

MID RIVERS REVIEW



2021

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* Recipient of the **Alyson Dickerman Poetry Prize** in 2021. Dickerman (1971-2019) was a poet and an English teacher at SCC. The SCC English department runs this contest annually every spring.

** Recipient of the **Jim Haba Award for Poetry** in 2021. Haba is a poet, teacher and founding director of the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. MRR confers this award annually.

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MID RIVERS REVIEW 2021 is accompanied by postcards featuring

- Christina Gant – blackout poem
- Alicia Gregson – More with Less
- Heidi Grohe-Rood – Rx and Winter Whispers
- Ryanzo Perez – Moon Through Trees

The Willow Tree

Holly Duffner

A spindling branch caressed my knee.
Light so crystal clear,
Kiss me softly beneath the willow tree.

Silence radiates throughout each beam,
The wind whispering our thoughts,
A spindling branch caressed my knee.

Beneath my skin, a warm chamomile tea,
Balmy as the sun's afternoon rays,
Kiss me softly beneath the willow tree.

Canopy of bliss, the ecstasy blinding me,
Our light fueled by empty bottles of kerosene.
A spindling branch caressed my knee.

A branch that snapped, the sting of a honeybee.
Every candle runs out of wick.
Kiss me softly beneath the willow tree.

As time grows old, you will hear my plea,
A never-ending summer, how fun to dream,
When it may nearly be fantasy.
Kiss me softly beneath the willow tree.

Two Worlds

Jolie Newman

I am from two worlds,
from tranquility and clamor.
I am from fields of corn,
from fingernails blackened with soil.
I am from sweat-stained clothing,
from aching backs and calloused hands.
I am from cherry pie baking in the kitchen,
from prayer before dinner.
From the determined and strong.
From the fixer and doer.
I am from your world.
I am from skin kissed by the California sun,
from windows rolled all the way down.
I am from migraines,
from white knuckles and “I love you.”
I am from meshuggeneh,
from bubbe meise.
From a head that knows its limits
and a heart that doesn’t see them.
From the supporter and fighter.
I am from your world.
I am from two worlds,
from church and synagogue.
From man and woman.
I am from two worlds
combined to make mine.

Alyson Dickerman poetry contest winner – 2021



1 / 5 – Alex Francis

America Unmasked

Gabe Sheets

America, why won't you put on the mask?
It's a very simple thing to do.
Why must Fauci even have to ask?

Are you a nation of patriots or of fools?
You received the call
but never showed.
Why must you be so cruel?

You say give me liberty or give me death,
You got what you asked for,
Now people are fighting
for their last breath.

What happened to backing the underdog?
The old, the weak, the little guy.
How many of us have to die?

What is it that has you so unwilling?
Can't you hear our cries and see our tears?
You don't seem to mind one with a pointed hood.
Nor a partisan one that covers your eyes and blocks your ears.
You've never complained on Halloween.
But now your indifference is killing.

You said you were the land of the free,
The home of the brave.
But that's not what I see
when I see so many graves.

Seatbelts will do.
Helmets are fine.
Airbags are too.
So, tell me how masks are
hurting you?

History is watching,
it sees the truth that lies
under your hollow disguise.
That your performative symbolism,
And deformative dogmatism,
Has led to your feckless demise...

I Lived

Loria Harris

I lived alone when I dreamed. I never had a dog, or a roommate, or a parent, or a spouse.

I lived with my mom and my brothers and my sisters when I was a kid. The number was always changing. So was the house.

I lived with roommates when I was in college. We split the utility bills evenly, and rent was always \$250. We were all girls, but two of them were a couple.

I lived with someone else's parents because I couldn't afford to live alone yet, while that someone else and I thought about getting married.

I lived with my husband, until I stopped spinning and realized the house wasn't changing anymore. But the number still was.

I lived with my children and my husband. We split the resources evenly, and we didn't have enough of sleep to go around.

Breeze

Loria Harris

White flowers line the roads like lace.
Chocolate melts all over my mom's stuffed suitcase.
The breeze lifts us all along as we go.

My mom's cracked hands are stained by black ink.
Stormy, muddy ground. The tires will sink as
white flowers line the roads like lace.

She forgot her Cabernet; left her glass on the wooden table
where roast beef was the last thing we ate.
The breeze lifts us all along as we go.

Forests are thick, dark, when we tread them alone.
But she's dripping in the rain; I'm trapped, dry in this home,
white flowers lining our shelves like lace.

My hands haven't yet cracked with age
like leather, sun-dried, dirt-caked, yet
I'm told the breeze lifts us all along as we go.

Trees root in the ground; they can not move.
Birds dart; they can not live unless the trees do,
though white flowers line the roads like lace.
The breeze lifts us all along as we go.



2/ 5 – Alex Francis

Alicia Gregson

Jim Haba Award 2021

In and Out * Duty of the Night * More with Less

Puddle of Me * Heavy * Grief as a Wave

In and Out

I take a bath
Fill the bowl to the brim
Allow only enough space between the meniscus and the edge
For me to fit
I get in and the water crests to meet me
It hugs me
I close my eyes and hold my breath
Allowing myself to float to the top
And I let my breath out
As I sink to the bottom
I let myself become limp once more
Ebbing and flowing with the waves
Waves I created by breathing
In
Out

Duty of the Night

the phone keeps ringing
people keeping needing
and i have begun to fade
the days get longer
simple tasks are harder
and i feel myself lessen
more and more
everyday
a few hours pass
and i feel the shift beginning
the shift from day to night
i walk to the door
gaze past the glass
and see the sun beginning to fall
it sees me
and i feel it pause
to acknowledge me
much in the same way
i have paused
to acknowledge it
only moments pass
before it continues its slow descent
the sun knows how long the day has been
it knows the exhaustion
that rears its ugly head at the end of its day
but even with this
it did not disappear
any sooner or later
even with the undeniable weight of the hours
the sun does not seize
it does not disappear faster in the effort to hide
it neither hides from dawn
nor dusk
it waits for its moon

in this split second
the moon starts its inevitable take over
the night becomes dimmer
and in the same moment lighter
it lightens not by faltering luminescence
but in the weight of its hours
my shoulders become less strained
as today's minutes begin to shrug off
everything calms now
and as i stare
to the blank sky
between the fall of the sun
and the rise of the moon
there is a miniscule piece of quiet
a moment where the day pauses
and it asks
"must we continue?"
without hesitation, my head nods in agreement
and i relinquish my duties of the day
and relish in my duties of the night

More with Less

Today

You are more

With less

You have become more yourself

With less time to enjoy it

You must not waste today

Wondering why it is not yet tomorrow

Puddle of Me

As dusk settles
So will I
Take the jumbled pieces and I try
To separate them once again
A pile here, a pile there
Then I lay still
In a puddle of me
Surround myself so peacefully
I carefully remind myself
That I am
Allowed to be
Allowed to see
Allowed to drown
in a puddle
Of me

Heavy

I am heavy
With the things I hold onto
For years I have let go of anything I must
Anything that was no longer mine to keep
I would not let my heart become heavy with trivial things
Whose mass grew as I let them fester
I now have a heavy heart
Weighed down by the things that I refuse to let go of
The things I have lost
That no amount of forgiveness will retrieve
I will let that heavy heart
Take me to the unforeseen part of the earth
Let it grab me by the throat
And drag me through our world
To the next
I will choke on the things I remember
Ache for breaths
Breathed behind a featherlight heart
But not forget
I will move slowly
Begrudgingly
Until the things I have lost
Are once again
Mine
To lose

Grief as a Wave

the pain in my chest has not seized

it has become a salty black wave

that moves not by the pull of the moon
but by its ability to block the sun
it is filled with debris
made of new and old alike
jumbling fragment of past memory and future dreams
encompassed within its grasp are the creatures it carries
schools of transparent fish visible just below its surface
appearing one moment,
completely vanishing the next

they seem to almost not exist until you feel their thousands of tiny scales against the bottom of
your feet

the prickle of grief, the nibble of pain
as you trip to avoid them
trampling into its depths

you are sinking now
weighed down by the inability to make sense of it all
to forgive the sky for what it has taken is a heavy task

down
down
down

you are sinking now

fear wells up inside of you like a balled fist in the bottom of your stomach
it aches to expel out of you
forced up your throat and propelling off your tongue

a heavy blink
a barely audible *clink*

and all at once

the anchor chain breaks

an iron weight created by the materialization of your own regret, now floats

leaving you to a panicked flail
which
slowly calms to a tread

you are still submerged in the water

but its salt has begun to dry up, creating crystals of hope at the bottom of its trough

glancing at your toes, suddenly able to see your feet
you notice they have become fins,
trying desperately to keep you afloat

you thank your fins
you thank the water

you forgive the sky
but do not think for a single second that this is the end
because you will never be dry

Lynne M. Jackson, June 19, 2021
Photo by Ryzano Perez

Jackson, the great-great granddaughter of Dred and Harriet Scott, stands against a column at the Old Courthouse in St. Louis, site of the landmark Scott v. Sandford trial. The U.S. Supreme Court's 1857 decision held that African Americans cannot be considered U.S. citizens and had no rights under the Constitution. The decision, arguably the most reviled in the court's history, was superseded by the 14th Amendment in 1868. Jackson is the president and founder of the Dred Scott Heritage Foundation.



Walls

Jake Long

Politics swing a hammer to our unity
Which hits the nail of our integrity
Until we begin gnawing on each other like mad dogs
We stand up just to see how far we have fallen
Maybe if we took the time to understand the pictures our children are drawing
We would understand the wrongs and the rights of the world we'll leave for them
Our freedom fighters wave the reds and the whites while you're back home being blue
Because someone else used their freedom to insult your views
Too busy bickering over elections
Yet too busy to go out and vote for your way
We defend our views online but won't do so in the light of day
Because we are a country split down the middle
Conservative or liberal
Everyone wants a strong America
Can't we just confess that maybe our enemies are human too
Because with every low blow we are peeling off the glue
That our founding fathers used to bind us
Our leaders wrongly accusing half the nation
Our states threatening to secede in frustration
More concerned about the price of minimum wage instead of the wars being waged
More concerned about our wealth than our people's mental health
Men speak of change, but lack the courage to grasp it
Oppression is the common enemy of the common man
But we fight over religion and things we don't understand
So let us come together across this country we've won
Is it too much to want all the colors to blend into one?
These monuments we make to symbolize our victories
Will they all fall like men upon their knees, on the slightest breeze?
Because it doesn't take much to see
That we don't accept diversity
That we really aren't free
Because the chains of prejudice wrap us in their iron grip
Until now we have become slaves to arrogance

Has anyone even thought of what we've all got in common
Don't we all want terrorists to stop the bombings?
Don't we all want the United States to feel safe?
It doesn't matter if a poem really changes politicians
But the point of America is that I can express my opinion
So what good is a country when it's divided?
What good are the states if not united?
Don't just speak of the change that our nation wants
Be the change that our nation needs

George Floyd Mattered

Heidi Grohe-Rood

Protests echoed
across the world
It's time for change
We're one and the same

Hearts pounding
a verdict is here
Would there be
 Justice
the tension was clear

The guilt was established
Never again
Would lives be taken so easily
for having black skin

Some were crying in release
others cheered,
 "Black Lives Matter!"
in the streets

A moment has changed
the days of the past
where Black lives didn't matter,
wiped away instead

Will there really be change?
Can people finally have hope
we'll all be treated the same?
Opening new doors

The Civil Rights Act
passed long ago
just turned the page
Dr. King labored for

Changes are coming
wait and see
the souls of the world
are starting to dream

The Human Race

Heidi Grohe-Rood

What does it take to see beyond color,
who is brown, black, or other

We were born to be unique,
our faces beckon, "Look at me!"

I am not you; you are not me,
we are all poetry

Silently we live in hope,
navigating the slippery slope

To cast aside contempt and hate,
building bridges in good faith

To shine a light on all that care,
lifting souls from despair

It's time we put an end to this,
destructive path that persists

It isn't hard to learn to see,
others who look differently

We are the same inside and out,
though color seems to raise a doubt

What does it take to see beyond color,
hearts wide open to each other



3/ 5 – Alex Francis

Genesis

Natalie Arnett

Genesis

Pure

Gentle

Chastity

Familiarized

Trust

Dependence

Sentiment

Attention

Priority

Relationship

Binding

Latter

Lust

Emotion

Betrayal

Deception

Mournful

Misunderstanding

Melancholy

Goodbye

Stay

No

Apprehensive

Sobbing

Loathing
Clinging
Weeping
Thinking
Regretting

Acceptance
Forgiveness
Closure
Him
Finale

Breaking Blondie

Brooklyn Cadwallader

Hair... the top hat to my personality
Static, crinkly, chop
Falling short of the image I have of my perfect self.
Bleach, white, dye, dark
Frustration with dissatisfaction.
What should be smooth sailing - instead, frizz
Angst because my identity and worth are wrongly dependent
on this image I have of my perfect self.
Happy & confident the blonder I go
Until excessive obsession cause damage
Breaking... not just hair.
Hiding
Desperate with emotion
Can't
Stop
Can't
Addiction comes in many forms.
Blonder
Whose approval am I seeking?
Exhausted
Fried
Dead

Time Into Ash

Sarah Eplett

Moments define our lives. Moments of action, moments of stillness, moments of joy, and especially, the darkest moments.

And the moments preceding us meeting the fire undeniably changed our lives forever.



I tug my brother's arm faster down the path as a root crunches under my foot. I gasp for breath in the smoke that suddenly filled the forest. I don't want to ask... Was it our fault?

I hear my twin brother cough and rush forward to keep up. The trees fly past, as well as the knowledge that each might be burned to ashes. Each unique tree, with its rings and leaves and reaching branches could all be gone in a matter of minutes.

Well... So could we.

I shake my head and duck under a half-fallen tree, around a rock, and shoulder through a full bush with flipped leaves. I spare a single moment wondering why before readjusting my grip on my brother's hand to make sure he was still following.

As we run, I think over the quietness around the campfire just hours ago. We hadn't spoken much, not after a quick argument about losing the trail. The plan did include staying the night in the forest, but much closer to the road to our east. Not in the middle of nowhere.

I jump over a log and wait to catch my brother's landing. We stand on either side of the rotten log without moving.

"Leone."

"Where are we going?"

I look past him to the smoke I can see through the canopy and the soft glow that seems like an early sunset. I return my gaze to my brother, our hands entwined across a breach. "We have to get home."

"And when we reach home? We're too far from anyone else, too far from safety. There's not—"

I jerk him forward and stare into his eyes, deep brown with a corner changed to gold. I scowl as my knee hits the bark. “We have to keep going.”

He lets out a small sigh and using his other arm for balance, he joins me on the other side of the log. “Lead the way.”

I take off, my brother in tow. *I’m sorry. Just... I don’t want to die. I don’t want to lose you, lose home, lose everything.*

We try to ignore the crackles of flame to our backs that slowly grow fainter until we pass a tree stump cut cleanly near the ground. I stop by its side and risk standing on it to see behind us. “I can’t see the light anymore.”

Leone turns and watches with me in silence.

I cough and hop off, jogging onto a rough, overgrown trail. It takes a sharp left turn and through a wall of trees and leaves I notice a darker brown and an unnatural shimmer. I grin and follow the trail until it opens into a clearing inhabited by an old wooden cabin. Although the door is rotted away and the windows are broken on the front porch, I call it safety.

I laugh and run inside, breaking out of my brother’s grip. I barely notice him following me, the dark dust-ridden air of the cabin giving me relief. I stumbled back against the wall and I cover my mouth as I smile.

“Hey Jaz?”

Leone’s voice echoes around the main room as I take a deep breath and look at him standing in the middle of an empty room.

“There’s nothing here.”

“It’s not like we expected to find anything. But that’s fine. We can wait it out here!” I step forward and spin, my heart relaxing and beating slower.

I freeze as a tree falls far away, followed by the gentle snaps of flame.

“Can’t we?”

“No.”

I blink at his sudden answer. He... “Are you sure?”

Leone grimaces and walks over to me, placing his hands on my shoulders. His hands are surprisingly cold, but his gaze was warm and gentle. “Have you ever been asked, ‘If you were dying, what would you do?’”

I lower my head and try to hold back tears. Dying. Such a strong word.

“Tell my girlfriend I love her. I... I’ve never told her that before.”

“Why not?”

I tense and shiver. “I don’t want to lose her.”

“You...” Leone takes a moment to lift my chin with a careful touch. He’s always been a lot more comfortable with touch than I have. “You should write a letter.”

“A letter? But don’t we have to run?”

“We can make time. You have a notebook and a pencil?”

I nod and he calmly steps away, a surprisingly bright smile on his face. “You can do this, Jaz.”

I dare a smile as well before gathering the items I need to write a letter for my girlfriend waiting at home. It’s worth it. It has to be. As I kneel on the ground of the abandoned cabin, I watch Leone lean against the front window. Pale, clouded light throws delicate shadows across his face, making his familiar features dramatic and foreboding.

“Do you really think she’ll read this someday?”

His smile disappears.

“We can only hope. The fire is getting closer...”

“I know...” In the distance, a small pop reminds me of the smoke on the breeze. “I’m scared.”

He kneels down next to me and hugs me close. He glances at the dusty, rotten windows of the short-lived refuge I found. “Me too.”

“I want to leave.”

“You need to write. Then we’ll escape, I promise.”

I wipe away a tear and start to write, hoping my tears don’t stain the paper. ‘Dear love. If you find this, please know that I love you. Ever since we met, I’ve wanted to know more about you. And the more I learned, the more I admired you. Your drive, your passion, your relentless heart. No matter the goal and no matter how it changes, you always try your best. I loved watching you. You are such a blessing to me.’

“Leone.”

“Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know what I should say. What if these are my last words to her?”

The look he gives me tells me everything I should say. The sadness, finality, hope, and desperation of facing death, all in a single sentence. I nod and finish my letter. I plant a lip-stick kiss on the corner, the light orange colour threatening tears once again. I close it and take a moment to hide it inside my thick metal canteen. I dump out the water, the rotting wood already worse for wear, and the rolled up letter fit inside perfectly. I cap it and place it in the middle of my backpack.

“Ready?”

I grab his hand. “Yes. You know I love you right?”

My brother pauses and faces me. “I love you too.” He swallows, a shine in his eyes turning gray with smoke. He pulls me to my feet and we take off.

To the end of the forest and back.



The run out of the forest is desperate, our breaths and glances back crazed. But the trees start to thin, the bushes sparse and allows light to reflect off of our way out. The land dips and as we jump down the small hills to the bottom, I notice the wide stream awaiting our arrival. I grab Leone’s hand and he matches my speed for us to reach the edge of the stream at the same time. The clear water ripples over rocks and under a fallen tree, but I don’t see it as a refuge.

“Isn’t this stream miles away from the road on the map?”

My breath catches and I stare at my brother, his eyes stuck on the water and the implication. Ash runs over the top of the water from our right and I take a deep breath. The smell of broken trees, rotting leaves, and smoke mingle together until I gather enough courage to lift my head.

“We’re surrounded.”

Fire, flames, flickers and cracks, on all sides.

“When did it get so close?”

The echoing question without a true answer fuels my smile. A smile that gives us both hope in... something. Anything. And as I watch my brother, my heart flutters and flies like a bird freed from a cage. Freed from the last line I wrote in a letter hidden in my backpack. Believing that together we could possibly be free.

I know you will survive, even if I am unable to. I believe that.

How Far Down

Katie Harrison

As my Vans slowly tapped the pavement below me, I pulled the cuffed sleeves of my gray hoodie over my hands, holding the ends loosely in my closed palms, with the cuffs resting just over my knuckles. Despite my earbuds, I could hear the people in my second hour German class chattering loudly. It was nice out, about 70 degrees or so, and our teacher thought it would be good to go outside and get some fresh air. We walked around the parking lot, and through a small patch of trees. The sunlight gently cascaded through the dark green leaves, creating shadows that danced on the dirt. I had decided to stay in the back in order to avoid being run over by the other crazy high schoolers. And they were just that: crazy. Carrying on and yelling as if they were deaf, the boys roughhoused and talked about whatever guys talk about, while the cliquy girls talked and scrolled around on their phones, barely looking at the beautiful things around them.

As I walked, I listened to the lead singer of State Champs sing 'Leave You In The Dark' through my earbuds, and took in my surroundings. To my right, through the oak trees, was a small pond down a hill, whose water rippled and glistened from the morning sun. I smiled as a gentle breeze rustled my dark red bangs under my beanie. There was something about the wind that gave me hope for some reason. It reminded me of feeling free and weightless, almost as if I was flying.

I'd always been different, even in childhood. Girls at school used to make fun of me because I never did anything "normal". I still don't, really. You're supposed to talk aloud in class, wear loads of color and listen to only the hottest rap hits. I'm the exact opposite. The only color in my wardrobe is black, I listen to screamo, and I don't talk unless my grade depends on it.

The class passed a dirt path that led down to another pond, whose water appeared soupy and thick with algae. I wasn't sure why, but I'd suddenly felt compelled to go down there. I glanced around, making sure nobody was watching me, then slipped out of sight and into the dense forest that lied ahead of me. I pulled both of my earbuds out and let them dangle from the neckline of my sweatshirt. All of the sudden, the leaves rustled loudly and something went tumbling into the pond. I whipped my head to the source of the noise. It was quiet for a moment before something popped its head out of the water and started thrashing violently. I broke into a run and went into the water, scooping the creature into my arms. I quickly set her down in the grass. It was a puppy. She coughed up the water she'd swallowed, then finally looked up at me, trembling. She was a gruesome sight with the algae and green sludge that clung to her matted white fur. I wiped it off as best I could and stopped to get a full look of her. She was completely white, except for a ring of black around one blue eye. Her coat was dull and her hips, ribs, and shoulders stuck out of her tiny frame.

“Shhh, easy,” I spoke at a level of calmness that surprised me. I pulled her close and hugged her to my chest, rubbing at her back in an attempt to warm her up. Despite the hot climate, she felt cold to the touch. I stood up, walked her back up the hill and into the sunlight.

Normally, I stick to the rules and do what I’m supposed to do. But I’m afraid that the animal always comes first, and this situation is no exception. I quickly walked to my car, which was conveniently parked in the back lot nearby. Once there, breathless and calves burning, I dove into the front seat, sitting the pup on my lap, and started the car. From there, I drove out of the parking lot and onto highway B, heart hammering away against my ribcage.

Ten minutes later, I pulled into the driveway of Fischer Animal Hospital and went inside. Needless to say, I earned a few strange looks from the vet techs when I told them where I found the puppy.

“Lacey?” the head vet, Dr. Gretsch asked in surprise from around the corner. We bring our dogs to him when they’re sick, so he knows my family well.

“Hello, sir,” I smiled timidly at him. His kind green eyes looked at me quizzically. Before I could speak up, the vet tech that I spoke with chimed in.

“Says she found this puppy at school. Sounds like she saved it from drowning,” she told him without an ounce of kindness in her voice.

“Really? Okay, well, bring her back here and we’ll examine her. We can hold her here until we figure some things out. I’ll call your home phone as soon as we know what’s going on. Now, I would go back to school before they realize you’re gone,” The man winked and smiled at me. I nodded and handed the white boxer to him, feeling a pang of sadness in my heart. A part of me wanted to stay and wait, but I knew I had already broken a rule, and didn’t want to get into any more trouble that I was already in. I reluctantly left, my mind spinning with all the possible punishments I could receive.

When I got back to school, I was bombarded with questions. “Where were you?! Why do you smell like a wet dog?! Did you really leave school?!” I stammered out some answers, internally cringing at my own awkwardness. Heat emanated from my pores despite the coolness of the German classroom. Fortunately, the vice principal called me down to the office. I sighed in relief as soon as I got out of the room, but then another bout of anxiety slammed my chest. Knock on wood, I had never gotten in trouble for something like this before.

I settled down into the chair of Mr. Belton’s office, tapping my foot restlessly against the carpeted floor. I had no idea what he would say to me. A few minutes passed before he entered, seeming calm rather than upset.

“Hello, Miss Lacey,” Mr. Belton greeted me. He smiled, wrinkling the corners of his aged eyes.

“I’m sure you’re aware of the rules about leaving the campus,” he began, sitting at his desk and folding his hands on top of it.

“I know you’re a good student, and you have a squeaky clean record at this school, so why did you leave?”

“Yes, sir,” I began, forcing my voice to steady. “I was walking with my German class and I heard something. There was this dog – a puppy – drowning in the lake by the neighborhood. I couldn’t just leave it there.”

“I see. And where did you take said puppy?”

“To the animal hospital off of B. She was shaking and wheezing and I didn’t know what else to do.”

Mr. Belton just nodded, comprehending the information I threw at him.

“Well, I award you for your kind heart, Lacey. But I’m afraid I can’t excuse you entirely. I’ll let you off with a warning and a week of after school detention. A letter will be sent to your parents informing them of this,” Mr. Belton told me. I nodded and gave him a forced but convincing smile before standing to leave.

“And Lacey,” he said just as I was about to exit the office. “Do let me know how the pup is doing, won’t you?”

“I will, sir.”

I drove home, white-knuckling the wheel as I got closer and closer to my house.

My mom didn’t waste any time in chewing me out. She exploded just as I walked through the front door.

“What the hell, Lacey? What were you thinking! A week of detention for leaving school grounds? You better explain yourself right now! And oh, don’t worry about filling your car up this weekend, because that car is mine now.”

“Mom, let me explain,” I said, trying to keep myself calm. “I was on a walk with my German class and there was a dog nearly drowning in the pond. It was a puppy-a boxer-and she coughed up all this water and I couldn’t just leave her!” the words fell like water from my mouth. “I took her to Dr. Gretsche and went straight back... they should be calling soon to tell us how she’s doing,” I finished, flopping down on the couch and shrugging my bag off my shoulders. My mom just looked at me for a second, speechless. After a few seconds she sat next to me, laying a hand on my forearm.

"I'm sorry I blew up. You should've called me and I would've taken her in for you. But..." she took a moment to steady herself. "You did the right thing. And, you can still drive your car. I'll call your dad and tell him everything. You don't need another unnecessary lecture," she gave a halfhearted laugh, then stood to retrieve her phone. I breathed a sigh of relief, all my tense muscles finally relaxing.

Later that night, we went to the vet's office to check on the dog.

"Well, your little friend here is a bit shocked, but otherwise she will be just fine," Dr. Gretsche informed us, looking just as relieved as we were.

"However, we did notice that she is wheezing and coughing a lot. This is most likely just a result of the water that did enter the lungs. Lacey, did she cough up any water at all?"

"Yes, quite a bit, and her breathing sounded fine on the entire ride over here," I told him.

"Okay. Well, it appears she didn't get too much water in, so that's good. We're going to go ahead and get a scan of her lungs just to be sure. I don't think there's any damage, but I think we should go ahead and order it as a precaution."

My parents agreed to get it done, and within an hour, we had the results back.

"Alright," Dr. Gretsche said with a smile, clapping his hands together. "Good news, we didn't find anything wrong with her lungs. She might have a cough for a few days, but other than that, she will be totally fine... You can go ahead and take her home! If you notice excess vomiting, wheezing or if the cough worsens, then bring her back and we'll see what we can do. I also printed a feeding schedule to help her get some weight back on her." My parents nodded their heads in agreement. I suddenly noticed what this meant.

"Wait, we get to keep her?" My eyebrows shot up in excitement and my face was stuck in a toothy grin.

"Well yeah!" My dad said as if it were obvious. "We can't just leave her here." I hugged both of my parents tightly and one of the vet techs brought her in. The pup's eyes glazed over with recognition as she saw me, and she jumped up at my legs. I picked her up and she slapped her tongue at any and all parts of my face, covering me with saliva. That night, we took home a new addition to our family.

"Welcome to the family, Gracie," I told her as my other two boxers sniffed and licked at her, tails wagging like crazy. From that moment on, we were complete.

In memory of Gracie Lou Harrison. 2007-2018

Silver Linings Strip Club

Andrew Galantowicz

“Just one more night,” she thought, all her money was spent
Although she hated it, how was she to pay rent?
In the back she donned her makeup and bra made of floss
How would she break the news to her boss?
She waltzes down the runway, the music turned up high
She scanned the crowd, who was the richest guy?
She found a man in a fur coat to give all her attention
She strutted towards him, how would she build tension?
It didn’t take long until dollars were flying through the air
She smiled inside, this man has no financial care
Once he ran out of bills he threw a lottery ticket on the stage
She picked it up, even though it wouldn’t help her wage
Once in the back she gave it a scratch
She was in disbelief, her face lit up like a match
She giggled in a girly tone
Unbeknownst to the man, he had paid off her student loans

Bullet Shells

Zion Johnson

I got to the building around 5:15. I had heard from my uncle that the chief arrived around 5:30, so I thought it'd be wise of me to arrive even earlier to set a good first impression. Unfortunately, since the bureau wasn't officially open, I came into contact with a large set of locked doors upon my arrival. The sun hadn't quite risen yet, but the city had certainly begun its morning rituals. I had heard from my uncle that this was a coastal town, but there was no evidence of that from what I had seen. The roar of waves and raucous cries of the seagulls that I'd grown accustomed to were completely drowned by the thundering of motors and occasional muffled gunshots that sounded far too close for comfort. I moved to stand under the awning of the building so as to avoid any blocking the way of any potential pedestrians using the pavement. After approximately an hour of waiting with the sun coming well into view at this point, I begin to hear footsteps within the building. In reaction, I then turn to see the faint silhouette of someone moving about on the other side of the door. After letting out a brief but controlled yelp, a woman opens the door, her face coming from the other side of our partition ridden with irritation. I was definitely rethinking all of my earlier choices in the day at that point, but as soon as our eyes met, she began squinting as if she was trying to piece something together.

"You Clarity?"

"Yes, Ma'am" I replied.

"How long have you been out here?"

"About an hour, Ma'am"

"Next time, come round the back way. The civilians' entrance stays closed until we open"

"Ah. I see." My voice cracked a little on the delivery of that last part, but I'm not completely certain if she heard me at all. Partway through letting me in, she trailed off from our brief conversation and began to walk back in herself. After a little hop-step to catch up with her, she leads me through the reception area and past a dimly lit office space with a few unenthusiastic workers. The air was somewhat stale within, and this woman walked at a pace that would lend an uninformed bystander the impression she was being chased. I was having a great deal of trouble discerning if this was even the correct path to follow, but before I could squeak my concerns, she approached a small staircase that seemed almost embedded in the wall before abruptly turning around.

“The Chief’s on the top floor. The door’ll say Chief Roscoe on it, so that should clue you into which one. Door’s a push. Remember that. Last thing we need is you spending an extra 30 minutes twiddling your thumbs in the hallway.”

I take a moment to recompose myself after that jab at my character and reply with a swift “Yes, Ma’am”. I couldn’t get a good impression if she truly didn’t like me or if she was just a little abrasive with her sense of humor, but either way I could tell that I was going to have a rough time operating here. The hall snaking up the floors was thin and dark. It was obvious the building had to be relatively new, because there were no windows and no open wall space for any potential candle holders, just flickering lights and row after row of frosted glass doorway. After another flight of stairs, the walkway comes to an end with a threshold littered with bullet holes and a nameplate saying “Detective Roscoe Warchur.” I immediately open to a steely gaze locked on to me from over his desk.

It was hard to describe him as I saw him then, but his presence seemed to fill the room in its entirety. His orange attire starkly contrasted the walnut used to adorn the walls and furniture, but the look that he held in his eyes made it seem as if he could fit firmly in place anywhere. I knew for a fact that he wasn’t going to speak until I introduced myself so I gathered the remainder of my dignity to form a decent introduction. “Hello, my name is Clarity Jones, and I’m going to be working forensics here from now on.” The chief maintained his laser-like focus on me, but didn’t seem interested in what I had to say. I assumed I either wasn’t saying enough or I wasn’t answering the right question, and then continued. “I know that I have very little experience with the big city environment, but I assure you that I have something to contribute here, and that I will not let you down” There still wasn’t a verbal response from the chief, but it didn’t seem necessary at that point. His look seemed softer, but without any decrease in intensity. From what I could tell, he was appeased with the verbal section of my first impression. That, however, did not mean my examination was over. I began to approach his desk so I might shake his hand, but right as I reached for his hand, he reached for a glass of water that he had set off to the side. I was already front and center with an outstretched limb when I gauged what he was actually grabbing at, so I essentially locked into position until his hands were open again. I desperately tried to hide my embarrassment as I stood, but right when it looked like the chief was about to lift the glass to his lips, he instead shot it to pieces with a revolver.

The sound reverberated off the walls a thousand times over and hit me like a punch or kick never could have. I collapsed to my knees in agony. I had momentarily lost any ability to process what was going on, and the ringing pain made it nigh impossible to think. Tears pooled in my eyes as I tried to resist screaming, but it felt like any shouts held down now would come back as vomit moments later. After a couple of seconds that took hours to pass, I tried to bring my head up and meet the gaze of the chief. I didn’t know exactly why he would fire into his cup, or where he was keeping his firearm, but I knew that I hadn’t responded to the shot in a way very reassuring of a future member of the force, so I wanted to at least gauge if this was some sort of test

that I'd failed. As my eyes began to focus, I made the realization that I hadn't truly looked upon what I thought was the chief until that moment. Yes, I had acknowledged him, and I had my idea of what he looked like, but I never truly did a visual analysis. The hand I had previously tried to shake was not a hand, but a claw. His orange attire was a shell, now glistening with water droplets from his shattered glass. His deep piercing eyes were pitch black and attached to stalks that rose from a crevice in his carapace. The chief was not human. The chief was a crab with two guns rubber banded to its claws. "Is this a prank? Is the real chief hiding somewhere else? How didn't I notice when entering? Did I sustain more damage than I thought?" my poor attempts at rationalizing my experience kept flowing until the slightly older lady I had met at the front door came in with a fresh glass of water and a set of earplugs.

"Here's a fresh glass, sir. Sorry for any delay" She sets the new glass among the remains of the old and then turns to me. "Guess I shoulda warned ya, the chief usually lets his irons do the talking for him." she was almost yelling as she spoke, but I probably wouldn't have been able to hear her otherwise. She then reaches into her pocket and puts the contents into my clenched hands. "Earplugs." she shouted "Most of us know better than to get near the chief without them, but I suppose you have trouble picking up on things like that, huh?" I was completely speechless. I shifted my stare from the two objects in my hand, to the poorly weaponized crab on top of the desk, and then to the woman again, hoping to convey my confusion in the situation. "What's the matter? You go dumb when you're shot at, not shot near. Pick yourself up before the chief rips you a new one." She turns to exit, but as she glides her hand down the back of the door frame, I see a trail of blood left behind it. I only caught a glimpse, but it had looked like some of the broken glass had embedded itself in her hand when she set down the new cup. I glance once more at the crab on the now soiled desktop. A few documents sat underneath it, but the presence of liquid and scuttling feet had rendered them unreadable. It was at this moment I began to wonder if I was really cut out for this line of work.



4/5 – Alex Francis

The Molt

Emily Webb

I have always been a skittering thing,
Crawling through the shadows, wary of the giants that loom above.
I have stood with eight shaky legs upon finicky self-confidence,
A house of cards foundation threatening to topple and throw me back down again.

I tire of balancing upon the backs of Jacks and Kings.
I leave the tower that strained to hold me,
And begin to build my foundations anew,
Trading fickle royals for warm brick and mortar.

This shift is no metamorphosis,
It is a slow and grueling struggle.
I pull myself out armor I have outgrown,
One leg at a time, leaving a husk of what was once me.

I am still that skittering thing that prefers the shade,
But as I replace those cards with bricks, I see giants no longer.
Instead, there are simply other many-legged scuttlers with iridescent armor.
I cannot help but wonder how many husks they have of their own.

Writer in Focus:

Christina Gant

The Truth * Stream of Consciousness

Lessons * Listening * The MRR Interview

There are secret sylvan places
where each embrace of branches
equals inspiration,

where words unwritten
arrive unbidden on the wild rose
scented air. Among the trees that tell
a thousand tales I wait

near stone and stream
where water's gentle trickle
sends a sparkle to the sky.

And these are places
made for asking why, made for waiting
and for reaching where the forest
teaches me to lie
so I can tell

the Truth

Snow melt feeds the running water -
rushes,
pushes
over rocks familiar with its touch
delivering a litany of leaves and twigs;

eventually it slows into a trickle
telling tales
of pools and puddles
where light and tadpoles play;

when fueled by rain the water rises
carving,
cutting,
venturing beyond its banks

and then -
December's laugh lines frozen on its face

it waits as warmth restores its voice,

in roar or whisper

relentless

Stream of Consciousness

Lessons

...and just like that
I'm surrounded by a spell of violets,
an interlude while walking in April's realm,

a forest filled with dogwood blooms
like thousands of little white faces
peeking through bare brown branches

and starry pink flowers
like confetti at my feet.

Flowers are first in spring,
before the grass and trees,
pushing through last year's discarded
leaves with quiet courage,
hungry for sun;

but we see only the flower,
not the roots holding her in place.

This is no frail beauty
but a fierce life
filled with purpose.

There's a message here, but it's no secret,
no mysterious magic. It's simple.

Patience.
Persistence.

This is what we learn from flowers.

Listening

Surrounded by the sound
of crickets in the darkness,
I'm steeping in a night alive with voices -
as though summer itself is being
summoned.

I'm wrapped inside their sonorous circle,
lulled by a droning chirping
to drowsy, dreaming
trance-
 this illusory song is not
 merely for the sake of making music.

I'm eavesdropping on an intimate
conversation, their steady stridulation
an invitation to courtship, or
announcement of aggression -
communication I am pleased to overhear.

I doubt our noise
impresses them as much.

Christina Gant: The MRR Interview

What does it mean to be a “nature writer”? Christina Gant shows us in a multitude of ways, luminously.

An Assistant Professor of English at SCC, Gant teaches literature and writing. In addition to full-time teaching, she maintains a rich life as a writer and photographer. These ventures are vistas into the largess of the world. Moreover, Gant is a craft maker whose works maintain an unflagging commitment to aesthetic refinement. There is a clear continuum in her work as a teacher, author, photographer and artist.

With Jayme Novara, Gant co-authored a textbook titled *Introduction to World Mythology* (Kendall Hunt Publishing), which is now in its second edition. Gant has published prolifically under the pen name Ember Grant, writing four new age books for Llewellyn Worldwide in the fields of alternative spirituality, mythology and folklore. More than 30 of her poems have been published in small literary journals and magazines and have received several awards, including the Reynolds Prize from Phi Theta Kappa and the Editor’s Choice Award from the Eliot Review. Gant was the first recipient of the Jim Haba Award for poetry.

Gant’s Instagram page (@poetofthewoods) froths virtually daily with beauteous things. She produces finely tuned photo-texts known as blackout poetry (aka erasure or redaction poetry) as well as nature photos and photos of her other interests and ventures. The poem part is comprised of a sentence or two whose words or phrases separated out in relation to the image and to the rhythms of internal voice.

Someday, a student or literary critic will examine the aphorisms and utterances of Gant’s blackout poetry for the ways they reveal a cohesive perspective of nature and writing.

“Silence is a rare mistress ... our universal refuge ... our asylum.”

“Little ghosts skimmed the darkness, elemental blackness of an older primaeval life. (Night is a different world.)”

“How transcendent and personal the strange music of poetry.”

“To have passion and poetry we must be tormented.”

“She wore black, and the moon on her arm”

The MRR Interview was conducted on June 2, 2021, via Zoom.

– Michael Kuelker

MRR: Your nature writing is exquisite. It reveals a world that is alive and tangibly before us, full of mystery, vitality and depth. How did you develop this kind of awareness?

CHRISTY GANT: I grew up at a beautiful place near Cuivre River state park. My family had 20 acres, which is what I have now, which brings me full circle. But I digress. I am an only child, and I grew up wandering around in the woods. That was my thing. It was me and my cats and dogs and whatever pets we happened to have or pets that I would find like turtles and ducks or whatever. I was just that kid, that nature kid.

I was really in love with science and the natural world. I had my field guide in my back pocket all the time, trying to identify all the trees and flowers and birds. I was just completely enamored of it. It became kind of a spiritual thing for me. That was sort of my escape. My parents fought all the time; my dad was an alcoholic. And so, literally my escape was, take a walk in the woods and go out in nature. Ever since then, I have been trying to get that back.

My parents divorced when I was 18 and we lost that beautiful home. And so now, just last year, I was able to finally realize that dream and have my own woods again. It was really important to me. I think that's how it affected my writing so much, is because it truly was an emotional and spiritual escape for me. I found a relationship and a connection there.

MRR: How much did reading about nature assist in the development of your writerly vision? Whose nature writing have you come to admire?

CG: It was probably later. When I was a kid, I mostly read fantasy things and fairy tales and fun stuff like that, which explains my love of mythology and fairy tales. When I started college, that's when I first started discovering that there was nature writing out there. I started by reading the transcendentalists, of course, Thoreau and Emerson. But then later on, I actually took a class at Washington University called American and English Nature Writing, and it was all about this whole genre that I didn't know existed. And of course, I discovered Annie Dillard and Mary Oliver and all these wonderful authors who were expressing things I longed to say and doing it so beautifully. I did draw a lot of inspiration from writers like that.

MRR: You've mentioned Annie Dillard and Mary Oliver. Who are some other writers and what are some works that have made a deep impression on you?

CG: Probably Pattiann Rogers. Not a lot of people seem to know about her. She's been writing since the 80s, and she's noted for her nature writing. I first discovered her work when I was taking the Summer Writers Institute at Washington U, and the person who was running our poetry writing workshop had us read some of her work. I was floored by the way she could pull in the factual stuff, the science, but also make it kind of magical. I was really just blown away by what she was doing. That definitely helped me, I think, to elevate my work and take it to another level. Her work is just so profound. I continue to use it in my classes to give students an example of somebody who really has the masterful touch with nature poetry.

MRR: On nature writing, I'd like to get your thoughts on what you think goes into good nature writing. In other words, the kind of writing that avoids the commonplace. We can say something that is true but it can also be conventional. But as writers, we aim to startle, unveil something fresh at least with a perspective or with language that delights on some level. How do you come up with your own good writing about nature?

CG: Sometimes my writing starts with just describing something, and then of course it evolves as I play with the words to try to make those connections. I love thinking about poetry and all of literature as a way to explore connections between people and the world and place and time and everything else, and so I like to try to think about what I am feeling when I am in nature, not just what I am looking at.

The other day I found a yellow lady slipper orchid in my woods that I had never seen in person before, and I was just so giddy over it I couldn't even believe it. But then I thought, how would I even write a poem about this? How could I convey the joy that it feels without, you know, sounding like, 'oh wow, this is this neat flower that I've always wanted to see'; people see it in parks all the time but I've just never seen one. It's gotta be more than just, 'I'm thrilled to see this flower.' What does it represent on a deeper level? It's more than just describing the flower or the moment. It often takes quite a bit of time. I'll jot down phrases and stuff in my journal, and I might not ever go back to those words for months or even years, but it just takes time to play with it and really dig and figure out what I am really feeling about it and what I want to say about that moment. Sometimes I don't even know how I feel until much later.

MRR: How much prose writing do you do? And when do we start discussing Ember Grant and how that venture functions in your writerly life?

CG: I'd love to write a novel someday. I've been attempting 'the great novel' that many of us want to write for decades, but I don't know if or when I'll ever do it. I play around with it. I write beginnings, I write bits and pieces. Most of the prose I am writing is nonfiction and has been since about 2000.

My love of nature is my spirituality, being sort of a pantheist, and so that led me to this whole, I guess a little over 20 years ago, maybe 25 years ago, kind of a spiritual revelation and realizing that my love of nature is my spirituality. That sent me on this whole quest of looking into mystical things. In that kind of discovery, as a way for me to explore and learn, I started writing about those things. Alternative spiritualities. The occult, by that I mean, what's mysterious and what's unknown, things that science can't explain—all these possibilities. That led me down the path to writing about those things.

I wanted a pen name for that because I wasn't sure where I was going to go with it and how comfortable I was with what people would think. Because some people look at that and they don't think it's a very serious form of writing.

So I gave myself a pen name and thought I would see how it worked.

My first piece was published in 2003, and I have been publishing something every year since then. I'm writing for Llewellyn, the oldest new age publisher in the world; they've been around for over one hundred years. They are the new age publishers. I submitted something to them and they published it, and ever since then, I have been in touch with the editors that work on various aspects of their company. They come to me now. 'Do you want to write this?' 'Do you want to do that?' I've been writing for them ever since.

MRR: What was that first piece for Llewellyn in 2003?

CG: It was about using the four elements. The classical four elements are earth, air, fire and water. It was about using those in a meditative aspect. That was really fun. Because of my love of nature, I'm really grounded in science, and so I have this way of reconciling my love of science with my spirituality through this platform. That was the first thing I wrote.

Through the course of my work with this company, I have also published four books. It's been really rewarding, and I've learned a lot about the publishing world and a lot about how to work with different editors. It's been a wonderful experience.

I don't know if I'll write any more [books]. Every time I finish a book, I think, 'I don't know if I have another one in me' because it's so much work and I don't know what fresh new thing I have to say; the genre is really, really crowded and popular. But if I do think of something, I'll try it again.

MRR: Do your ventures in photography affect your writing? Does your writing affect the photography you do?

CG: They do. When I am in the act of doing the photography, though, I am usually not thinking about poetry. I usually am switching different modes. But after I have pictures, what I've been doing lately, and what I've always wanted to do since I found photography as a hobby, is to combine them in some way. I used to think it would be nice to make a coffee table book, an art book, where I find photos that I've taken that correspond with poems. It's not usually 'this photo inspired this poem.' That's pretty rare. I do have a couple pieces that are like that, but most of the time it's a separate thing and then I look for the connections later.

Last year, I decided I wanted making more of a social media presence and I know Instagram is a big place to do that, so I started sharing stuff on Instagram. I decided I wanted to find a way to combine my poetry and my photography. But of course, I don't have that much poetry that I can post every day; I'll run out of stuff. So I started doing blackout poetry, or what they call erasure poetry. Those are really fun and they're also a way for me to keep a creative spark going because they're kind of like little puzzles. So I started making those and overlaying them with my pictures. People have been doing that online for a long time, but I hadn't been doing it myself and didn't realize how popular it was, so I started doing that. Now I've opened up this whole other

world, a new art form, for my explorations. I've met a lot of cool other writers online who are doing all kinds of other wonderful ways of expressing poetry and art. Some of them are doing blackout poems or cut-up poems. Some of them are exploring their art, like painting, with poetry. So many cool things going on that I didn't realize. That has been an eye-opener and it's been inspiring.

MRR: What was the first-ever piece of writing of yours that was published?

CG: I don't know if you count high school.

MRR: Oh yes.

CG: We had a literary journal in our high school that I'm sure it didn't go past the campus, but I did get some poems in there. That was probably the first time.

The first time I remember having something out there in the world in print, it was in the early 90s, a little magazine called Pen and Ink magazine. They're not around anymore, but they're the first place I submitted old school, in the mail with a cover letter, and they wrote back and accepted it and published it.

MRR: What is literally the last piece of writing that you have worked on?

CG: Today, I have been working on a piece about rainbows. It's Pride month. I've taken some rainbow photos over the years and I thought wouldn't it be nice if I could write something about not just nature and color but people. I don't think you can overstate the importance of recognizing those beautiful differences and I thought maybe I could put together something simple for Instagram in honor of Pride month that would feature a rainbow picture and some kind of short poem about color. That's literally what I was working on five minutes before this interview. It's hard not to make it be cliché. How do you write about a rainbow without it being corny? It's hard. [Christy laughs.] We'll see if I can do it.

MRR: Is it bad juju to talk about your novel or other writerly aspirations?

CG: I don't think it is. Yes, I do want to write a novel someday. It's about time. It takes so long time to put together something that big and it seems like something else always gets in the way. But I would like to write some kind of fantasy novel someday. I used to think I wanted to write epic fantasy. You know, I'm a huge Tolkien geek. I thought maybe there's something there I can do. I think I've changed my mind and I'm leaning more toward urban fantasy. That's a really popular genre. That's what I have been experimenting with and playing with for the last few years.

Poetry is more important to me than that, though. I'd really rather get a book of poems before I try to tackle a novel. So I think that's where I'm going to put most of my energy in the near future, trying to get a book of poetry published.

MRR: Do you have a strict regimen with your writing, or do you carve out writing time when you can amidst your other responsibilities?

CG: This is one aspect where I don't practice what I preach. I always tell my students, 'Set aside a time every day when you're going to write,' and I don't do that. I tried. That's just not how I work. I think I could if I wanted to. If I really tried, I could say, okay, at this time every day I'm going to write. Instead, what I do is work it in whenever it fits or if I'm inspired. But I do try to write something every day.

That's why I started doing the blackout poetry. Even though I'm not writing from scratch every day, I'm at least looking at texts and playing with words a little bit each day. That's art in itself. But sometimes playing with words in that way inspires me to come up with something else. So I do try to do something creative every day, and if I'm not writing, I'm taking pictures, or making jewelry or stained glass, something crafty, something artistic every day.

MRR: Let's go back to your interest in science. Not everyone who is a 'nature writer' necessarily loves the science of it, but you do. How did that develop beyond the fact that you were situated on those lovely 18 acres in your childhood? And how did this exposure to science inform your writerly self?

CG: It started with my wanderings as a kid in the woods, but then when I was in school, science classes were my favorites. Right up until middle school, I absolutely loved it. I thought I had a career in science like maybe forestry, or maybe a wildlife biologist. That's the direction I thought I was going in until about maybe early high school. And I don't know exactly what flipped the switch, how literature won out, but I know I was doing a lot of writing. I started writing as a kid. Around 8th grade, that switch got flipped and I realized that despite the knack I seemed to have for science and my love for it, literature and writing and exploring the feelings and all of that was taking the lead. I had a teacher in the 8th grade mention something to me about possibly a career in writing, and that may have had something to do with it. Also the fact that once I hit the upper levels of science with some of the harder equation-based math, I am not saying I couldn't do it, but I didn't like it. I liked observing nature and enjoying nature, and I liked learning about it, but I didn't want to do that kind of work. That was kind of taking away from my enjoyment of it. Maybe that's what flipped the switch.

I think my observations do make a difference because I am curious about the way things work, and I do research sometimes when I am writing a poem. I wrote a poem recently about the sound of crickets, and I had to do some research to find out, okay, how do they make that sound and what does that mean and what are they doing? I want to know what that is before I start writing about it because it has a purpose and a function. Research is still part of my creative process. It does play a role.



5/ 5 – Alex Francis

Artist Statement

I am Alexander Bryan Francis. The five photos spread out in MRR 2021 represent the journey that is mental health. I want to show the valleys you experience along the way. Through the emptiness, isolation and frustration. The path you have to sit in to evaluate. Being trapped in your mind before finally being able to stand the pressure.

Band aids

Heidi Grohe-Rood

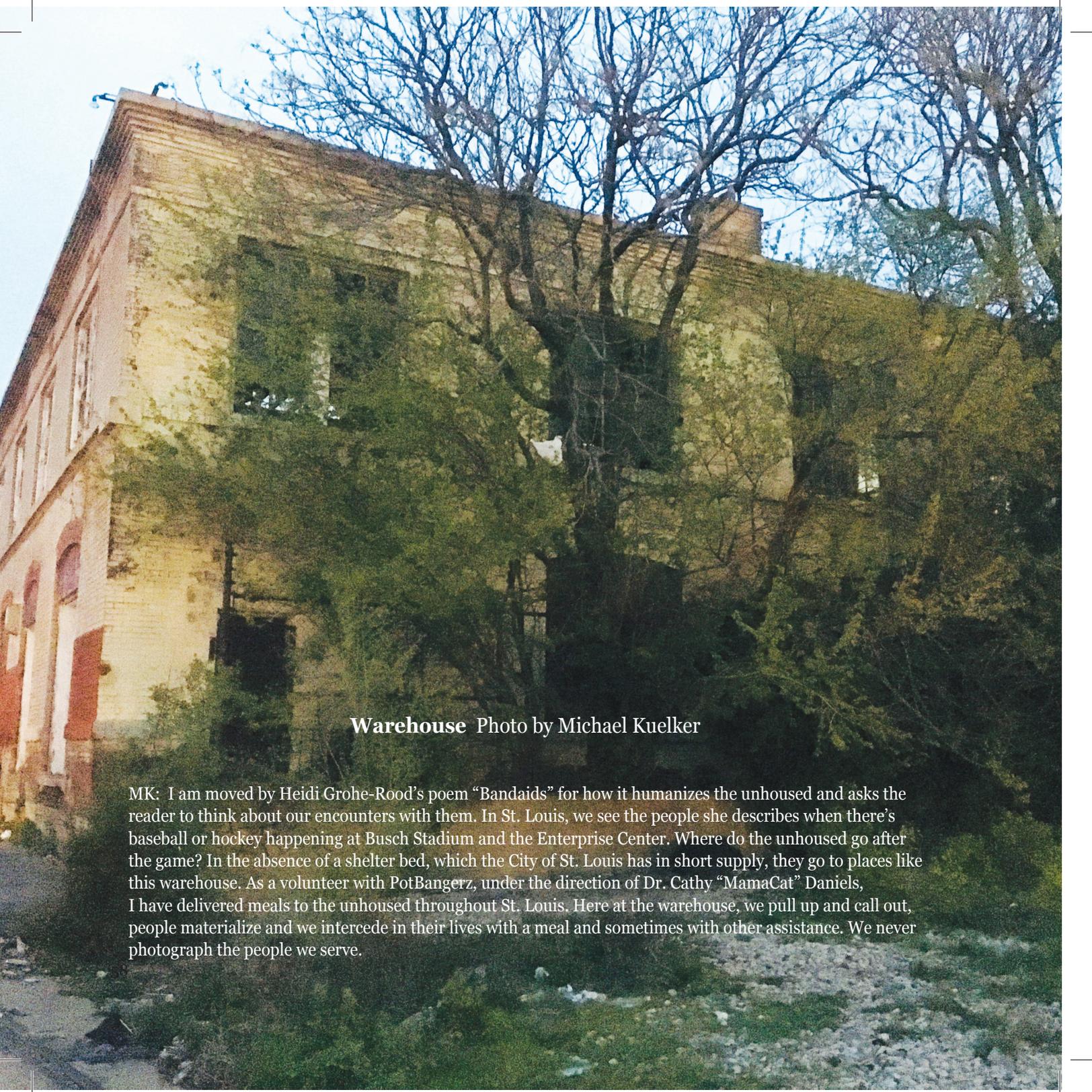
They stand on the exit and entrance ramps
and medians of a highway
in the rain, snow, and wind,
or under the punishing heat from the summer sun
holding a cardboard sign that reads,
“Please help.”

A backpack filled with supplies and snacks
hangs out the car window,
Hoping to help them get from one week to the next.
They run to reach it before the stoplight changes.
“Do you need a blanket, an umbrella, or a bottle of water?
How about an orange or an apple?”
The old man without teeth is grateful for the orange.

“How did you know what we need? It’s as if someone told you!
It’s my birthday today!” a young man said with a smile.
They say, “Thank you! God bless you and be safe.”
In the midst of a pandemic, they still think of others
more fortunate than they are.
Some people hand them money.
They get smaller in the rearview mirror.
The next overpass repeats the process.
Some come from behind buildings or rise from benches,
happy to be seen.

The car, that had held all it could, had been emptied.
In a week the journey will be made again,
some met with the same grateful smiles
Looking a little more tired than the week before.
They may have been at this a while.

It's nothing more than a bandaid,
but to them, it's a lifeline.
Who will take the next step,
and give them a job or a place to sleep,
food to keep them going,
lifting them up,
restoring their dignity,
ending homelessness.
What a thought.



Warehouse Photo by Michael Kuelker

MK: I am moved by Heidi Grohe-Rood's poem "Band-aids" for how it humanizes the unhoused and asks the reader to think about our encounters with them. In St. Louis, we see the people she describes when there's baseball or hockey happening at Busch Stadium and the Enterprise Center. Where do the unhoused go after the game? In the absence of a shelter bed, which the City of St. Louis has in short supply, they go to places like this warehouse. As a volunteer with PotBangerz, under the direction of Dr. Cathy "MamaCat" Daniels, I have delivered meals to the unhoused throughout St. Louis. Here at the warehouse, we pull up and call out, people materialize and we intercede in their lives with a meal and sometimes with other assistance. We never photograph the people we serve.

To Pasture

Gabe Sheets

We've reached the end of our pathway,
A sunset shine over our final separation,
Shine over a landscape of bright golden hay,
Oh, how much I wish you could stay,
Your absence—a void of desolation.

I relieve your back from my heavy saddle,
For the last time—withdraw your rein,
And having overcome every trial,
Your iron hooves are now made idle,
Free to roam amongst the grain.

What it is to come of age together,
All those forgotten memories,
Amount to a hidden tether,
A love that soars like that of a feather,
Moments that will always be with me.

I watch as you gallop away,
A ballet that's trapped my eyes in,
Set loose to be eternally astray,
One last journey towards the end of day,
Finally alone as you vanish into the horizon.

CONTRIBUTORS

Natalie Arnett is majoring in nursing and plans to go to Goldfarb School of Nursing after SCC. She loves writing in her free time and sharing her work with others.

Brooklyn Cadwallader has been writing for the past two years, primarily poetry. She says that the last year has really helped her grow as a writer.

A “creative soul at heart,” **Holly Duffner** says, “I have written stories for myself and others since I was little. If I am not writing as a hobby, you could also find me painting, reading, playing video games and cuddling with my cats.” After graduating from SCC, Ms. Duffner plans on going to Midwest Institute to become a veterinary technician.

Sarah Eplett is a writer and student at SCC who has graduated with honors on a Certificate of Specialization in Creative Writing. She has always been fascinated with storytelling, and ever since finding her writing voice with the help of family in middle school, she hasn’t stopped writing. The stories she writes are a mix of realism and magic, with an emphasis on characters and the aspect of change. The future may be uncertain, especially in these times, but she is driven to continue writing and continue her studies.

Alex Francis is an STL based photographer currently attending SCC for graphic design.

Andrew Galantowicz graduated from SCC in 2020 and is studying criminal justice at UMSL. His other accomplishments include winning the geography bee in the 4th grade, placing 2nd in his age group in a Girls on the Run 5k race and totaling two of the three cars he’s owned. He says, “My MRR poem is a bit funny and not the most politically correct, but I think the humor is well deserved in a year full of rather depressing events.”

Christina Gant is Asst. Professor of English at SCC, where she has worked since 1998. She is an alumna of SCC and has been serving as advisor for SCC’s chapter of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society for 18 years. She shares poetry and photos (mostly of nature and her travels, and sometimes her cats) on Instagram: @poetofthewoods

“My dreams are too big to fit in a few lines,” writes **Alicia Gregson**. She is a student at SCC working on a psychology degree.

Heidi Grohe-Rood is a graduate of SCC and UMSL. She enjoys writing poetry and prose as well as photography. Traveling and being outdoors give her inspiration in her writing. Heidi likes to read a good book as often as possible, primarily nonfiction. Spending time with family and friends is what she values the most.

Loria Harris is a world-class hesitator who doesn't want life to pass her by. After over six years focusing on her children, she is reviving her old dream of writing, pursuing a Certificate of Specialization in Creative Writing and currently revising her first novel. She loves to highlight the misunderstood plight of mothers.

Katie Harrison is in her second year at SCC. She has been writing since elementary school and has always had an affinity for creating unique characters and stories. She hopes to finish and publish a novel in the near future.

Zion Johnson writes, "I am an amateur in the arts, but I aspire to get better so I can one day write my dream book Guncrab."

Michael Kuelker is Professor (Emeritus) of English at SCC. He is Secretary on the Board of Directors and a volunteer for PotBangerz—Food Outreach to the Unhoused, a 501(c)3 organization in St. Louis.

Jake Long has been writing poems and songs actively since his freshman year of high school. "I have also written a few short stories. My pieces usually focus on issues in my life, or they tell a story about problems that a fictional character is facing."

Jolie Newman has been writing since she was a child—even before her family had a computer with internet. She is a creative at heart and has many artistic outlets; her favorites are writing, painting, drawing, and sewing. Jolie will be continuing her artistic pursuits at Savannah College of Art and Design where she will be majoring in fashion with a minor in sustainable design.

Ryanzo W. Perez is a father, husband and hobbyist photographer who is constantly amazed by the camera's ability to broaden and elongate the impact of messages, moments, and emotions.

Gabe Sheets is an aspiring screenwriter and director based in Lake Saint Louis. Gabe has written articles, interviews, and movie reviews that have been published in local magazines and online blogs including FocusOn Magazine, The Hurlblog, and We Are Movie Geeks. Gabe is completing an associate degree at SCC before transferring to a four-year university.

Emily Webb is an aspiring writer and artist who is at work on an associate's degree at SCC. "I enjoy incorporating my love for insects and animals into my work. My favorite genre to both read and write is horror."

St. Charles Community College proudly offers three degrees in creative writing. The Certificates of Specialization in Creative Writing and in Literary Editing and Publishing are each 16-credit hour programs that allow students to augment another two-year degree, affording students flexibility and adding depth to their primary academic interests while studying the genres of their choice. For those whose primary interest is becoming a writer, our 60-hour Associate of Fine Arts in Creative Writing gives students an opportunity to develop their craft and prepare themselves for a four-year degree in creative writing at their next institution through a broad exploration of the many genres and approaches to the writing process.

MRR annually confers the Jim Haba Award for poetry. Additionally, the SCC English department annually recognizes excellence in student writing through the Alyson Dickerman Award for poetry, the E.B. White Award for expository essay writing and the Annie Dillard Award for creative nonfiction.

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Creative Writing at SCC

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Natalie Arnett
Brooklyn Cadwallier
Holly Duffner
Andrew Galantowicz
Alicia Gregson**
Heidi Grohe-Rood
Loria Harris
Jake Long
Jolie Newman*
Gabe Sheets
Emily Webb

FICTION

Sarah Eplett
Zion Johnson

ESSAY

Katie Harrison

WRITER IN FOCUS:

Christina Gant

PHOTOGRAPHY

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Michael Kuelker
Ryanzo Perez



Cover art by Christina Gant
Ephemeral
color photography



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More with Less

Today

You are more

With less

You have become more yourself

With less time to enjoy it

You must not waste today

Wondering why it is not yet tomorrow

- **Alicia Gregson**

I wrote **'More with Less,'** along with most of my work, pretty soon after losing some people very close to me. I found myself so focused on moving on that I was completely losing days. It is very easy to lose the present. I hope this is taken as a simple reminder to live for now. You certainly will never know how long this "now" is going to last. It's often the hardest feelings to express that are the easiest to write about. It gets easier when someone else is able to understand. Feel, write. Hurt, scribble. Laugh, type.

– **Alicia Gregson**

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Place
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Here



Moon Through Trees – **Ryanzo Perez**

“How many ways can you describe the sky and the moon?”

– **Toni Morrison**

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Rx

*Crunching—beneath my feet,
a different sound than those of leaves*

*Each step crisp and freshly crushed,
only hearing skwush—skwush—skwush*

*White flakes clinging to my boots,
making sounds that only soothe*

*The messy muck inside my mind,
easing out the noisy grind*

*That wanders through delicate space,
in my most defining place*

*Where dreams are made and life resides,
without much effort they preside*

*Losing myself in the sound,
as I put footsteps on the ground*

*Wandering nowhere to the sound
the cobwebs gone,*

I am found.

- Heidi Grohe-Rood

“Rx” and “Winter Whispers” – **Heidi Grohe-Rood**

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dare

to

walk

the

path,

Never hide who you are

“dare to walk the path / Never hide who you are”

Blackout poem – **Christina Gant**

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