to modern horses, only one of which would evolve molars strong enough to graze on grasses that came to dominate the planet and thus only Mesohippus would pass its genes to modern horses; Amphicyonids that were thick-bodied, trap-jawed, fox-to-wolf-sized carnivores who hunted by ambushing prey; seven dog genera, three bear genera, eight different kinds of bear-dogs, tapirs the size of house cats, four types of rhinos, goat-sized camels, “false saber-toothed cats” called Nimravidae that were neither saber-tooths nor even cats (although in the youngest of the fossil beds there are fossilized bones that were saber-tooth cats). With so much prey and so many predators, this place was surely blooded by tooth and claw. We learn that after the dinosaur apocalypse, the largest land animals were smaller than ten kilograms. We learn that by the mid-Eocene, some 20 million years later, the earth has become a jungle planet pole to pole. We learn that as the great supercontinent, Pangea, broke up, ocean currents altered, the climate between the poles and the tropics became seasonal and the polar icecaps formed. We learn that by the time the continents assumed their current place, this about 7 million years ago, the earth had become cooler, dryer, grassier, and more mountainous. It’s a

fascinating story, although there's a danger to this type of compressed natural history. You lose a sense of the vastness of time. You lose the recognition that almost all of the extinct mammals in the Age of Mammals lived much longer on the planet than our own species has lived on the planet, that hundreds of millions of sunrises and sunsets fell on them and their progeny before there was even the remotest mother of men and women. You can mistakenly assume our species is the end product of an orderly progression and forget then uncertainty of how long we'll last or even if, in terms of longevity, we'll even be a successful species. You also lose sight of how frighteningly random evolution is: there's no inevitability or guiding intelligence to it. The last and most dramatic mural depicts the Rattlesnake Assemblage, seven million years ago, moments after a super volcano in what is now southeastern Oregon erupts and the animals are fleeing the pyroclastic flow that will incinerate them leaving only their bones, which will become the fossils we're viewing today.

I'm taking a break from patio cleaning, sitting in a rocking chair at the front window of our San Juan house, keeping an eye on the harbor when I notice a mosquito lion flitting back and forth across the window glass. The lion is perhaps one hundred times bigger than a mosquito – if you drew a circle around it, it would be about the size of a twenty-five-cent coin – but it has proportions similar to a mosquito: long legs, a small body, large, translucent wings. Its name is a local one and local lore maintains that the lion feeds on mosquitos. I have no idea if this is true. What strikes me this morning, however, is this creature's exquisite fragility and its determined animation as it goes about doing whatever mosquito lions do. We have yet to build a machine this small that moves so beautifully, although perhaps someday we will – I'm not certain I'll welcome it. But I know this: If such an insect were discovered in the deserts of Mars or under the ice of Jupiter's Europa moon, headlines would scream its existence. WE ARE NOT ALONE! But consider this: is it any less a miracle that the mosquito lion is here with us, one of the one-and-a-half million animals so far discovered, with over ten-thousand new species being discovered every year? I think not. So small. So beautiful. So urgent in its comings and goings. So determined to survive.

Wearily, I rise from my rocker and return to my brushes and my bleach and my paint rollers. In a week or so, the patio will be moss free and the decks will be newly stained and for a while I'll enjoy illusion that I've held life at bay. But only until next year. Then the moss and algae will return, along with the kingfishers and the spring daisies that whiten our lawn, as they will year after year until Susan's bones and my bones are fossils too.

Physics Sloshed

So now we are all vibrations:
lapping lake, the blood-thump bass
of passing cars. But also me—
my tendons gripping arch around
this glass bottle's seeming shape.
The amber atoms dupe me that its shell
is hard, unlike the amber sloshing within.

Not so, they say; not so separate as
we think—glass vibrates in some other key
than beer, than me... and rippled wavelets
shoreward lap the pebbles in atomic dance.

Teeth that terrify,
wings that beat against the sky,
tail made of iron

Have I become fear?
Painted a black, bleak color,
scales only lifeless

No longer full of
Rage and Resentments to others --
no, I am empty

Relieve me of this
cruel, wicked corpse of a beast
and make me a man

Why the Doge Marries the Sea Each Year

The queens of carnival paraded in the flotilla of glittering barges hung with lamps that shone rippling pools of light across the lagoon. They lay in the barges, the curtain drawn with a gauzy grace so the queens saw all the citizen lining the edges of the Grand Canal while the citizens only saw the flickers of the lanterns, the shimmer of the gold painted oars and the elaborate disguises of the queens' attendants. Sometimes a queen would peek through the curtain and the crowd's gasping admiration startled the lovely gloved lady back in. In the dusky evening moon, the Rialto glittered in the light of the lanterns, white and arched like some noble grimace as the barges passed beneath in a silent parade.

Estelle and Cozine worried at the edges of their thick embroidered tunics. They shared a barge, though their fathers could afford separate, grand boats. Sometimes being able to afford something meant you didn't have to. It meant a sort of freedom from such frippery. The girls, neighbors and friends like sisters, would not be separated in their season, much to their mother's anger. But their fathers understood. They'd been best brother friends in their youth and had pursued ladies together. Why should their daughters not be the same?

Each wave knocking against the hull of the shallow draught boat sent Estelle and Cozine into giggling fits. For weeks, they'd watched the boys gathering, playing at being men—fighting in the street below their windows. Both girls, beauties in their way, inspired such displays. Estelle's long, shimmering curtain of dark hair and her delicate features; Cozine's fine white skin, strong lips so shaped by God's hands—both ladies gifted with the blessings of Venus' grace. How could the young men not stamp their feet and clash swords like bulls sharpening their horns upon each other?

The Doge demanded the beauties of Venice parade at Carnival, in the deepest part of the winter. He demanded that fathers sacrifice their daughters upon the "swords" of young noble boys, virgin blood to spill for the strength of Venetian family and Venetian wealth. Cozine's father called it in-breeding.

So the girls dressed in embroidered robes, black with pure white stitching—white so dear because the process required human urine, human bone, and magic. White as the moon on a night without stars to steal the eye. The girls faces obscured behind lace masks their mothers stitched since the girls suckled upon their wet nurses' breasts.

The barge bumped into the dock, wood piers slick with green algae but festooned with ribbons of gold and purple, the Doge's colors. The girls stood together and stepped off onto the dock, refusing the hand of their attendants. Instead, they held firm to each other, fingers twisted

in softened knots, soft beats of heart and breath passing through that skin connection. They lined up with the other carnival queens, a delicately wrapped procession of the finest women snaking through the now silent crowd of watchers toward the palace of the Doge. The Doge waited with the breathless men of Venice, ready to be matched.

Estelle and Cozine wished at the same time and it passed between the pads of their fingers as sweetly as a spring song. Their wish grew from a long love, from a sisterhood that needs no husband, no keeper, and no forgiveness. They marched forward through the silent nobility crowded in at the entrance of the white peaked entry of the palace of the Doge, weaving through the men who'd staked a spot standing as a pillar holding up their sky. An intrusion that the queens made to weave around, as if they flowed like fluid, parting and coming together. Only Estelle and Cozine kept their course and held together. The men's gazes raked across them, noting the white of their weavings, the shape that the tapestry made as it brushed their bodies, their eyes. Estelle and Cozine wove through, like the other queens of the carnival, only they recognized the walk for what it was— an audition. The men stood, waiting to be picked, to be lifted out of loneliness by the current crop of queens. Some of the girls stopped in front of the boy they'd loved outside, the boy they'd promised to love in breathless moments before the carnival. Some chose what their parents said. Some chose what their eyes wanted. Estelle and Cozine kept weaving and wandering and avoiding the men left, so many more than the women. So many seeking a wife.

The Doge finally stopped them. They'd been walking for hours and even the men, posed like lions in a fight had sagged in the waiting.

“Will you not choose, O queens?” The Doge asked. His tall hat nodded on his gray head. Kindly crinkles around his eyes covered the sharp edge of his words. No choice, no husband, no future. The girls could hear their mothers weeping, but only inside their heads. To weep out loud, with others to hear, that their mothers would never do. The girls pressed their hands together again, more firmly, in hopes that their thoughts would pass once more as a breeze between them. But this time, only their own fears haunted each head. Father's shame, mother's horror, the future of a family. If only one of them had been born a man, then they could live together in the love of each other. Then, were Estelle an Edwin or Cozine a Costas, then they'd find each other in the queens' parade. But as two young women in love, all they could do is shake their heads and wait for judgment.

The Doge bowed his head, allowing the other couples to enter the palace where they

would dance and eat and drink together. They would cement their union and parents hopes as the Doge's players strummed their lap harps and rang their bells. Sopranos that fluttered and lofted through the rafters would charm their feet into a dance. Not Estella or Cozine. The Doge held out his hand and stopped their weaving gate through the crestfallen suitor boys.

"You cannot circle forever, young ones. You must choose your future or choose your death."

The girls looked into each others' eyes. They'd never be alone again. Never press fingertips upon each other's lips. Never whisper. Never.

They glanced around at the men left to them. None were so bad. None.

"Choose, beauties," the Doge said. "Or don't choose. You must not stay here."

The girls turned to each other and smiled. This had been decided so long before. They'd talked about it for many years. For some time, one or the other would say, "Knowing you live is enough. I would be able to survive if you are alive."

Then in the softening embraces, they would find the horror of that loneliness. To know your love lived on without you. To be alone with someone else. They'd found that only together could they see a path forward.

"We will marry the sea," Estella said. Cozine nodded and jerked off the lace mask her mother had created stitch and knot, year after year. Like a broken shackle, it fell away. Then Estella did the same, ripping her own off along with the hat that covered her beautiful hair. They walked together past the men and the families, all turned their backs as the girls passed between. The Doge walked behind them, silent and watching as the girls loosened the robes with the precious white thread until they stood naked on the stones leading to the lagoon where the sea waited for its brides. The families stood, backs to them, not moving, scarce breathing.

At the edge of the pavement, where earth fell away into the sea, the Doge reached out and stopped them.

"Would you not marry me? Be my brides and live as my ladies of the palace. You would have each other and you would have me."

The girls turned to face the Doge, his kind eyes lay upon them in a promise.

For a moment, the flesh pressed between their palms tingled. Estella, lover of life, thought about it. Thought about giving herself and her love to the kind, old man. Life known, instead of life unknown. But Cozine's eyes told her that such a thing would never be enough.

They shook their heads, bowed to him, and leapt into the sea.

###

That, my child, is why the Doge marries the sea every year. When he says his vows as all of the queens watch, he wishes that he'd been able to save them from the hate of the nobles and their own fears. He throws out two rings for the sea to take down to their bones.

*

The glare this plate thins out
eats the way each star
tells you it's still alone

though rim to rim you bring
a rain smelling from a narrow road
holding down the Earth

till everything is dirt and she
is sitting at a table, asks you
to hold her hand, childlike, fill it

lets you swallow the afternoon
even she will remember, your lips
circling down in flames and hunger.

*

As if a rope, half bone
half pulled from your chest
the way this dead branch

tells you everything then closes
though the wood won't burn
—so many things are made from doorways

and she was left inside
with nothing to sit on or a stone
that will fall by itself, broken off

to die alone, whispering goodbye
for two and this dirt not yet
just another hole that weighs too much.

*

You don't read how weak it was
though this windtorn composition book
steadies its lettering for afternoons

the way beginners wave their arms
making room for the Honor Roll
mixed with stone, not yet the pages

—these dead are used to it :words
put together by a still warm crayon
and you too no longer move

leave them nothing except an afterall
in writing and on these sheets
hillsides to fit inside your name

holding it between your fingers, higher
and from the struggling dirt, over and over
making mountains, clocks, emptiness.

*

You caress this dust as if it's stuck
drains under ripples and sap though all goodbyes
keep warm in a dark lake at sunset, reek

from varnish, hunted down by small stones
by dying wood and from the rot
and enormous rain paws the scent open

the way she once stood still –the room
is familiar, shattered by lips, cheeks
–as for you it's just another door

somehow dry, no longer the one by one
you leaned against then left behind
away from everything, both hands at once

and yours is the only loneliness still leaving
–what you smell is when she first came in
and stayed without turning her head.

*

You walk past as if the first death
was a bird –enormous feathers
half stone, half outworn, one by one

though they still need more time
could calm these dead, spread out
airborne, older than the number 10

than this hillside letting its small footsteps
fall standing erect, frightened
–you come here to listen for eggs

for echoes, for brothers, sisters –it's useless
flying so close, wing tip to wing tip
till a moon is all that's left

bringing you its black, covers you
already one hand on your shoulder
counting your fingers out loud to 0.

devoid of light,
our universe is infinite,
it extends to forever
there is no escape

It has been said that we never dream of new colors,
that we cannot see them in the mind's eye.
And that we cannot think outside of words.
I loved an unseen person more than once.

On First Looking Into Hubble's REALM

We measure shadows, and we
search among ghostly errors of
measurement for landmarks
-Edwin Hubble

Plate II and a dollar closed the sale.
A pristine copy unread, in my surmise,
in full twenty years since its arrival.

A watcher of the skies, I travell'd
then in dreamy realms of speculation,
to the dim boundary and notions he'd not risk.
Who lived, will live, out along our galactic plane?

But his photos, and the New General Catalog
were enough. It is still a bargain to imagine
all late spirals as five-and-dime pinwheels,
tho' "even our dreams may be forgotten."

In Mendel's Garden

1. ipo

Supposedly to
access the inner t-
shirt, a consortium
of lentils & beans
has launched its
maiden hedge fund.

2. ceramic beads

Key words: bioreactor,
mammalian. Parents spend
more time reading with their
kids than doing numeracy

activities. Cell growth is
rapid, & a retroviral titer still
yields a positive reading.
That's more than half the battle.

3. A return to a hunter-gatherer society

It's one of those rad-
ical moves so often
proposed but so rarely carried out—

celebrities enchanted
by fashion are using
lemons to keep their
skin guacamole green.

4. An / outstanding example / of the artwork

A Poisson model for
the genetic evaluation

of tick resistance can
be a robust mechanism

for exchanging ω -auto-
mata, & much more

cost-effective than
buying chicken nuggets

5. endocrine transfer

Hormones & glands are
surprisingly easy drag
& drop site creators

which is why 99 percent
of all life forms on earth
have become extinct.

Contributor Notes:

Patricia Clark's recent work has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Salamander*, *Prairie Schooner* and *The Feminist Wire*. *The Canopy*, her fifth book of poetry, came out in 2017 from Terrapin Books. She is a professor and poet in residence in the Writing Department at Grand Valley State University in Michigan.

Dan Corfield teaches writing at Golden West College in Huntington Beach, California. His fiction appears in over a dozen literary journals including *Word Riot* and *Carve Magazine*. His poetry can be found in *Beside the City of Angels: An Anthology of Long Beach Poetry*. He enjoys surfing and playing beach volleyball in his spare time.

Michael Crane lives in South Melbourne, Australia. He has been published widely in many Australian Journals and newspapers, including the Best Australian Poems 2011, 2014 & 2015. A recent story called *Aeroplane Girl* will appear soon in *Southerly*, Australia's oldest literary journal. He also published a literary journal called *the Paradise Anthology* from 2007 to 2013 and ran the successful Poetry Idol series for six year at the Melbourne Writers Festival.

A.S. Coomer is a writer, musician and native Kentuckian currently serving out a purgatorial existence somewhere in the arctic midwest. His work has appeared in over forty literary journals, magazines, anthologies and the like. He was nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times in 2016. His debut novel, *Rush's Deal* (Hammer & Anvil Books), came out December 11th, 2016. You can find him at www.ascoomer.com. He also runs *Lost, Long Gone, Forgotten Records*, a "record label" exclusively for poetry.

Holly Day has taught writing classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, since 2000. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Tampa Review*, *SLAB*, and *Gargoyle*, while her recently published books include *Northeast Minneapolis: A History*, *A Brief History of Stillwater Minnesota*, and *Ugly Girl*.

Susan Gundlach's poems have appeared in such journals as *The Best of Vine Leaves*, *Lingerpost*, **82 Review*, *After Hours*, and in the walkway of the Evanston Public Library --

etched in stone, or cement, actually. Some of her poems for children can be seen in *Cricket magazine* and *Balloons Literary Journal*. Currently, she is working on collaborations with artist and musician colleagues. In April 2017 she will be featured in an exhibit that pairs her poems with works by a printmaker colleague. She lives in Evanston, Illinois, with her family, human and canine.

Bret Hoveskeland is a writer and editor based in Orlando, Florida. He is an active member of the local literary/arts scene. His publications include a collection of poetry titled *The Oxytocin Opera* (available through Amazon), work in journals such as *Literary Juice*, *Red Weather* and *Definitely Magazine*, and various articles for *West Orlando News Online*. He is currently finishing final revisions on his first novel for children.”

Lavinia Kumar's full-length book is *The Skin and Under* (Word Tech, 2015). Her chapbooks are *Let There be Color* (Lives You Touch Publications, 2016) and *Rivers of Saris* (Main Street Rag, 2013). She has a background in Chemistry, Biology, and web-based technology. Her poetry has appeared in the US and UK such as in *Atlanta Review*, *Colere*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Exit 13*, *Flaneur*, *Kelsey Review*, *Orbis*, *Pedestal*, *Pemmican*, *Symmetry Pebbles*, *Lives You Touch*, & *US1 Worksheets*. Her website is laviniakumar.org.

Catherine McGuire is a writer and artist with a deep concern for our planet's future. She has three decades of published poetry and two children's scifi novels published by TSR, four poetry chapbooks and a full-length poetry book, *Elegy for the 21st Century* (FutureCycle Press). A deindustrial science fiction novel *Lifeline* has just been published by Founders House Publishing. Find her at www.cathymcguire.com.

Donna J. W. Munro has spent the last fifteen years teaching high school social studies immersed in the beauty and immediacy of teenage world building. Her students inspire her every day. An alumni of the Seton Hill Writing Popular Fiction program, she published pieces in *Every Day Fiction* the Fantasist Enterprises Press anthology *Modern Magic: Tales of Fantasy and Horror* (August 2005), the Seton Hill kindle anthology *Hazard Yet Forward* (2012), and in the upcoming anthology, *Enter the Apocalypse*.

Neil Mathison is an essayist and short-story writer who lives in Seattle, Washington, Friday Harbor, Washington, and Ketchum, Idaho. He is a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and has been a naval officer, nuclear engineer, an expatriate businessman living in Hong Kong, a corporate vice-president, and a stay-at-home-dad. His essays and short stories have appeared in *The Ontario Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *North American Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Agni*, *Under the Sun*, - divide-, *Bellowing Ark*, *Pangolin Papers*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Blue Lyra Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Rappahannock Review*, *Brooklyn*, and elsewhere. Neil's essay, "Volcano: an A to Z" was recognized as a "notable essay" in Best American Essays 2010. A second essay, "Wooden Boat," was recognized as a "notable essay" in Best American Essays 2013. Neil's short story "The Cannery" won of the 2013 Fiction Attic Short Story Contest has been published in *Modern Shorts: 18 Short Stories from Fiction Attic Press*. His essay collection *Volcano: an A to Z and Other Essays about Geology, Geography, and Geo-Travel in the American West* won the 2016 Bauhan Publishing Monadnock Essay Collection Prize and will be published in the spring of 2017. Neil's author's website link is <http://www.neilmathison.net/>

Simon Perchik is a previous contributor to *Dark Matter*. His poetry has also appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere.

Margarita Serafimova's first collection of poetry, "Animals and Other Gods", in the Bulgarian (Sofia University Press) was published in 2016. Her second book, "Demons and World", also in the Bulgarian, is forthcoming in May 2017 (Black Flamingo Publishing, Sofia). In English, pieces of hers are forthcoming or appear in *Agenda*, *Trafika Europe*, *Tales From The Forest*, *Obra/ Artifact*, *MockingHeart Review*, *London Grip New Poetry*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Outsider Poetry*, *Heavy Athletics*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Peacock Journal*, *Noble/ Gas Quarterly*, *In Between Hangovers*, *Window Quarterly/ Patient Sounds*, *The Voices Project*. Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/MargaritaISerafimova/?ref=aymt_homepage_panel.

Henry M. Spottswood was born in Mobile in 1940, and lives in downtown Cincinnati with wife Mary and kitties Maggie and Matilda. His poems have appeared in earlier issues of Dark Matter Journal and in other publications. His favorite line in all poetry is by Emily Dickinson: *“Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me.”*

Mark Young lives in a small town in North Queensland in Australia, & has been publishing poetry for almost sixty years. He is the author of over forty books, primarily text poetry but also including speculative fiction, vispo, & art history. His work has been widely anthologized, & his essays & poetry translated into a number of languages. His most recent books are “Mineral Terpsichore” & “Ley Lines,” both from gradient books of Finland, & “The Chorus of the Sphinxes,” from Moria Books in Chicago. A new collection, “some more strange meteorites,” came out from Meritage & i.e. Press, California / New York, in early 2017.

UHD Student Poems

Archie Gayle

Angel Lopez

Helen Martinez

Alondra Morillon

Miguel Sanchez

