

MID RIVERS REVIEW



2020

MID RIVERS REVIEW

2020

St. Charles Community College

Cottleville, Missouri

VOLUME XX

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MID RIVERS REVIEW invites submissions of original poetry, short fiction, prose and visual art and photos. Please see the submission guidelines at our website – www.stchas.edu/midriversreview – and send your work via email to midriversreviewsc@gmail.com or by traditional mail to Editor, Department of English HUM 203, St. Charles Community College, 4601 Mid Rivers Mall Drive, Cottleville MO 63376.

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is supplemented with art cards featuring
Debra Crank-Lewis - Reflection
Kirstin Iverson – Photomontage
Chile Nguyen – Vegetables
Kaleigh Oliver – (W)hole

 **MID RIVERS REVIEW – 20th Anniversary** 

**Even the Smallest
Pebble Can Cause a
Ripple in the Water**

Relentless

Lacey Burnette

Ahab
Borg
civil war
drone
evangelism
flood
genocide
honey badger
imperialism
jihad
kudzu
labyrinth
mother-in-law
NRA
obsolescence
poverty power
quicksand
red
Sirens
 or silence
toothache
Urlacher
Vegas
wildfire
xenophobia
yakuza
zombies

[Do you remember when]

Alyson Dickerman

June 4, 1971 – July 4, 2019

Do you remember when
We were young and free?
Our wings were bright,
Prepared for flight,
Before we ever set out to sea.

We had stars for eyes,
Few sorrows of any size,
Our hearts were so large,
We thought ourselves in charge
Of fanciful destinies.

But now our ships
Have sailed on seas
So rough, so calm.
And our wings rest in tatters,

But, oh, our hearts have learned
What matters.
Or so it seems to those of us
Who once were young and free.

Redundant Love*

Haley Muse

I fell asleep last night
Thinking of an old haunt
That handprint on the ceiling above your bed
Etched into the paint
Only visible to me one night
Illuminated red from the subtle backlight of your desk
You are not the love that I knew
Yet, I'm sure I love you.

I never saw that handprint again
That doesn't stop me from looking for it
Perhaps one night it will appear to me again

I fell asleep last night
Looking at the ceiling of my room
Imagining it was yours

I could hear the subtle hum of your fan
The quiet clicking of each rotation
The cars that drift and squeal through the stop
The wandering footsteps of the blind dogs
And the patter of your cat waiting to be let in

Engulfed I was, in the delicacy of your scent
Your body heat
And the sudden shiver you give off
Just before falling asleep

I awoke abruptly,
and was brought back.
You had been replaced
by none other than a wall and empty space.

I always seem to be seeking your comfort,
So I'll fall asleep again
to the hum of the fan I don't have.

* This poem won the Alyson Dickerman poetry award at SCC in Spring 2020

River Cathedral

Mary Sweetin

River Cathedral is a tone poem written for a full orchestra and has been performed by local orchestras on three occasions. Listen to the entire 11-minute composition at <https://soundcloud.com/mary-lucas-sweetin/river-cathedral> .

– Michael Kuelker

This piece was inspired by a float trip taken on the Rio Frio in Leahey, Texas. References to the “River Cathedral” are owed entirely to the late Frances Horn, who coined the descriptive phrase and who generously provided lodgings at her cabin, allowing so many of us to enjoy the splendor of the river. Below is a descriptive narrative, detailing my personal experience on that float trip. However, listeners need not follow the narrative, and are encouraged to attach their own thoughts, meaning and imagery to what they hear.

– Mary Sweetin

MEASURE	TEXT
---------	------

1	Drowsily ambling down to the river,
5	morning sounds...birds, crickets, frogs....
11	First sight of the river.
15	Jumping onto the innertube, it whirls around in the brisk river water.
17 beat 3	the float begins.
20	Taking in sights and sounds.
38 (B)	The current is steady, and a little stronger as the water deepens.
43	Hérons and hawks announce themselves.
47	Echo of living things calling to each other in the trees.
51	Swift waters spin the tube around.
53	Vivid white clouds lie in contrast to the deep blue sky.
72	Rumble of thunder
74 (D)	The sky darkens as clouds roll in from the west
78	The wind begins to pick up
80	Bird calls announce the coming storm
82	Gusting winds howl
83	Thunder claps, in reply
90	Great cypress trees sway broadly on the shore banks, giving form to invisible winds

92 A massive canopy of green appears over the river,
 94 a "Cathedral" of trees.
 100 The wind subsides...the calm before the storm.
 105 Much of the wind is impeded by the ancient cypress trees, standing
 sentinel over the
 teeming river
 111 Enormous roots of the old trees extend their gnarled claws into the river
 115 Shimmering blue dragonflies hover in the air like helicopters
 121 Encountering a shallow, pebbled patch, the float gets bumpy for a bit.
 123 Surprisingly, the innertube rumbles steadily on over the rocky river bot-
 tom.
 130 (G) Under the cypress canopy, a single butterfly wings its way among the
 wildflowers on the shore bank
 134 as skeeter bugs skate swiftly across the water's surface.
 145 The canopy gives way to open sky,
 146 and the rain falls freely,
 150 (H) producing a cacophony of sounds; rhythmic, but random.
 156 Raindrops make circular patterns on the water, rippling out toward the
 shore
 160 Observing this, I consider the elegant symmetry of it all,
 164 and the subtle hand that reveals the Great Artist...
 174 After a time, the rain yields to the sun's warmth
 177 Colossal rain clouds, still bloated with moisture, now a brilliant white...
 180 ...disperse gracefully on the moving breeze.
 239 Today's river expedition is almost over.
 242 (L) Savoring moments of the river journey,
 243 the beauty and harmony of creation,
 244 the restorative power of nature,
 245 and a deep sense of peace,
 247 (M) I say goodbye to the river.
 257 Time to head back.
 261 Walking the dirt path with a spring in my step.
 265 Same song, different dance!

River Cathedral

In Loving Memory of Frances Horn

Mary L. Sweetin

Duration: 11:00 min.

Andante $\text{♩} = 82$

Piccolo

Flute 1

Flute 2

Oboe 1

Oboe 2

English Horn

Clarinet in Bb 1

Clarinet in Bb 2

Bassoon 1

Bassoon 2

Horn in F 1

Horn in F 2

Horn in F 3

Horn in F 4

Trumpet in Bb 1

Trumpet in Bb 2

Trombone 1

Trombone 2

Tuba

Timpani

Snare/Tom/tom 1

Andante $\text{♩} = 82$ *Drowsily ambling down to the river.*

B.C. Eb

Triangle

A Bouquet of Poems by Kaleigh Oliver*

A Love Letter from God / Engrams / The Anthem of Lonely
His Grace Leaves Bruises / Magic Tricks / (W)hole / Miraculous

* recipient of the JIM HABA AWARD FOR POETRY in 2020.
Haba is a poet, teacher and founding director
of the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival.
MRR confers this award annually.

A love letter from God

Kaleigh Oliver

My child,

I see you.

I see you when you sit down and when you rise up.

I see your struggle

and doubt

and fear.

I am familiar with all your ways.

I knew you even before you were conceived,

For you are my offspring.

I determined the exact time of your birth and where you would live,

And brought you forth on the day you were born so you could be the living proof of my grace.

My child,

you were not a mistake,

for I have written all your days in my book.

I control the rain and the waves,

Because water will wash away every hurt of this world

And baptize you in my grace if you let it.

I told the mountains to raise themselves something mighty,

So you never had to feel big.

I told the sky to watercolor into sunsets

Because I know how you like My art so,

And when the sun fades into distant skies,

I cloak you in moonlight that runs over from the galaxies like grace abundance,

Just so the darkness wouldn't make you scared.

You were decided as necessary

by the greatest Artist of all Time.

you are My greatest masterpiece

Above all other beautiful things

I crafted from the dust.

My child,

Why do you doubt my might,

When it is only I who can quake the earth

With a mere thought.

The most wild, reckless things

Still ask for My permission.
Why do you doubt my power
When it is I who gave the waves their limits
And I who wakes the morning to rise.
And I who even still calls you out by name.

My child,

I created you
and imagined you from the start
and knit you in the womb;
I spoke this world
and all of its beauty and glory into existence
and yet I handcrafted you,
handmade you,
I finished the constellations with your freckles
To remind you that you're part of something bigger,
And I put galaxies in your eyes
So they would know no limits.
I fabricated your heart to beat for me
and I breathed life into your lungs
so you could praise Me.

My child,

you were built on the Rock Foundation,
Who never crumples
that though the floodwaters may rise,
My Living Water is stronger and I made you to swim,
and though the wind may howl,
My deserved worship is louder and I made you to sing.

My child,

I am also the Father who comforts you in all your troubles and sadness,
When you are brokenhearted,
I am close to you.
I have carried you close to my heart.
I see you throwing stones into
My Grand Canyon
Trying to fill the space of what you're missing.
One day I will wipe away every tear from your eyes.
And the sufferings of this earth
Will all fade away
At the sight of me.

My child,

I am from eternity to eternity
And I am able to do more than you could possibly imagine.
Who do you think made the northern lights to dance for Me,
Who else could command the sky to send flashes of light and
Who else can shake the edges of the earth into rolls of thunder,
To show that My Light
And My Might
Cannot be overcome by darkness.

My child,

My plan for you is good,
For I am good.
My thoughts and affections toward you
are countless.
I will never stop doing good to you.

My child,

You look to this earth
Asking what love looks like
When my love is surrounding you,
And washing over you,
And watching over you.

My child,

You were loved before I created time.
You were chosen before you even had a thought.
Your worth is so great to me
It required a heavenly exchange for my son.
You ask what love looks like,
Can you see it now?
Love looks like an unfillable canyon
Bridged by my grace
Through your faith
For eternal life.

My child,

Love looks like the cross.
And isn't that
Something heavenly.

Engrams

Kaleigh Oliver

Neuroscientists say memory forms in chains,
And that once you start remembering
You can't stop.

Link by link,
The memory of you
Gets heavier.

Your voice is chained
With vividness
That I can't make myself unhear.

You are an engram now,
Some permanent change
Weaved in my brainstem.

The sound of your breath
Used to string its way
Into my innermost soul.

Your being used to chain my being to fear,
Your memory traced back
To the root of all others.

But chains can be broken,
And you can be unlinked
From everything else.

Your memory
And my remembering
No longer cross paths.

My chains are gone,
And I am finally set free
from you.

The Anthem of Lonely

Kaleigh Oliver

Lone·ly /≈/ *adj.*

1. sad because one has no friends or company. **2.** without companions; solitary.

3. If I were a sound I think I would be the rustling of bed sheets. This, perhaps, is because I have insomnia and I hear this sound often/but also perhaps and more likely because it is the loneliest sound I know. The loneliest sound I know because if you were in bed too the sheets would not brush against themselves and if you were in bed which you should be I would not be tossing and turning/tossing and turning which is fueling the rustling that is also the anthem of lonely. **4.** The anthem of lonely has played on repeat every night since you decided to leave. And I know I was made to miss you because I was made to crave you. I know missing you causes the lonely that fuels the rustling that makes me more lonely/and yet I can't stop.

5. The cool emptiness of the sheets reminds me that I am alone and I am lonely. Even more lonely than just the sound of rustling bed sheets.

His Grace Leaves Bruises

Kaleigh Oliver

And I said

God, I am not pretty

My mouth is a tangle
of tongue and desire

Good intentions
Just look like the tracings of a masterpiece

My is head a steel drum
That can't stay on beat

My heart a mansion
With spiral staircases that only seem to go down

My thoughts get cottonmouth
And can't articulate themselves

They wrap around each other
And corset themselves

Into the skeleton of an idea
The shell of an abstraction

My lips cannot form the words
The letters can't draw the shapes of how I feel

They just circle across themselves
Until there is no clear beginning or end

And yesterday I was a full moon
But then somehow space shifted

And I'm a sliver of myself
I don't even recognize

My mind is always
Somewhere between buzzing

And the pause after an exhale
before the next inhale;

The gap as one might call it,
Survival as another might.

But regardless
It never seems to get anywhere.

I've spent countless hours trying to find myself
Through someone else's eyes

I regurgitate what I'm taught
As though the thoughts are my own:

I am loved.
I am loved.

I regurgitate what I'm taught
Until the thoughts are my own:

I am loved.
I am loved.

He wants me.
I am loved.

God has taught me
To write a symphony with the voices in my head

I may be looking through
A broken mirror

But he's shown me how to
See His son's reflection through it

I am some fire of a girl
Destruction and warmth

A child of wrath
Turned woman of waiting

I read Psalm 16 with an amen under my breath
Oh how his grace leaves bruises.

I said
God, I am not pretty

He said no,
I made you so much more.

What a shame it would be
If others looked at you

And all they saw
Was pretty.

Magic Tricks

Kaleigh Oliver

As mountains do,
we rise.

We are told to stand tall
and bare not only our own weight,
but the weight of a galaxy,
a swatch of pigmentations,
lineages.

We rise.

But the weight of all time and space and alternate realities
is a heavy thing to hold on your own.

I mean,

Who else can
play connect the dots with the constellations and create a masterpiece?

Who else can corkscrew their curls
into the ripples of waves on a shore.

Who else can hold the canyons
in eyes of honey?

Who else can breathe a song
from the whistles of the wind?

Who else can birth a tribe,
and raise them up to form a nation?

Who else can rise
without crumpling under the weight of a glass ceiling.

I guess this is why
the good God gave us black girls

Magic.

(W)hole

Kaleigh Oliver

I kissed the stars because their distance
reminded me of it all.
I made friends with the night
because it understood me.

I washed and detangled my hair for two hours the way I ought to,
and learned the resilience of curls in natural hair.
I learned even though the sun has vanished,
the leaves haven't started dying yet.

I've tripped but I have not fallen,
and I'm refusing to kill myself from the inside out like I used to.
The thoughts in my head can be a tall glass of poison,
that I used to drink and wait for someone else to die from.

I have learned the brain and the mind
are in fact sisters, not twins.
And the smoke that fogs them both
is really just dragon's breath after all.

I met myself at 3 AM one night alone,
as it turns out I am 20% woman, 80% unfinished poetry.
It also turns out my blood type is o-negative,
which means I can still give to everybody outside of myself.

I also learned that God heard me the first time,
and that this universe is magnetic,
and while we are all pulling together
fragments are just pulling away which is finally okay with me.

I found out that love is not just a choice or a feeling,
but it's the fabric of the universe.
People, places, things and ideas.
Love is a noun, too, after all.

I've learned how to keep myself company,
And though these things are now more familiar
than writing my own name,
I am finally (w)hole.

Miraculous

Kaleigh Oliver

I made you after I made the skies
that span across the whole earth
I made you after I made the oceans
that churn and bubble from within

Don't you see that I am the horizon
Where all good things meet
The unfolding of my words gives light
I am where everything comes together

I made your soul
like a river
My hands placed the oceans
The choir in my voice is thunder

I silenced the noise
In the crowded corners of your mind
Your Finite nature
I reach past the infinite and into eternity

I authored your morality
You once lived in hypocrisy
So I rewrote your destiny
When I hung myself on Calvary

I am bigger than your humanity
And stronger than your ability
I cannot fit inside your mentality
Do you not see that I am so past your capacity

I am the creator of your reality
Do you feel the gravity
Outline of my majesty
Holy Spirit breathe through

I created a cycle of time for you
because you could never know my ways
You could never fathom the might of my hands
The ways of my doing

You could never understand
how I aligned the stars
Or projected the sunrise
for you

You don't know how
I chose where to send the lighting
And you couldn't comprehend
where I store the rainbows

or the depths of the ocean
or the holes of the ants
So I give you little mindless wonders
you can understand little by little

And moments of time
so you can handle the least of my power
The giants you face
break under my breath

Your strongest points
Cannot touch my weakest
So I gave you my strength
making you more than a conqueror

I am a God that is compassionate
Not a God of abandonment
I created a living breathing being in you
Can you even fathom it

I have done nothing by accident
I am a God that is elaborate
Created the great reefs, canyons and mountains
I am a God that is extravagant

I am a God that is passionate
My love set the precedent
I am an outside of time and space God
You can't even imagine it

You don't know how I orchestrated your heart beat
To make a symphony for me
How I watercolored the blush on your cheeks
With technicolor only I can see

I spoke balls of floating burning fire into existence
The galaxies are nothing more than
a mere vapor of my breath
And I strung the stars into constellations

I laid the foundations of the earth
And birthed the mountains
So my might
could erupt from the mud.

The seas waterfall out of my mouth,
Their depths only I know,
And I make them fall perfectly
into the bounds I set for them

I am a justice seeker
A perfect teacher
The harvest is so plentiful
Kingdom reaper

I am a love seer
A chain freer
You once were lost and I found you
How couldn't you be a believer

I am a star breather
Mountain speaker
Water us with living water
Garden keeper

I am
Miraculous.

***#BlackLivesMatter:* St. Charles County**

photography by Ryzan Perez

As I drove to my first George Floyd Black Lives Matter march in O'Fallon, Missouri, I convinced myself that I was going to focus on being present and active in the march and that I would refrain from taking photos. As we began to march and chant, I could not help but notice the powerful imagery and tangible energy that surrounded me, and I felt a need to extend and amplify the messages, pains, frustrations, triumphs and losses that were being voiced by black members of our community by sharing them visually.

The moments featured on these pages were captured at various marches and protests in St. Charles County. Some were organized by students and faculty of local school districts. Others were organized by activist organizations. Some were joined by police officers who demonstrated moments of partnership and support. Others were met by opposition from law enforcement agencies and produced a lot of emotion and conflict.

This is an unprecedented moment for our county, the country and the world, and these photos tell a small part of the story about St. Charles County's contributions to this important movement.

– Ryanzo Perez



photo by Rianza Perez



photo by Ryzanzo Perez



photo by Ryzano Perezr



photo by Ryanzo Perez



photo by Ryzano Perez



photo by Ryzano Perez



photo by Ryzan Perez

**All natural
shapes blazing
unnatural light.**

**Dark, dark
my light,
and darker
my desire.**

from "In a Dark Time" – Theodore Roethke



Swallowtail Silhouette – photo by Christina Gant

Hate

Laura McDonald

It clings to me.
A flesh-eating parasite attached to my spine,
Eating away at my very essence,
Leaving barren what used to be,
It clings to me.
Finding nourishment in my chest,
Sucking the air out of my lungs,
Only leaving venom to escape from every gasp,
It clings to me.
Fabricating paranoia in my brain,
Filling me with uncertainty and fear,
Tainting the last fragments of my faith,
It clings to me.
Leaving my heart hollow and cold,
Ridding me of empathy and compassion,
Roots of resentment have found their home,
It clings to me.

Unholy Trio

Claire Canning

"This is so stupid." I mutter under my breath causing a puff of white to fly out of my mouth. Shivering, I hug myself as I bring my knees up to my chest. My black sweatshirt and leggings didn't do much in terms of fighting the Scottish landscape's freezing temperatures, but it worked perfectly for camouflage.

My partner's voice comes over from the right corner of the roof we are sitting on. "Isn't this technically desecration? I mean sitting on a church rooftop with weapons seems...rude..." His voice trails off as I glare at him.

"Isn't whatever killed that woman desecrating the church grounds? Shut up. We need to focus." Ugh! This guy was nice to the point of it being infuriating. I could feel my normally white hair turn red with irritation.

"Right. Sorry." He says quickly. He turns around holding the shotgun closer to him. I glance at him for a second. His name is Sean. He's in his early twenties, wearing a knitted hat that he told me eagerly was from his mother, a pullover jacket that had its mid-zipper pulled up all the way so that it covered his neck. Apparently, that's to keep him safe from vampires. I told him that that's the same childish logic that a blanket protects you from a murderer. Ripped up jeans showed his scab and bruise ridden skin due to his clumsiness. Despite my situation, I didn't like being angry at him. It wasn't his fault I was forced to travel the ocean and leave my family behind.

From the other flat corner, my other partner and arch enemy sits. He says sternly, "Focus. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we get paid."

Yeah, and you two get most of the cut because you guys are "veterans." I click my tongue again as I think back to why I'm here in the first place and not at home under the covers enjoying my Christmas break with my family. Why'd that stupid kid have to decide to try to kill himself by jumping off of the top floor of our school? Why did I even care enough to use some magic to cause a gust of wind to push him back into the building through a conveniently open window? And why did a group of assholes with their assholishness decide to be assholes and pretty much force me to work for them? "For the greater good" my ass! So, I'm a witch. That means a secret international government agency gets to use me to fight some monsters? If I didn't agree to work with them, they would have experimented on me! What's a poor girl to do? I huff loudly. And worst of all was this asshole...

The man didn't need to change his daily uniform from his monster-fighting uniform. You'd think for a priest that this guy would be a lot more professional, but he just sasses my sass with greater sass. Talk about unholy. I can feel him roll his eyes as he says, "You just called me an asshole, didn't you?" He wasn't a psychic,

per se, he could just hear the thoughts of people in the air. Yeah, I don't get it either, but it's impossible to have a dirty thought around him without getting whacked with his many Bibles, which are always leatherbound.

"I don't know. Why don't you ask your God?" I immediately duck as he throws a snowball that most likely has ice in it at my head.

"Why don't you learn to respect your elders?" He raises his eyebrow and scrunches his stupid face. I can't see his face, but I just know that that is what he is doing, trust me.

"Dude, you're barely in your mid-twenties. That's only a few years older than me. I respect Sean more than you, your holiness."

"Dude?" You are truly from the colony's." He spits out. He's British. I'm American. Clearly we are natural enemies. His name also thoroughly annoys me. Ignatius. Blegh. Just how pretentious can you get?

The Scotsman tries to intervene. "Hey, hey. Calm down. We've got work to do."

Iggy and I glare at each other and then turn around. I say, "Doesn't even matter. As soon as someone steps into my summoning circle they'll be as good as dead."

"If they are a monster. We are not allowed to shoot people." The priest says as if I were an unruly student and he was the annoyed, underpaid teacher. He adds quietly, "And if your magic works. Do I need to remind you what happened on our last mission?"

He doesn't need to remind me. I failed and almost got killed on my first mission. I yell, "Why not just ask for a miracle then, Iggy? If my magic is that annoying just ask good ol' J-man for some help!" I get up and jump off of the roof before he can respond. Floating down onto the soft snow, I begin to walk quickly towards the entrance to the forest that surrounds the church and its graveyard.

"Hey! Zoe!" Sean yells. "Come back!" As I walk I can hear Ignatius' muffled voice tell him to leave me be.

Eventually, I stop walking. The silence is beautiful. I breathe the ice cold air deeply.

Snap!

I immediately turn around while creating a bow and arrow out of my light magic. I point it at the sound. Two red eyes stare back at me. The dog-looking creature growls and I put the bow down. I whisper loudly, "Stupid Church Grim! Go back to the church where your master is. You aren't supposed to be here, Sage." Iggy better not have sent it to try to apologize for bringing up the past. Who am I kidding? He just wants to make sure I don't die. Dead witch equals no money.

Sage huffs and then fades into the woods with no sound. I circle around, keeping the church barely in sight. When it becomes a point in the distance I stop and pause. I make myself a bow and arrow using my light magic. The light becomes a sort of outline that makes it look like a hollow bow and arrow.

Snap!

"I told you to leave me alone!"

No response.

Crash!

"Oh, shit!"

It sounds as if a tree just collapsed. What could have done that?

The light from my arrow barely lights up five feet in front of me. I shoot it and all I see are large naked trees.

I back up and shoot another one. "Fu-" Two of the trees had moved. Wait, those aren't trees, those are legs! I need to aim higher. I need to get to higher ground! I tilt myself as I take more steps backwards and release another arrow.

My god. I see it's head. It's at least twelve feet tall. It's face contorts into a hideous wide smile. It's eyes are completely human, but that's the only thing.

A Ghoul. I'd never thought that I would actually see one of these damned things. They used to be humans, but for some reason they started to eat humans turning them into monsters.

I shoot again.

It's face is right in front of mine. This monstrosity bent down and to look me straight in the eyes.

It makes a choking sound.

It's laughing.

I turn on my heels and run. The church quickly comes into sight. I just need to activate the magic circle!

However, just like a horror movie character, I trip right before stepping into the safety of my own creation. I turn around and immediately point my arrow as I try to get up without the help of my arms, but the snow underneath didn't help much in terms of grip.

The light causes me to see the full thing in all of its hideousness. Bloodthirsty creature. This one is particularly strong. Two people had died before we were called in. Apparently, this secret agency doesn't think about easing their workers into their environment. It's like they want me to die.

It swings its unnaturally long arm towards me. I shoot at it, but fear causes my arrow to disappear before it could hit the creature. I can't do magic when I'm scared. Shit! Calm down!

I scream and try to shield myself when bang!

The thing's head flings back and it falls slightly as if in slow motion as Sean yells, "Zoe! Come on!" I can hear him reload as I stumble and run onto the hallowed ground. It can't reach us there without getting hurt. My magic circle lights and the intricate designs blur as I run to the church.

Running inside, all of the lights turn on as Ignatius makes his way inside from the roof. "Ghoul," I tell him breathlessly.

He nods. "Go help Sean." I decide not to argue for once. I run outside and climb the back ladder. Sean's silhouette is outlined as he shoots at the creature that was creeping closer. It had seen me and it isn't going to stop until it gets what it wants.

I stand next to him and try to conjure my bow and arrow, but my whole body's shaking. Sean says in between shots, "It's gonna be okay. You're gonna be okay. We're going to be okay." He said the last sentence with emphasis on each word. He lines up and shoots at it again. "Shit, this isn't working." He pops his shotgun open to refill it and I see that his hands are trembling as well. He snuffles before closing the gun and placing the butt on his left shoulder and shooting the Ghoul straight in the forehead.

Seeing him tremble, my bow and arrow immediately reappear. It flies from my hand easily, hitting the thing in the collarbone. Sean says aloud, "This thing ate some of the women it killed, so why does it still not look human?"

"It's eyes do." I tell him. "It probably has been denying itself for a long time."

He lets out an angry laugh, "What? Does it think it can become human again?" He points the shotgun. "Too late, you monster, you had your chance." He shoots and hits it in its left eye causing it to scream. These types of Ghouls are the easiest to kill for most of the time, at least according to the pamphlet the agency hands out. The less human it is, the less smarts it has, and the parts that remain human are what need to be destroyed.

That's what will kill it.

Taking away what little humanity it still has.

We aim for its right eye, but it suddenly turns around and flees. Sage howls as it goes back into the woods. "Shit..." We say simultaneously. I grab his hand as he reaches for mine and we land a bit rougher than I would've liked on the snow below, but we have a mission.

We run into the woods chasing after the Church Grim as it follows the Ghoul. Sean says through panting, "Go right. We'll try to circle this thing."

We separate as we try to get ahead of the giant while keeping Sage in sight. If it keeps running in this direction...

A field comes into view right in front of a frozen lake. It at least has enough brains to know that it won't be able to cross. Heck, I wouldn't be able to and I'm the smallest one here.

It turns around and I kneel down to create another summoning circle on the ground, completely getting rid of my bow and arrow. Sweat drips down my forehead despite the cold as I aim the blue trap circle around the creature and raise my fists up tightly to my chest causing the ice inside the circle to contort and wrap around the Ghoul's shins and thighs.

It screeches like a Banshee causing an actual Banshee to scream in the distance. It swings at the ice. It cracks creating a spider web design. I pull my fists closer together to keep the ice together. I fall to one knee and with the last of my strength yell, "Now, Sean!"

Without hesitation, a bang resounds and the creature falls over as the ice collapses in chunks underneath the weight of itself. The Church Grim sniffs it as it turns around to pee on the thing's body. I let out a little chuckle as Sage begins to trot back to the church alone. I try to stand up, but my legs buckle underneath me. "Whoa! Got ya." Sean grabs my hands and gently helps me up. The shotgun was strapped to his back as he yells, "Awesome!" He said a bit quieter, "I told ya we'd be alright, didn't I?" He holds up his hand with the palm facing towards me.

I laugh and give him a high-five.

"Good team!" He looks at me again. "Hey, you're smiling! I 'ave never seen that before. You should do it more often."

I guess his enthusiasm isn't too annoying. We begin walking back as the Ghoul's body begins to disintegrate. I stop.

Sean pauses after a second. "Hmm? What's wrong?" He comes up to me with a worried expression. "Ya aren't hurt are ya?" He begins looking over me. "Your hair's changing color. It was just purple. Now it's turning pink. Does that mean you're feverish?"

"Shut-" I begin to yell. I take a breath, "I-thank you...for earlier."

"What?" He laughs loudly. "We're a team, aren't we?" He pats my shoulder. "I mean, I know you didn't really want to be, but...thanks for being a trooper." We begin walking again. "It can get a bit boring with Father Ignatius. Not that he's boring. I mean-he's just-" His face was turning red and it wasn't from the cold.

"Serious?" I reach for the nicest word I could I could think of when describing my arch nemesis.

"Yeah, that's it! I get you were forced to be on our team, but he just never seems to let himself relax despite this being his choice." He chuckles. "So having a new face is really refreshing. Even for Father Ignatius. He may not act like it, but he really does like you. And so do I."

"Iggy? Like me? No way." With the way we bicker, there was no way he could like me.

Sean suddenly turns serious, "Well, uh," he sighs, "maybe you remind him of someone he lost." I have never seen him like this in the two weeks I've known him. I didn't know what to say.

We both stand in silence for a second. I ask, "Did you lose someone, too?"

He breathes out through his nose, "Me?" He looks up at the star covered sky. "No...I was kind of recruited like you..." For just a flash, his eyes change shape and color, and a mischievous smile crosses his face.

We walk back with the crunch of snow being the only sound as we walk in calm silence. The glowing circle had stopped due to the crisis being over. If I had tried to keep it together any longer, I would have fainted by now. Even still, my steps were wobbly. Sean grabs my hand. "Easy does it, lass." He leads me up the steps and into the church.

Iggy looks at me. "You alright?" What has he been doing this entire time?

"Yeah, um, thanks." I say not meeting his eyes. It wasn't really his fault that I was here. Or Sean's. There were other people and creatures to be angry at, not them. I'm sorry that he lost someone and that was why he was here. He didn't deserve that, even if he is a jerk sometimes.

He raises an eyebrow. "What are you apologizing for?"

I try to improvise. I couldn't let him know that I knew. "I'm sorry for being so rude, I guess."

"You guess or you know?" He crosses his arms and smirks slightly.

"Ugh, never mind! Let's get out of here!"

Sean laughs and asks, "Yeah, where to next, Father Ignatius?"

I don't hear where we are going as I storm out of the church. Sage sits on the steps and I sit down with him. He lays his head on my lap. Wherever we are going to...I suppose I can handle it if I can help people. Even if they are idiots.

Light Love

Alishia Hulbert

The shivering fog of the first light wraps around me,
as the warmhearted misty air fills my chest-
Cooling my bones giving me minuscule raindrops of anxiety-
The small flickering of stars seems to be suspended in air, quietly at rest-
I crave for the taste of rain that is ignored by society-
Humor me by showering me with your burdens and sorrow-
Don't fill my soul with sunny cloudless wishes and dreams-
I already caught a glimpse of the dimming crescent moon,
behind the clouds of the impending tomorrow-
Instead let me quench my naked screams-
Saturate the ever-cultivating emptiness in my heart –
Swear you will indemnify for all the abating pleasure and misplaced sense of self-
I swear on the underlying of my soul I won't detach from the world and fall apart-
I beg of you to at last leave the first drop of rain losing, in the end, oneself-



Richard Morse and his wife Lunise Morse, co-founders of the group RAM, performing at the Hotel Oloffson in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in July 2000.

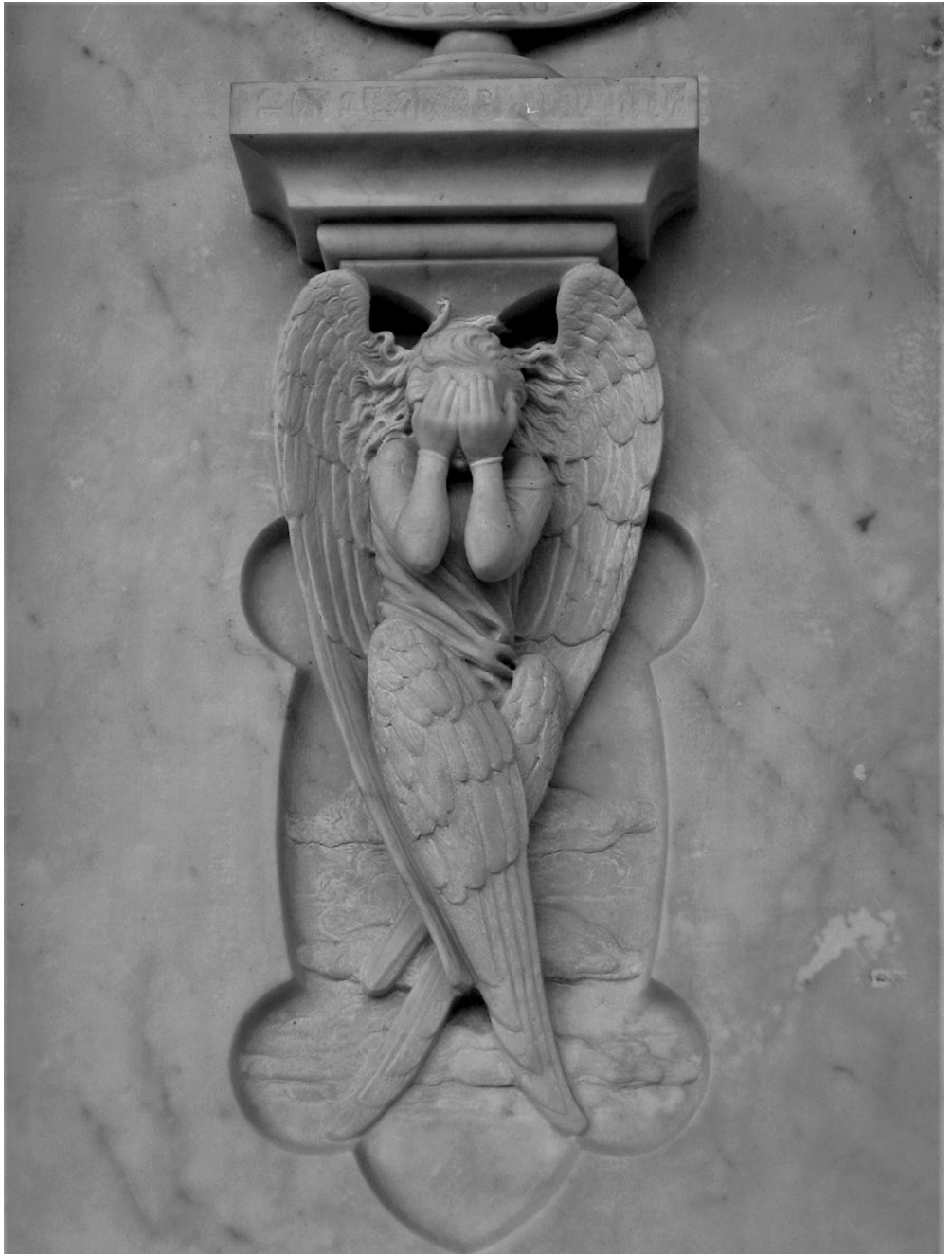
– photo by Michael Kuelker

RAM is a large ensemble that performs mizik rasin [roots music] fusing rhythms and lyrics of the vodou tradition with electric guitars and other elements. The Hotel Oloffson is a Gothic gingerbread mansion renowned from Graham Greene's 1966 novel *THE COMEDIANS*. "With its towers and balconies and wooden fretwork decorations [...] You expected a witch to open the door to you or a maniac butler, with a bat dangling from the chandelier behind him." Richard Morse assumed the lease to the hotel in the mid-1980s, and for many years, even during the spells of unrest in the post-Duvalier years, RAM has performed regularly at the Oloffson.

These Days

Kendall Scherer

Today I am lucid.
I know who I am.
I know what cannot and what can.
I know why and how. I know everything I am about.
Tomorrow I will be utterly confused.
Who I am is a blank.
I do not know how much more I can take.
I know nothing at all.
I do not know if anyone will catch me as I fall.
Today I am lucid.
Tomorrow I will be utterly confused.
Today I have security and answers,
But tomorrow I will have no such thing and no such proof.
Today I am resilient.
I stumble,
But I get right back up.
You shoot with pluck.
If I get hit,
Upright I pull myself to sit.
Tomorrow I will be exhausted.
It is a tired beyond rest and sleep.
This tired is my spirit and my soul's defeat.
There is no cure or fix,
Only you learn to tolerate it.
Today I am resilient.
Tomorrow I will be exhausted.
Today I feel alright,
But tomorrow I will not remember why.
Today is today,
And tomorrow will be tomorrow.
Today is for frays,
Tomorrow is for wallowing.



Detail on the Tomb of a Young Girl, Santa Croce – photo by Christina Gant

The Dark

Lacey Burnette

do you know the dark
explore the dark
do you hear
 the dark
 listen for the dark
do you taste, smell
 the dark
 inhale the dark
do you feel
 the dark
 touch the dark
do you see
 the dark
 look into the dark
do you know the dark, yet
do you know
 the dark
 think the dark
do you know the dark, now

Cover Song

Lacey Burnette

You hijacked my words
 my notes
You could not know
 their true meaning
You could not know
 the pain, the loss, the sorrow
 in which those words steeped
 for so long
You weren't there
 when it happened
You did not linger
 in the thoughts
You did not struggle
 to let them loose
And you do not sit naked
 performing
Now, the pain is so much worse
 because you do it so well

Devotion Poem

Lacey Burnette

A tear drips from my young daughter's eye

The big tree

sprawling, comforting shade
home to picnics
adventures
where dolls heard tales from picture books
where baby birds cried out
where homeless honeybees once gathered
and had to be corralled
where leaves magically transformed
and carpeted the ground
and miraculously sprung back

The big tree

where hugs were invited
has been struck down

Lightning pierced through the gloom

and shattered the big tree

A tear drips from my young daughter's eye

Why?

She curls into my lap

I refuse

to tell it slant

I will not say

Thor cast down the thunderbolt,
nor did Zeus, or Perun or Ukko
or Indra or Raijin or Kiwanuka
or Jupiter or Taranis or Huracan
or Vajra or Lei Gong or God

I will not say it was a punishment

Nor I will say there is

a reason

The truth is, I tell her,

we don't know everything
about lightning
but it was a tall tree

And I tell her what I can,

what she can absorb
about electrical charges

Some of it remains a mystery,
I say, but it's only a mystery
until we figure it out
But it's OK not to know
Then I tell her
it is sad
that we lost the big tree
but we will plant a baby tree
and I tell her
she can help it grow
into another
big tree

Beast

Laura McDonald

Hear me roar at the moon in dead of night,
baritones of longing ring in mortals' ears,
hairs on their necks stiffen and curl,
now, one will see what man truly fears.

Legends of me are still told to this day,
razor teeth forever haunt men's dreams,
described as ferocious and loathing,
my claws will tear you apart at the seams.

Fierce golden eyes that pierce through shadows,
full moon nights filled with useless prayers,
beware, for when clock hands reach the witching hour,
I will no longer just be a product of your nightmares.

Love Hate

Dominic Studebaker

White
Wine
Sincere
Passion
Lights
Dim
Her
Him
Bed
Blankets
Guilt
Desire
Indecision
Temptation
Hands
Explore
Lips
Spot
Teeth
Bite
Carnal
Embrace
Peak
Embrace
Rogue
Monogamy
Sinful
Lust
Pure
Infatuation

Life / style

Five Poems

Laura Maxwell

[1]

Peach and chubby,
Small and grubby,
Intertwined with soft strands –
The bitter leaf,
The onion sweet,
Romulea Rosea strands –
Uprooted wild,
By brutish child,
The fragrance of the hills –
No leaf missed,
By hungry fists,
A mouth, the sweet earth fills –

[2]

She loves a lover that loves so long
as he doesn't love her love too long

[3]

Serrated steel
Meets soft flesh -
Silver, cold
To hot, wet -
Crimson spills
A deep breath -
The heart beats
The mind's dead -

[4]

I let my hair down
- in the water
I let my hair sway
- in the water
I let my hair drown
- in the water
I let my hair play
- in the water

Fish and clams don't mind me,
Frogs and snails are just fine, see?
My hair abundant, needs to be free,
My hair, I love it, can't you see?

-A crown, a cape, a novelty-

To be gently cleansed,
Caressed by the stream -
To be loving friends,
My hair and me -

My hair does know, too
- in the water
My hair does know, true
- in the water
My hair does know life
- in the water
My hair does know love
- in the water

[5]

To break the ocean's surface,
To grace the bluest sky -
To plunge the deepest depths,
To soar the highest, high!

Anywhere but here I want,
Anywhere is fine -
Anywhere but by my side,
Anywhere alive!

An Excerpt from ‘Back’ Then, ‘Back’ Now: The Back Family Memories Cookbook

Loretta Back Porter

Lori Porter (1947-2013) was a student of mine in creative writing in the mid-1990s. She was writing a lot of vignettes at the time about her childhood and family for a family memories cookbook that she self-published in 1999. The excerpt below is her introduction to that book.

Lori’s passion for writing and her innate friendliness and ready humor made her a joy to encounter in the classroom. Her book is a remarkable achievement – 220 pages, paperback with comb binding, with photos, prose reminiscences and recipes in nine food categories from appetizers to desserts. It required tremendous drive on Lori’s part to cultivate something of this scope and go from idea to manuscript to physical product. The book is a great touchstone of memory at that.

Lori and I remained friends after she earned her Associates Degree in 1998. She resided in St. Peters and worked as a staff member in the college’s Continuing Education department, retiring in 2012. She died of cancer in 2013. I visited her at her home five weeks before her death. We chatted convivially and the visit included a trip into her Elvis room. Yeah, Elvis. Story for another time. Right now we’re about to tour a spot on the map of southeast Missouri.

– Michael Kuelker

Down in Bollinger County, near the Bootheel of Missouri, is a 127-acre farm that lies along the deep green meandering Castor River near a literal wide spot in the road called Zalma, Missouri. The farm was homesteaded by my great-great-grandfather and has been owned by the Back family for four generations. I am a member of the fifth generation.

Zalma is a tiny town along southern Missouri’s Highway 51, situated 40 miles southwest of Cape Girardeau and 150 miles south of St. Louis. If he were still alive my grandfather, Charles Franklin Back Sr., would say that it has become too modern: but with two general stores, a post office, two gas stations, a restaurant and less than 200 residents, the 1990’s person would consider it a step back in history. Grandpa would say it’s too modern because you only need one general store, one gas station and there’s no need for a restaurant at all!

Even today, it is not unusual to drive the gravel streets and never see a single person, giving the impression of a ghost town or (at the very least) a town that is

closed for the day. However, if you do encounter a living soul, it is customary to wave, even though you don't know the person. It doesn't matter that you don't belong there, but it is important to act as if you do. I never hesitate to smile and wave because I know that if I took the time to stop and talk, I'd probably find that the person is a relative of mine: being rude to your kin could justify a front-page story in the Banner Press, the county newspaper. So if you ever make it to Zalma, be friendly, it's expected.

Leaving the main part of town, the traveler passes the old school house that my father, his siblings and a couple of his uncles attended. An expansion of the school complex has put Zalma on the map as neighboring towns bus their children there. Zalma has the only high school in a 20-mile radius. The original white stone school house remains, though the building that housed the original gymnasium burned down in the late sixties, taking with it the trophies that told of Zalma High School's athletic history. After passing the school, human population diminishes to a bare minimum as you pass large farms with houses only now and then. Deep woods flank the road on the (less than two mile) journey to the Back farm and soon you realize that you've entered that mysterious realm you've always heard about. God's country. If the car windows are rolled down, a strange smell permeates your olfactory nerve and puzzles the mind until you realize that what you're smelling is fresh air. You begin to think that you can actually see the oxygen produced by the plants and trees and you find yourself taking in long, deep cleansing breaths of this scent that is unfamiliar to the city dweller.

During the warm seasons you'll find flowers blooming along the road; flowers you probably won't be able to identify because they are wild flowers. There are Black-Eyed Susans, Queen's Lace, Wild Petunias, Goldenrod, Blue Bells (though these grow mostly near the river and creeks) and in June the Wild Roses bloom. This is the 'country' and it's okay to stop to pick them if you like. They belong to you and God. Though abundant, these flowers are more fragile than the hybrids you left behind in your yard in the city so, if you pick some, make sure you get them into water as soon as possible. Stopping to admire the flowers, you'll find that their fragrance is a contributing factor to the fresh air [scent] that you're breathing. If you drive this road slowly and methodically, as I do, by the time you arrive at the farm you're completely relaxed and the cares and stress of that other world have been left behind.

At the crest of the third steep hill from town, you'll find the driveway of the Back farm: still unpaved, exactly as my grandparents left in 1967 when their poor health necessitated their move to the town of Marble Hill, twenty miles away. The tin roofed house, built in 1888 on a rock foundation, has stood against the elements of time and standing before it you can almost hear the laughter and joy that once filled the five-room house. The house has evolved over its 110 years of existence:

the north bedroom and the screened back porch were added in 1892. In the early 1980s, the fourth generation installed the home's first indoor bathroom and the kitchen plumbing.

On the southeast side of the house is a barn that was built around 1936. As children, my sister Karen and I and our cousins Linda and Rhonda played in the hayloft when we tired of roaming the rest of the acreage. We loved to look out of the hayloft doorways for a panoramic view of the upper pasture, the sprawling hillsides and a great vantage point of the road leading to Grandma and Grandpa's house. There is a pond in front of the barn that we used to seine for crawdads to be used for fishing bait. Today the family stocks the pond with catfish: this allows the youngest family members the fun of fishing. If the caught catfish are large enough, they're transported to the river in order to stock it for future years of catching 'the big one.'

There was once a meat smokehouse at the back of the house but this was torn down due to lack of use. Memories of smoked bacon and ham (for breakfast) makes me long for the days of the smokehouse. There was also an underground fruits cellar on the side of the house, but this was filled in and covered: snakes kept getting in. This is one thing I don't miss.

The heavily wooded property includes fifteen acres of river frontage, five pastures and a huge mounded area of soil that was once an Indian burial ground. This mound is at the north edge of one of the pastures and the grass there is a deeper, darker green and the soil is ebony black. My father, Charles Franklin Back Jr., explained the reason for this. It was the custom of wandering tribes to carry soil from their original homes with them. When a member of the tribe died and was buried with his most prized possessions, he was also buried with this small amount of 'home soil.' Today, as in my childhood, you can walk in this area and find Indian arrowheads that have worked their way to the surface of the soil over the past 100-plus years. For as long as I can remember there has always been speculation on the valuable treasures that may be buried in that mound, but my grandfather would never allow anyone to disturb (what we always referred to as) the 'Indian mound.' It was Grandpa's belief that to disturb a grave was to desecrate that final resting place.

At the lower end of the pasture near the mound is a spring-fed creek, a favorite spot for all of us kids, where we explored the miracles of nature. We'd find tadpoles, frogs and minnows, ending up in trouble when we'd return to the house with wet clothes and muddy shoes. Our moms would make us change our clothes while chiding us about getting muddy, but once we donned fresh duds we were off again. There was so much more exploration to be done that we were like young Magellans in our quest.

North of the creek, on a high hill above the Castor River, is a cabin built by family members in 1950, when I was three years old. Known as the 'clubhouse' it was built to provide additional sleeping space when the whole family came together on the farm. The full length of the front of the building has a screened porch overlooking the river where (even today) you'll find a refrigerator that operates on kerosene. There is a wash pan (to wash your hands and face in) and two kitchen sinks for dish washing. The cabin has no electricity or running water so you have to bring large containers of water and heat it in order to wash the dishes.

The interior (one large room) has three beds, a hide-a-bed sofa, a wood stove (for heat), a kitchen dinette set and shelving that holds the [propane] gas stove-tops for cooking. The cabinets contain 'odds and ends' china, silverware and pans contributed by family members. Light is provided by Coleman lanterns and old kerosene lamps that once provided light in my grandparents' home.

The walls are decorated with fishing equipment: gigs, dip nets, scales (for weighing fish), rods & reels and an occasional poster or picture someone found amusing or artistic. One picture is an [artistic] family member's charcoal rendering of the original outhouse (a new one was built a few years ago) and because it had two seats, the artist, Bob Allendorf, entitled the picture "Castor River Two-Holer." Time here is kept by a wind-up alarm clock, the sun in the sky and a record book that everyone writes in when they visit the cabin. In this book you can write about whatever you want. Some just give a laundry list of how many fish they caught while they were there, and how many fish others did NOT catch while they were there. So I guess you could also call it a "brag book."

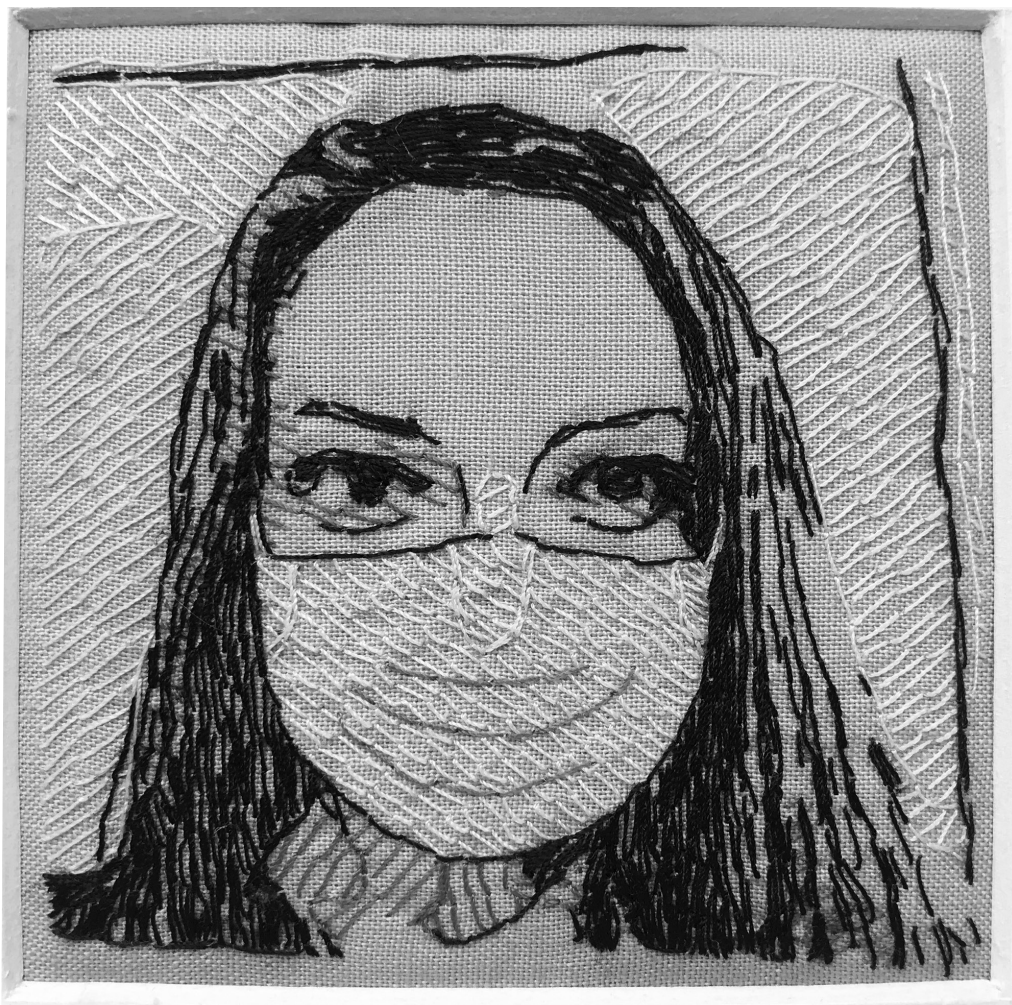
When I was a child, we'd spend my father's two weeks' vacation (from work) at the clubhouse. Dad would go hunting in the deep woods and take us fishing and swimming. We'd spend the whole day fishing for sun perch to bait the trout lines at night, eat a picnic lunch on a sandbar, and swim in the shallow areas of the 25-foot-deep river. At night we'd sit around a chunk fire near the cabin and roast hot dogs and marshmallows on sticks my father cut from the trees. As we listened to night sounds of crickets chirping, frogs 'ribbiting' (on the river) and coyotes howling in the distance, Dad told us stories of his youth on the farm and wisdoms taught him by his parents.

Today my childhood memories are as vivid as the precious moments when they were actually occurring and in 1993, I decided that the time had come to put them in writing for future generations. At a family reunion in a St. Louis County park, the idea of a family memories cookbook began. I asked everyone to send me their special recipes and cherished memories of the farm and the family. Two years later the annual family reunion site was moved to the Zalma farm from which those recollections sprang and now, every September, the Back family gathers there to enjoy good food, music and shared memories.

What follows is a collection of the recipes and history my family has shared with me. I cannot vouch for the perfection of the recipes because I haven't kitchen-tested them all, but I can wholeheartedly endorse the loving story contained in these pages. It is the story of an American family. A family that survived the Great Depression and the turbulent sixties while still holding onto the values that were taught over a century ago. As the author of this book, I will serve as the narrator of the Back family history, but the reader will find that this story is told by many voices. Even those deceased ones that echo in my memory.

As a mother and grandmother I know that for our children, memories are being made during each moment of every day. That is why the recipes in this book go back as far as my great-grandmother, while others are favorites of the [youngest] seventh generation who are still growing up and gaining their own history – their own 'good old days.' To account for this I have entitled this book 'Back Then, 'Back Now.'

Loretta Back Porter
1998



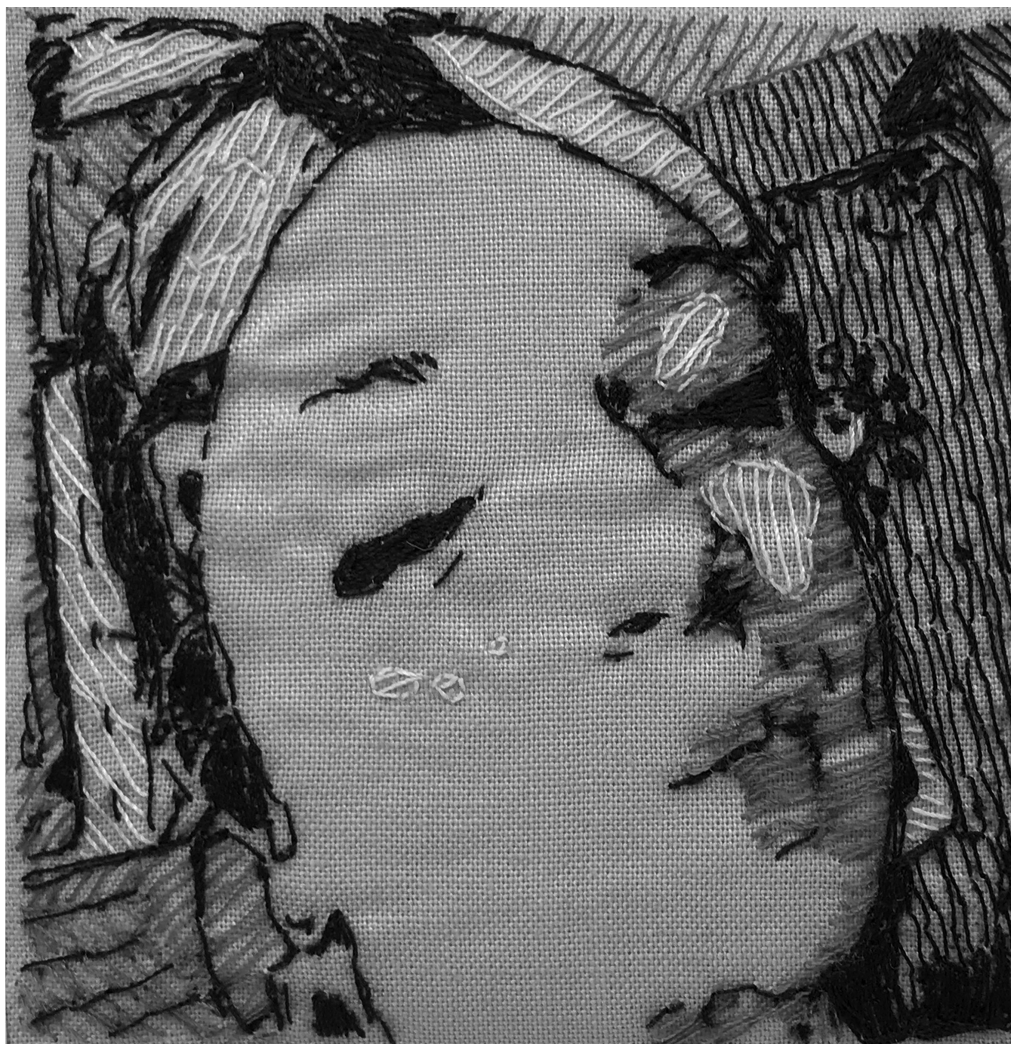
#therealme #Covid19

Embroidery on Cotton by Christine A. Holtz, 3"x3", 2020



#therealme #6

Embroidery on Cotton by Christine A. Holtz, 3"x3", 2019



#therealme #8

Embroidery on Cotton by Christine A. Holtz, 3"x3", 2019

Rite of Passage in Words Music & Art

Jennifer Stohs LeGrand & Carol Stohs

Rite of Passage

This song came through me in 2016. 'Rite of Passage' is about a struggling musician. The song is connected to artwork also titled 'Rite of Passage' by Carol Stohs, my Mom.

– Jennifer Stohs LeGrand

Verse 1

Here's free tickets. Come to the show. No discrimination. All are welcome you know.
Collaboration on original sound. Dance together, mixing in the crowd.
Invitation with good time guarantee. Liberating force, opportunities. A dance party,
spread the word. Friday night, wear your favorite pearls.
Ebb and flow to the Mid-eastern beat. Baby let go. Dance with me.

Verse 2

Post on facebook. Sing open mic. Go to my page. Click on the like. Fame and
fortune
define who you are. Money in your pocket will make you a star.
Got no money. Got a dream. Sleeping beauty, no shaking esteem. Join the party.
Let the music bring you in. No fear when grooving begins.
Music is my therapy. Dance away hostility.

Verse 3

Stash your money in the cookie jar. Dream a song, hit top of the charts. Cast a spell
with magical charm. Seize the moment like a rising star.
Snap your fingers. Clap your hands. Stomp pretty feet for the candy man. Dark eyes
stare at vibrating hips. Seal the deal with a booty fix.
Express yourself at this badass club. It's a dance party and music is your drug.

Ending

Ooo eee aaa ooo eee aaa ooo eee aaa hahaha
Ooo eee aaa ooo eee aaa ooo eee aaa hahaha

Rite of Passage

Jenn Stohs

Intro

♩ = 88

Gm Eb Bb F D Gm Eb Bb F D

Verse 1

5 Gm Eb Bb F D Gm Eb

Here's free tick-ets. Come to the show no dis crim-in a - tion All are

8 Bb F D Gm Eb Bb F D Gm Eb

wel - come you know col-la-bor - a - tion on or i - gin-al sound. Dance to-ge-ther

12 Bb F D Gm Eb Bb F D

mixing in the crowd In - vi - ta - tion with good time gua - ran - te - e

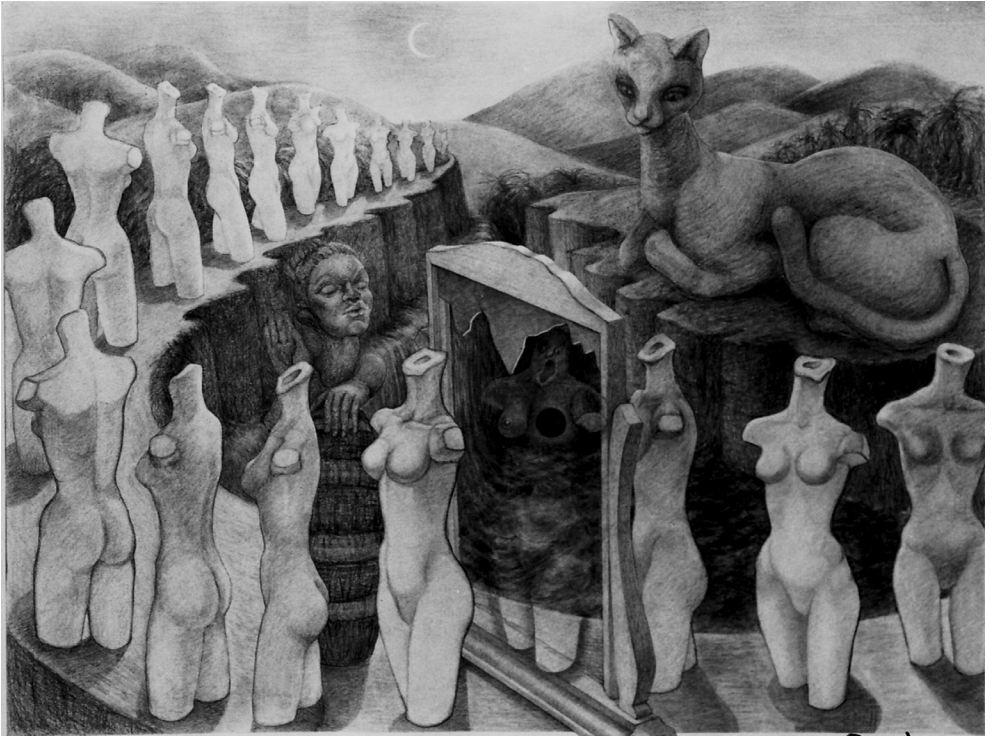
15 Gm Eb Bb F D Gm Eb

li-ber-a-ting force op - por - tun - t - ties. A dance par - ty

Rite of Passage

Carol Stohs

This large surrealistic drawing (34 ½" X 43 ½") reveals a watchful but helpless mother figure who is disguised as a cat. From afar, she sees her vulnerable young daughter walking on a pathway while she is listening to the compelling sound of an exotic drum beat. As she cautiously keeps walking, that beguiling rhythm becomes more and more enticing. When she approaches the source of the seductive beat, she still cannot see the drummer because he is sheltered in a nearby space just off the path ahead. Because the persistent drumming has hypnotized her, she mindlessly steps into a jagged, broken glass mirror which has blocked her path and vision. She is caught inside her Rite of Passage. When her scream of terror interrupts the astonished drummer, he drops his beloved drum to run to rescue her. He takes her to his dwelling place where he gently cares for her until she is well and ready to continue her journey of what to do next. The disguised cat mother continues her watch.



Rite of Passage
Carol Stohs

Inside the Thin Blue Line

Dominic Studebaker

White light, blue light, red light, go
Five white Tahoe's behind a foe
Hard left, hard right, straight away, go
black chopper tracks like a crow
We see you, no matter where you go
News follows for the 6 o'clock show
You bail, we bail, here we go
Ran away, try to stay low
But we see everywhere you go
Hard left, hard right, into a vaco
Black coat, blue coat, fur coats a go
We say fetch, fur won't say no
Out the back door you go
Bang bang you throw
Bang bang, we go
We are only human you know
That's the last place we wanted to go
The news got their show
We just want to go
We have to do this again tomorrow

Velvet Snips

Cammie Dagg

forever is mighty
so is your guns

we was pretty
b4 the blood

so is your guns...
a minty taste or an effervescent tingling?
b4 the blood
grows like an invasive species

a minty taste or an effervescent tingling
is it here yet?
grows like an invasive species
velvet snips + clenched fists

is it here yet?

we was pretty
velvet snips and. clenched fists

forever is mighty

Her

Cammie Dagg

4/1/20

in solemn breezes
on carpeted shores
Her.

foggy sidewalks to grade 2
Stuck in the hole of an inner tube
Her.

folding my hands with
no hope
but for love
but only in senior
Her.

when i splash her on baking soda soaked shores
getting me back with thunderstorms and pillow fights that night
Her.

Drowning

Brianna Barrett

She takes off her clothes
Every piece that falls to the cold tile floor
A weight is lifted off her shoulders
She stares at her reflection in the mirror
She wonders to herself, "When will I love my body?"
Her eyes are heavy and stained with tears

She slowly slips her feet into the warm water
With every part of her body filling up with water
She slides her head down and closes her eyes
She has gone underneath
Listening to the echoes of the world
So many sounds cluster together
But there is no one around
"Just a little bit longer," she says
She takes a deep breath and slides up from the water

Taking a towel she dries herself off
Turns once more, glances in the mirror
This time there are no bruises or scars
As if they were never real
She believed lies that almost killed her
Her own thoughts drowning her
With every second that goes by
Her life as precious as a ticking bomb

SCC Coffeehouse

prose by Heidi Grohe-Rood

benediction poems & photo by Christina Gant

COFFEEHOUSE: a tradition @ SCC; a literary endeavor,
open-microphone-style, produced by the SCC English
department, featuring poetry and prose as well
as other original artistic performances

I Came, I Read, I Ate a Cookie

Heidi Grohe-Rood

I opened the door after leaving the Coffeehouse on the way to my car. The fresh air washed over me as I listened to the sound of my boots clapping against the sidewalk. It's the end of April [2019] and just yesterday I was wearing flip flops. It rained almost all day today, so I wore boots. "It's spring, though," I keep telling myself. I have to remember to expect a fair amount of rain in the spring. I got in my car, buckled my seatbelt and turned on the radio. Surfing the stations for a song I wanted to listen to or sing along to, I kept my thumb on the button on my steering wheel to advance to the other stations. Driving home I enjoyed the clear sky for a change when naturally it starts to rain. It rained the rest of the way home.

As I was driving, I reflected on the poems and prose I had heard at the Coffeehouse. The readings were sad or explained anxiety, depression or mental illness. There were poems about nature, travel, love, loneliness, and seeing inside ourselves trying to find the person we really are. "There are so many good poems," I thought to myself. Sometimes I don't feel like I'm as good as I'd like to be. Other times I give myself a mental "thumbs up." Tonight, I had mixed feelings. Writing about nature always helps me feel more positive. Lately over the last couple of months I've noticed that I have been pushing my tongue against my teeth from stress off and on during the day. Apparently, I even do it when I'm sleeping because I'll wake up sometimes and feel the push. I could stand here and try to analyze why I'm doing this but there's no point. Everybody has problems. I just wish I could stop. I don't know what will happen to my teeth in the long run. I've never done anything like this. It's scary to do something in your sleep that you're so stressed over that even sleep isn't really sleep. I wonder how long I hold the push on my teeth. How long do I sleep before I do it again? I've done it several times since I've been sitting here writing this.

Someone once told me that people can look totally fine on the outside, but that doesn't mean they are on the inside. I try to remind myself of that when I talk to people. You never know what their breaking point is. I hope all the people who feel inadequate in some way that poured out their feelings in front of strangers and friends at the Coffeehouse remember not to fall into the pit of judgment that some people will be determined to lavish upon them. Whether they realize it or not, the people who are judging others and making them feel unworthy are already flawed. Someone who has to tear people down to make themselves feel better is nothing but a bully. So, I'm glad people feel comfortable enough to release their burdens to people who truly understand but hopefully, they'll remember the heartless, thoughtless people who want to judge them aren't worthy of knowing them.

On Benediction Poems

The word “benediction” comes from the Latin *benedicere* (*bene* =well; *dicere*=say) which means “to wish well or bless,” especially for a congregation at the end of a religious service.

Professor Kuelker’s use of this word to describe these poems is an appropriate description.

While not a religious service, the SCC Coffeehouse can certainly be called a congregation; it’s a place where people come together, often sharing deeply personal feelings and revelations. And for many, writing itself is a spiritual, transcendent experience.

I can’t claim credit for the idea behind these poems. It all started many years ago with Professor Jacqueline Gray. From time to time, she would read the last poem of the night at Coffeehouse – a poem she composed during the event using something from everyone’s performance. As often happens over time, as Coffeehouse has evolved, things changed, and few of us even recalled these delightful moments; I wanted to revive the tradition.

During this process I found myself absorbed like never before, focused on every word, every moment of each performance. As I took notes of words and phrases that caught my attention, a tone or theme seemed to emerge – the first few performances of the night created the roots and the rest seemed to grow almost organically, evolving throughout the evening and taking on personality. The poems that resulted from this process seem to capture the mood of the particular event.

While I may have pulled the words together, these poems belong to all who contributed. As artists and writers we draw inspiration from each other and everything around us – it’s both an individual and collective effort. These poems are my first two Coffeehouse Benedictions. I’m looking forward to continuing this tradition, being inspired by the talented writers on our campus and in our community.

Close to the Sun

Christina Gant

- inspired by Coffeehouse, November 2019

The muse is here.
She has cast a spell over this room,
planted seeds. We speak
of a weekend lover, of alcohol, and fear;
we learn to see the beauty in life.
She shows us the way of brightness:
roots, pine trees, and undeclared space –
things both known and unknown.

Her gesture, a messy handful of stones –
carnelian and emeralds –
an opera of roads and gardens and desert.
And here, we all receive her inheritance –
the ordinary heirlooms of inspiration
that we somehow change to porcelain,
to gold, and cast into flight.
We only have our humble words,
our strength to continue, to find our purpose,
to craft our stories
despite times of disbelief and suffering.

Let us be inspired by each other,
be touched, know continuity.
Let us discover the important things.
Let us charge into the thick of battle,
pick up our pens, reveal our bare skin,
play a game of hearts, leave an imprint,
write an epilogue –
experience awe.



Cafe Mocha and the Blank Page (Burgate Coffee, Canterbury)
photo by Christina Gant

Write of Passage

Christina Gant

- inspired by Coffeehouse, February 2020

Each time we create it's a rite of passage –
pulling words, notes, colors from the space
between breaths and brush strokes; a pattern from chaos.
We grasp at the changing colors of life –
hold fast to the gardens we write, sing, draw
or paint into being; every fear, friend, car, cup of coffee,
mountain we climb, or loss we endure
becomes part of us. When we are robbed of time, gifted with love,
cleansed by confession, or conflicted in heart and mind,
when we can name things and know –
the moon, the owl and crow –
then we can overcome, know wisdom,
and we can truly create
instead of destroy.

The Fiction of Joe Baumann

'Morphology' – a short story

**'Something very bizarre is happening
in the world we normally inhabit' – an interview**

Morphology

Joe Baumann

As they'd expected, the line for the funhouse was longer than anything else at the carnival. Matthew and Evan waited for at least twenty minutes, watching as people exited the funhouse in all sorts of absurd shapes, the evening air tinged with the spun sugar of cotton candy and the blitzed fat of overcooked hotdogs. They wondered aloud who would want to turn themselves into a squat, pumpkin-shaped thing for a few hours when there were so many other possibilities, like being a giant or, as was the most popular choice, super-muscular like someone from Baywatch. A few people went with the Picasso approach, mishmashing their features. One woman, in a tight red dress and wearing matching lipstick, turned herself into something of a sidewinder, her body like an S.

"She belongs in Sesame Street," Matthew said.

"The freaky, nightmare edition," Evan said.

These words, the freaky, nightmare edition, would echo with Matthew, because they were the last thing Evan said before he turned to his father and blinked at him. There were only two people in line in front of them, a pair of college kids, holding hands. They wore matching jeans and plain black t-shirts. Matthew wondered what they would choose to look like for a few hours.

"Dad," Evan said, leaning in close. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I was wondering." He chewed on his lip. The ticket taker pulled back the curtain over the entryway and gestured for the college kids to go inside. Neither Evan nor Matthew moved forward.

"I was wondering," Evan repeated, "if you could start calling me Evie."

★

Matthew tried to rattle the words the freaky, nightmare edition out of his head like they were water trapped in his ear after a swim. Before he could say anything to Evan—Evie—the attendant gesticulated for them to enter the funhouse, so Evan—Evie—spun and held out their tickets and ducked inside. Matthew followed.

He wished Eddie, who was probably just deplaning in Iowa for the big linguistics conference he attended every year, was with them. Eddie would know what to say. Matthew did know a part of what to say: "Yes. Of course. We'll call you whatever you want." But he hadn't said it yet. He knew there needed to be more,

and he knew that there was a particular way he was supposed to say the words, but he wasn't sure about the proper inflection. That inflection, he thought, was important, because it could, maybe, mean life or death. Not for him or for Eddie, but for their child, this gentle fifteen-year-old who played soccer and—Matthew knew—drank one beer at parties and on some Friday nights still went with his father to a carnival.

The funhouse was dark, the walls draped in blood red paint. Maybe they were curtains, heavy and thick. Matthew couldn't tell. The pathway was narrow, the only light coming from pinhead-sized fairy lights affixed above each of the mirrors. Matthew watched as Evan—Evie, call him (her?) Evie—stopped in front of each one, looking at the twisty reflection with a cocked head, then moved along. Matthew didn't bother. He didn't want to change, even temporarily.

He watched his child and felt something blooming inside him, like a tree was pitted in his stomach and its roots were extending into his bowels, the branches shooting up through his esophagus and tickling his lungs. This wasn't excitement—or maybe it was. He watched Evie—yes, he'd call his kiddo Evie, if that's what his kiddo wanted—twist and turn and glance in one of the mirrors that gave the body rippling effects, like it was cut into five stacked blocks that teetered on one another, the second and fourth jutting out like buckteeth.

"I'm not sure what I should go with here, and we're moving through this place fast," Evie said.

"We can slow down."

"I don't want to hold up the line."

"We waited patiently. The people behind us will, too."

Evie smiled.

"I still think I want to use boy pronouns," he said. "If you think that's okay."

"Of course I do."

Evie moved on to the next mirror, which made his head bulge. "And I don't want to cut my hair or have boobs or anything."

"Okay."

"You're probably wondering why the name change then."

"I'm just wondering if you really think magnifying your head for a few hours feels like the right choice."

"Of course it doesn't." Evie blinked, his eyelids the size of Post-It notes. "My pores. Yikes."

"There's a reason we encourage face washing in our house."

Evie ticked a fingernail against his nose. "Understood." He stood up straight, head shrinking just-so in the mirror. He took off for the next mirror.

His son had not had this kind of bounce in his step for a while. Matthew pictured Evie, then still Evan, slinking up to the dining room table for breakfast and dinner, plopping down like a bag of concrete dropped to a curb. Eddie would give Evan a sidelong glance as he ate his green beans, watching him pick at a mountain of mashed potatoes—once his favorite; now, he had no favorites, it seemed—and sighing when asked what was wrong. A flutter of a hand, fingers wavering like hummingbird wings, and then nothing. Off to soccer practice, or to study for a geometry test, or to write an English paper, which both Eddie and Matthew, in sync, offered to help with, dismissed by the absence of any response but their son's tramping feet as he shuffled down the hallway.

When Evie paused before another mirror, one that bulked up his neck and narrowed his waist, he turned to Matthew and said, "I can see the appeal."

"The proportions are all off, though."

"Yeah, but there's movement toward the ideal here."

"Movement toward the ideal?"

Evie turned to his father, the glimmer from the tiny lights above the mirror catching in his eyes. Or, Matthew thought, maybe it was something else: a release, a shift, something let go or added on.

"Everyone has a body fantasy. This is all about finding ours."

"Finding yours. I've already got mine."

Evie frowned and turned to Matthew. "Really?"

"I'm in pretty good shape for a forty-something, thank you very much." He tapped his stomach. "No beer gut."

"You've got pretty spindly thighs."

"Ouch." Matthew did an air squat.

Evie smiled. "I'm just kidding." He turned away from the mirror. "Thanks, Dad."

"For what?"

"For just saying, 'Of course.'"

"Should I have said something else?"

Evie sauntered to the next mirror, where his hips widened out like he was a kite. "Not that I can think of. But there were lots of things I was glad you didn't say."

"Like what?"

Evie did a pirouette. "I kind of like the movement of this one."

"You look like a piece of origami."

"One of those paper fortune tellers? Or one of those hopping frogs?"

"Something in between, I guess. I couldn't think of anything else to say."

"You said plenty." He frowned. "Getting back into the car would be tricky with this one, wouldn't it?"

"We could toss you in the back."

Evie rolled his eyes. "I'm your kid, not the groceries."

"Just trying to offer practical solutions."

They followed the funhouse hallway's sharp turn. Far away, Matthew could see the exit. Evie chewed his lip and stared into another mirror. This one made his feet gigantic and his head the size of a softball. His eyes were dark marbles.

"I don't like that at all," Matthew said. "It does no justice to your bone structure."

"I think that's the gayest thing you've ever said, Dad."

"Well, every now and then a blind pig finds an acorn."

Evie laughed. "Does that saying even apply?" He turned toward the exit. "Getting desperate here. Not many options left. I'm not sure I like that we can't go back without upsetting the flow of the place."

"You don't have to pick one if you don't want to."

"Then what was the point of coming?" Evie turned around in slow motion. In the mirror, his tiny head craned over his huge shoulders to look at his back side in the mirror. "My calves look weird."

"Couldn't the point of coming be to see that you don't want to be different?"

Evie stared at him. The words—freak, nightmare edition—came back to Matthew, crawling along his skull like a tarantula in tap shoes.

"It's only for a few hours, anyway," Matthew said. Evie nodded.

They kept at it for the last half-dozen mirrors, Matthew not bothering to look at how his own body buoyed and shifted and stretched and squished. He kept his focus on Evie's movements, the way he frowned at himself, trying to find the perfect something frowning back in the sharp, reflective surface of the mirrors. Nothing seemed satisfying.

They arrived at the famous, most popular mirror. Evie's shoulders were suddenly juiced, his chest giant, quads the size of redwood trees. He looked boxy, in Matthew's estimation. Like one of those turn-of-the-century musclemen in singlets, handlebar

mustaches sprouting from their upper lips. Except this was worse, like Evie had been inflated with a bicycle pump and would pop at any moment.

Evie sighed. "This doesn't look right. None of them do."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried. I just—I don't know. I'd be disappointed. To have come here and just, you know, leave."

Matthew couldn't help himself. He reached out and grabbed Evie's hand. "Never be that, kiddo. There's nothing to be disappointed by."

That's when Evie started to cry. It began as a low hiccup, so that Matthew thought he might just be coughing, but then Evie's shoulders stuttered and a quiet whine of noise escaped, something he clearly wanted to hold in, trap in his chest beneath his ribs. His entire body shook and he snorted out a sob and Matthew gathered him up, holding him tighter than he had in years, brushing off the quick shock of how strong and thick his son was, with shoulders Matthew barely recognized, a tight back, the press of muscle in his chest apparent through his t-shirt.

"You've been working out," Matthew said. Stupid.

"Coach," Evie said through tears. "Coach has us on a training plan."

"That's good. That's good stuff, kid."

"Do I stay on the team? Can I?"

"Oh. That. Well, if you want to."

Evie nodded into Matthew's chest. Matthew was suddenly aware of other carnival-goers; he felt their eyes on him and Evie like they were under a hot spotlight, two actors trapped on stage in a play where both has lost their lines.

"I thought this would help," Evie said. "I'm so dumb."

Matthew pried Evie away and held him at arm's length. "You're lots of things, but dumb isn't one of them. Don't say that, either." He hugged Evie again. "Never ever, okay? Or I'll tell your father."

Evie let out a laugh. "Anything but that."

The sobbing subsided. Matthew gave Evie a pat on the back and steered him to the next mirror.

"How do you know I didn't want to look like that, all muscular and stuff?"

"Because I think you don't actually want to change what you look like at all. Not for just a short while, at least."

"How do you know?"

"Just a hunch."

"But even I don't know, still."

"That's okay. There's so little that anyone actually knows." He squeezed Evie's shoulders, still a bit bewildered by how taut they were. When did they grow like this? How had Evie expanded in this way without Matthew's notice? What else, he wondered, has he missed? When Eddie returned, he'd have to give Evie a thorough examination.

"I just feel like I'm wasting time," Evie said, looking into the next mirror, the second-to-last. Evening sodium light peered in here, so close to the exit. The college kids ahead of them were giggling and they let in more night noise and smell as they threw aside the tent flap leading back out to the carnival midway, their temporary transformations set.

"Of course you're not wasting time. Has your dad ever told you about morphology?"

"Morphology?"

"It's one of his linguistics terms."

"Oh. No, not really."

"Well, basically, all words are made up of smaller parts. With most words, the way you change their meaning requires just a change of a small part."

"Yeah?" Neither of them looked closely in the mirror, so they shuffled to the last one. A bored-looking carny waited for them to announce their intent to exit. He sat on a stool, back bent and craven.

"Yep. For example, to turn a verb into a noun, all you do, in English at least, is add -er or -or to the end."

"Doesn't sound like a whole lot."

"It isn't."

Evie frowned into the final mirror. "I just look like me in this one."

The carny let out a low, manufactured cough. Both Matthew and Evie turned to look at him.

"It's for people who change their minds. Doesn't happen much, though," the carny said in a growly smoker's voice. His fingers were tinged with oil stains, and his bright yellow shirt pulsed in the near-dark. He gave Evie and Matthew the once-over. "You know you don't get no refunds if you haven't made a choice, right?"

"That's fine," Matthew said.

"You'll have to get back in line if you want to try again."

Matthew said nothing. Evie was staring at himself in the mirror, scanning with more intensity than he had at any of the other mirrors. Matthew watched his eyes lower at incremental ticks. He tried to imagine what his child was seeing as his eyes passed over the reflection of his shoulders, his chest, his slim hips, the little flare of his soccer player legs, his strong ankles and calves. Matthew knew, again, that he should say something, banish any thoughts of freaky, of nightmare, of, even, edition. Because he saw something keen and smart and powerful, full of a beauty and a sorrow that were precious and delicate. He saw something confused but capable.

"That won't be necessary," he said to the carny. "I don't think we'll need to get back in line."

The carny shrugged. Evie, finally, turned to Matthew and gave a small nod, his eyes catching the fairy light. Leaning forward, the carny pulled open the curtain, letting the flashing glitz of the carnival, its sounds of screaming joy and its smells of fried dough and exhaust fumes, all come crashing into the funhouse. Evie paused, framed against the outward din. With a squeeze along the shoulder Matthew pushed him forward, keeping his hand on Evie so that he could, if nothing else, at least steer him this one time, through the crowd and homeward.

'Something very bizarre is happening in the world we normally inhabit' –

An Interview with Joe Baumann

Joe Baumann is Assistant Professor of English at St. Charles Community College, where he teaches literature and creative writing. He is an intensely prolific author of many published works and he has been a catalyst in the English department for his intrepid teaching and writing and associated functions.

Since joining the faculty at SCC, Baumann developed and was instrumental in implementing an 18-hour certificate program for creative writing. In spring 2019, having secured funds through an arts grant, Baumann set in motion the Missouri Writers Series. Three regional writers – Allison Coffelt, Jamie D'Agostino, and Meagan Cass – visited SCC creative writing classes for readings, discussion of writerly craft and Q&A during the day and gave public readings in the evening. Baumann is the founder and the editor-in-chief of *The Gateway Review*, a journal which publishes magic realism, surrealism and the new fabulism twice annually. Baumann is the author of *Ivory Children* (Red Bird Chapbooks 2013). In 2019 he was named a Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction.

Baumann recently completed a cycle of 10 stories in which the Biblical plagues are visited upon the contemporary world. One of them has just been published as a stand-alone chapbook, *Terranium*, by The Head and Hand Press. Baumann's short stories have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize three times.

The interview took place June 5, 2020.

– Michael Kuelker

Your stories are a RIOT. I want to explore that with you. Your short stories break down order and yet they have such control on your part in terms of bringing forth a narrative. So when you break down order, how then do you determine a center-point, a guide on how to accomplish the story?

I often don't know the answer to that question for an individual story when I start. When I start writing a story... As I like to describe it is I like to write about very weird things. Things where something very bizarre is happening often times in the world we normally inhabit. What I often do is I come up with some wacky premise and just kind of start writing and I don't know where I'm headed, but more often than not, at some point I will write a sentence or have a character think about something, and a little switch will go off inside of me and I'll go, "Oh, there it is. That's the center-piece. That's what this story is quote-unquote is 'about.' And then I'm able to circle back once I have a full draft and really have that center point in mind in deciding

what stays, what goes, what needs to get elaborated on, what needs to get cut down. And so that's how I end up there.

So I almost never actually know what that anchoring thing is going to be going into writing something. Sometimes I do but oftentimes I don't. I kind of force myself to stumble around for a while until I find something that makes me go, 'Oh! There it is.'

So in 'Orbit,' that strangely compelling blowhole of Fergus McMillan's – was that the place where it started?

That was the premise that kicked things off. Whenever I sit down to start a story, I just come up with some goofy weird thing. And I can almost never remember after I've written them what made me come up with that starting point ... so if you're hoping to find that out, I might disappoint you. For this particular story some person is staring at the back of this guy's head and he's got this weird, like, growth/blowhole-looking thing and it went from there, and at some moment in writing that story, I realized that, 'oh wait, the girl that's looking at him is in love with him despite these things that she sees about him that shouldn't make her be in love with him. That then became the center-point, and I re-circled the story re-thinking about that.

So much is happening internally with the characters inhabiting your fiction, including that woman.

Yeah, and when I talk about the center-point, the thing that clicks, it's almost always some internal kind of thing. Most of the time that weird premise I come up with is something external, so a character having a blowhole or a funhouse existing that lets people to transform themselves. Those come very quickly. And I tell my students this all the time, you can write an entertaining story that only relies on 'here's this wacky premise,' but I've always thought that to tell a really great story, you need there to be something meaningful that's happening inside somebody. Most of the time that's the part that I am trying to stumble upon, and then my goal is to make that the center of the piece, whatever is going on under the surface for somebody.

It comes as a surprise to that female character who's looking at the blowhole how powerful her feelings are and where they're located in her. And I love the ending:

A pleasing nausea, blending sour-sweet vertigo and the coppery taste of pressure placed on a blue-black bruise, followed her for a week. So, she tells herself, she'll admire Fergus from afar, waiting for his blowhole to whisper her name, to create a gust of air that the two of them can ride up into the sky, where they'll be able to taste the stars and marry the moonlight in the wordless black, whirling an elliptic track around the sun in a silent vacuum, a place where sight and smell count for nothing. (Baumann "Orbit")

Such a beautiful close. At the same time, you seem exquisitely attuned to the value of the kick ass opening line. Two of my favorite from your stories come from "Takers," which opens "A girl kisses a boy and takes his earliest memory,"

a fascinating idea, and “Numbskull,” which begins ‘Tobias Smallworthy stabbed stabbed himself in the eyeballs at Ada Warner’s annual kegger.’

How hard do you work on the opening line?

If somebody wants to be able to figure out where I first got the idea for a story, you can usually look to that first line. I like to just sort of throw readers into the premise of the story right away. Part of that stems from, I edit my own literary magazine and from reading 100-plus submissions in a several month period, you kind of know very early on, at least I do as an editor, if I want to keep reading a story. And so to me as a writer, it’s really important to get a reader invested even if it’s just through them going, ‘okay, I’d really like to know what that means,’ or whatever it is that gets them into a story very, very early. Most of the time, at least when I’m drafting, and it doesn’t often go away. We talk about revision. That first line almost always sticks around because that’s usually the first thing I’ve come up with.

For example, in that story “Numbskull,” I had just gotten this picture in my head, and again I don’t know where it came from, of a kid stabbing himself in the eye with a fork but it not hurting him. And so that’s where I started the story. Because if that’s the first thing that got into my head, I feel like that’s the first thing that should get into a reader’s head. So I always try to make sure I have something that grabs a reader right away. That’s where you can see into my own writing head by just looking at those opening lines, for sure.

And then there’s the story (“Do to Me What I Can Do to You”) where Ricky wakes up and he’s minus his left hand. What is it about the transformation of the body that makes you curious as a writer to write through these ideas?

If I would describe the one obsession that has wended its way through my writing for the last several years, the weirdness does often have to do with a person’s body.

If I could articulate a conscious reason for that – there could be all sorts of subconscious unconscious problems that I’m not aware of that I’m revealing about myself – but I think part of it has to do with our physical bodies are so connected, whether we want them to be or not to our interior selves. There’s all sorts of talk about body image and then there’s also just, we can’t always control our physical selves when we talk about illness, injury, those sorts of things. I’ve found that it’s a good through-way to do that sort of pairing of the whatever’s going on on the outside with what’s going on on the inside. So whatever it is that a character is experiencing internally, I find that having the external thing have to do with some bizarre transformation that’s happening to their body is a really nice through-way into linking those two things together.

You are very much right that I’ve done a lot with the human body. Part of the reason I think for that is there’s just so many things that can be wrong with it or different about it, and so the possibilities seem very, at the moment, still feel quite endless to me as a writer in terms of those things.

Where did that curiosity and delight about magic realism come from? When did that develop for you?

There's a couple of points in my, we'll call it literary career, which includes my academic career, that sort of gets to that. Probably the first of them, as I think is the case for a lot of writers, I had a high school teacher who introduced us to a variety of very unique writers. When I was a senior in high school, for my college credit English class, our big final research project was to research an "ism" and write about it. I can't remember how I stumbled on it but I stumbled on magic realism, was the thing I researched.

So I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when I was 18. Read a bunch of Jorge Luis Borges' work. And that was one starting point. Then the other big ones, when I was a graduate student at Truman, I took a studies in short story course where we read six writers' short stories, and let's see if I can remember who they all were. There was Edgar Allen Poe, who doesn't really write magic realism but certainly the supernatural was part of his work. Same thing with Nathaniel Hawthorne. But then we read a bunch a stuff by Borges, Julio Cortázar, Clarice Lispector, these writers who all wrote in the bizarre or the strange.

So that was point number two. And then point number three was probably when I was doing my Ph.D., the writer in residence in Louisiana was a woman named Kate Bernheimer. She does a lot of work in fairy tales. And I don't really do exactly the same thing, but she sort of deluged us with this writing that was in this genre. I got finally, much later than I should have, introduced to the work of Amy Bender, who is an iconic writer of the magic realist genre in contemporary writing. Of course there's Jeanette Winterson and a whole host of others that I got introduced to from her. And I just found that when I started writing these things for myself, something clicked.

I had spent a lot of time before that experience writing more straight realism, and I was okay at it, but I wasn't as good at it as I became at writing in this sort of bizarre, weird vein once I knew it was a thing I could try. That's the course that charted me to this style of writing.

One of your recent projects is a cycle of stories on plagues. I find that fascinating particularly because of our current historical moment. What drew you to the Biblical plagues and to write about all ten of them?

The project stemmed out of a failed project which was really just, I had this idea to write a story in which a contemporary family who was deeply religious was suddenly struck by all ten of the plagues, they were gonna to show up in this short story. That became a bit of a wreck, so I had abandoned it. This was like five years ago, I tried this and it hadn't worked. And then about two years after that, I thought, what if I do one story for each of the plagues? And that became much more manageable thing.

I'm not sure what got me on that notion in the first place. I was raised in a Catholic household and so I knew the story of the plagues. And I hadn't really done much with

any Biblical re-tellings in any kind of capacity. But when I realized that I could try writing 10 short stories, one for each of the plagues, the notion of the challenge of that was a lot of fun. What would that look like in a modern-day setting? Once I realized I didn't need to try to do all ten plagues in one short story, it became a fun challenge to try out.

Where are you in the fulfillment of this project on the plagues?

They're all done. All 10 stories are written, and actually all 10 stories have individually been published in a variety of outlets. The full collection, I've been submitting it here and there. There's a, I don't know if I want to call it a contest, but it's been for a while a finalist for a book prize. And so I'm waiting to hear about that because that will come with the collection being published.

It exists. Now it's waiting for somebody to print the darn thing.

What was your first published short story?

Let me think about that ... I remember the very first published piece of writing was actually a short essay that I published when I was in graduate school about seeing a jellyfish on a beach. The first short story, I think it came after that. I think it was a piece of flash fiction. I had a little cluster of pieces of flash fiction that I was sending out in probably 2010 and several of them got accepted in places kind of at the same time. What the first one was is hard for me to remember. They were all very short little flash fiction.

The first short story of particular heft that I had published was a story called "The Last Farmland in the Country," which was about a guy who is a farmer whose wife shoots him in the face with birdshot and he slowly turns into a scarecrow. And that was the first story where the fascination with bodily transformation took hold, I think, too. And that was the first piece that I had published in a print magazine. All the other ones before that were in online journals. This one was in a print magazine and so I got copies that got mailed to me. That one I remember.

I'd like to ask you about the panel of student writers that you have chaired on two occasions at SCC Democracy Days [2018, 2019]. You titled the panel "The Prose of Protest" and your students presented and discussed their original writing. What is the terrific story you read on those occasions?

"Tasters." I have a whole collection of stories that all are one-word "ers" so that gets a little confusing.

It's about a young woman ... The backdrop of the story is that there is some kind of famine happening and she discovers that her musculature will regenerate rapidly and painlessly so she starts selling off bits of herself as food and people flock to this because they are desperate and hungry.

I love that story. So powerful and affecting. What drew you to that story as a piece of discourse for Democracy Days?

First of all, I wanted to make sure I was reading something too because I was asking students to share their work and felt like I should have something as well.

That ended up being about a number of things, I think. The commodification of the body, the viewing of human beings as property in a way and a rallying cry for autonomy and that story of thing, and so it felt like a decent piece to include in the notion of 'the prose of protest' in a way that I hope is not sort of hit you over the head with a hammer style, which has its place, for sure, but asking people, why do we view, in this case specifically women, as a thing to be bought or sold. That was the reason I thought it fit with the sensibilities of that panel.

What is literally the last piece of writing you've worked on?

Just a few hours ago ... I'm in the revising phase of a story that underwent a unique transformation for me. I had to write this story as a piece of flash fiction and the premise is that this young man, his best friend and his best friend's girlfriend each have unpleasant scars on their bodies from various things and he discovers that he can temporarily make those go away. So I tried to tell the story as a piece of flash fiction and something about it wasn't really working, and then so I realized well, maybe I should make it a full blown, full-length story. So I did that and today I was going through a printout that I had marked up already and was making some changes to it. That's literally, earlier this afternoon, the last thing that I was working on.

CONTRIBUTORS

Brianna Barrett is outgoing and loves to interact with people. She has a passion for reading and writing. One of her goals is to help people who may need a little push, and she says, "Showing any expression can be hard for some people and I want to be there for those who have no one listening."

Joe Baumann's fiction and essays have appeared in *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Electric Spec*, and many others. He is the author of *Ivory Children*, published in 2013 by Red Bird Chapbooks. He possesses a PhD in English from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette and is an Assistant Professor of English at St. Charles Community College. In 2019, he was awarded a Lambda Literary Fellowship in Fiction.

Lacey Burnette is a retired newspaper editor. He lives in Dardenne Prairie, Missouri.

A sophomore at SCC, **Claire Canning** is an English major with aspirations to be an author and editor, and her favorite genres are fantasy, horror and mystery.

Debra Crank-Lewis is a Professor of History at SCC.

Cammie Dagg is here for the giggles, the haha's, the guffaws, and chortles; you know, a jokester. She has previously been published in the zine *SoapBox* as well as Truman's Young Voices of Missouri edition of the *Chariton Review* in 2018

Alyson Dickerman loved life to the fullest. Friends have said that when they were with her, she made them feel that they were the only one that mattered; they felt that they were always 'seen' when they were with her. She loved poetry and writing and often wrote an original poem or short story for friends or family to celebrate events in their lives or soothe their feelings during difficulties. The untitled poem in the first section of MRR 2020 is one of those poems, written for a friend and former classmate. It is untitled, as many of her works are.

Christina Gant is an alumna of SCC and she has worked there since 1998; she joined the faculty in 2011. She is a former host of the SCC Coffeehouse and teaches composition and literature classes, creative writing, and poetry.

Christine A. Holtz received her M.F.A. in fiber arts from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and her B.F.A. from Indiana University with a concentration in painting and fiber arts. Her artwork has been shown at many art institutions nationwide. Ms. Holtz's career as an educator started in 2008 at Jefferson College teaching various art studio courses along with art history. From 2008 to present, she has served as an Adjunct Instructor at SCC, where from 2010 to 2017 she also took on

the role of Art Gallery Coordinator. She also teaches at Maryville University. In her not-so-spare time, she is a part-time stay-at-home mom to her two small children who have greatly inspired the current direction of her artwork.

Alishia Hulbert says, "I hate talking about myself, but I love writing poetry. Poetry helps me express my emotions. Sometimes it is difficult expressing how I feel. Poetry has and always will be my voice."

Kirstin Iverson graduated in May 2020 with her graphic design degree at SCC where she and many others explored the new frontier of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a single parent, it took her some extra time to complete this chapter of her life. With the experience she gained as an artist, and author, and mother she plans to combine her skills to write and illustrate a children's book.

Michael Kuelker is Emeritus Professor of English at SCC and the editor of MRR 2018-present.

Jennifer Stohs LeGrand is a Mathematics Professor at SCC. She studied at the University of Texas at Austin, where she played college soccer. She was a passionate soccer player and coach for over 30 years and established the college soccer program at SCC. In 2016, a new passion for music took over her life. She is working on her third CD.

Laura Maxwell is an SCC student working towards a degree in Environmental Science. She loves to read and write in her spare time.

Laura McDonald is in her middle 20s and has been writing since middle school with hopes to be a writer of fiction one day although she enjoys writing poetry as well. "I started developing an interest in writing after I found my love in reading. I hope that my writings will one day provide an escape for people as books have done for me."

Haley Muse is a full-time biology student, working on her Bachelor of Science degree. She uses art to express impulsive thoughts, and she hopes her work will encourage others to look at their own feelings differently.

Chile Nguyen is a student at SCC. "I am an illustrator and landscape artist. Ever since I was very young, I had the opportunity to read a comic book from two brothers. I feel that the pictures in the book are very beautiful. I don't know when I became passionate and immersed in those characters and drawings. I began to imitate how to draw and practiced drawing the things I liked. My brush has been gradually improved over the years, of course. I have met many good teachers who can improve my thinking and artistic look so that my paintings are more complete. I am extremely grateful for that."

2020 did not go the way **Kaleigh Oliver** thought it would, but at least she made it back in this book. Besides attending Zoom University this year, Kaleigh has spent her time making wild amounts of banana bread and writing poetry. Kaleigh has also been enjoying long walks to the kitchen and looking longingly out the window. Just kidding. She would do all of the above regardless of a worldwide pandemic.

Ryanzo Perez is a father, husband, recent transplant to St. Charles County and an amateur photographer. He is an avid supporter of positive social change, equality, equity and kindness. He uses photography to capture major and minor experiences and events and share them with family and friends.

Loretta Back Porter was the author and publisher of *'Back' Then, 'Back' Now: The Back Family Memories Cookbook* (1999). She worked in SCC's Continuing Education department after earning a degree at SCC.

Kendell Scherer lives in the Hundred Acre Wood with her best friend, Winnie the Pooh. Jealous, are you? You should be because she and Pooh get all the honey. The one thing you should know about Kendell is that rhymes really do it for her.

Carol Stohs is really old, but still functioning rather well at close to 92 years of age. She created *Rite of Passage* in 1988. Art, photography, writing, music, and theater are still her compelling interests. She is proud of her family and feels honored to be included in this amazing publication of creative work.

Dominic Studebaker was born in Lincoln, Nebraska and moved to St. Louis shortly thereafter. "I have spent most of my life here and right now live in Wentzville on 10 acres where I am working to build a farm with my family, our hopes being to create a farm that is totally organic and environmentally friendly. I enjoy writing in my free time and I hope someday to write about life on the farm."

Mary Sweetin is a classically trained violinist with bachelors and masters degrees in music from SIUE. Sweetin performs with numerous ensembles in the St. Louis area, including the Bach Society Orchestra and St. Louis Ballet Orchestra, and is concertmaster of the University City Symphony Orchestra. Since 2008, Sweetin has directed the orchestra at St. Charles Community College. In that time, the SCC Symphonic Orchestra has performed a major symphonic work every semester, including *Scheherazade* (Rimsky-Korsakov) *Symphonie Fantastique* (Hector Berlioz), and Holst's *The Planets*. In May 2012 Sweetin was named Adjunct Faculty of the Year in the humanities division at SCC.

Creative Writing at SCC

St. Charles Community College proudly offers two degrees in creative writing. The Certificate of Specialization in Creative Writing is a sixteen credit hour program that allows 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 new, 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 a four-year institution through a broad exploration of the many genres and approaches to the writing process.

MRR annually confers a Jim Haba award for poetry. Haba is a poet, teacher and founding director of the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival.

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☞ POETRY

Brianna Barrett
Sophia Bollinger
Lacey Burnette
Cammie Dagg
Alyson Dickerman
Christina Gant
Alishia Hulbert
Laura Maxwell
Laura McDonald
Haley Muse
Kaleigh Oliver
Kendell Scherer
Dominic Studebaker

☞ FICTION

Joe Baumann
Claire Canning

☞ ESSAY

Heidi Grohe-Rood
Loretta Back Porter

☞ ART, MUSIC & PHOTOGRAPHY

Debra Crank-Lewis
Christina Gant
Christine Holtz
Kirstin Iverson
Michael Kuelker
Jennifer Stohs LeGrand
Chile Nguyen
Ryanzo Perez
Carol Stohs
Mary Sweetin

☞ MID RIVERS REVIEW
20th Anniversary ☞



Cover art by Chile Nguyen
Vegetables
pastel still life drawing





Reflection – Debra Crank-Lewis

Teaching has been my profession for forty years and, as a history teacher, telling stories is a large part of that experience. Taking photographs is another component of storytelling for the photographer as well as those who experience the photographs.

- Debra Crank-Lewis

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(W)hole

I kissed the stars because their distance
reminded me of it all.
I made friends with the night
because it understood me.

I washed and detangled my hair for two hours the way I ought to,
and learned the resilience of curls in natural hair.
I learned even though the sun has vanished,
the leaves haven't started dying yet.

I've tripped but I have not fallen,
and I'm refusing to kill myself from the inside out like I used to.
The thoughts in my head can be a tall glass of poison,
that I used to drink and wait for someone else to die from.

I have learned the brain and the mind
are in fact sisters, not twins.
And the smoke that fogs them both
is really just dragon's breath after all.

I met myself at 3 AM one night alone,
as it turns out I am 20% woman, 80% unfinished poetry.
It also turns out my blood type is o-negative,
which means I can still give to everybody outside of myself.

I also learned that God heard me the first time,
and that this universe is magnetic,
and while we are all pulling together
fragments are just pulling away which is finally okay with me.

I found out that love is not just a choice or a feeling,
but it's the fabric of the universe.
People, places, things and ideas.
Love is a noun, too, after all.

I've learned how to keep myself company,
And though these things are now more familiar
than writing my own name,
I am finally (w)hole.

- Kaleigh Oliver

‘(W)hole’ was written in 2019 in the wee hours of the morning. This poem is about realizing a truth about yourself, however minuscule, and relishing in the moment of understanding who you are. The title is representative of this moment as well – like the gap between an exhale and the next inhale when you’re neither breathing or suffocating; being satisfied but still longing. There is a wholeness to the still quiet of 3 AM, while at the same time if the quiet is loud enough it creates a hole of sorts. This poem is about that. The gap between breaths and only realizing you’ve been satisfied once the longing starts. This poem is dedicated to 3 AM and to the roaring sound of silence.

– Kaleigh Oliver

MRR’s Jim Haba award recipient 2018, 2020

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Photomontage – Kirstin Iverson

The purpose of this project was to create a surrealism scene using only black and white imagery in Photoshop. I created the scene using a total of six images and blended them accordingly. All images had to be converted from color to black and white and many of them needed highlight and shadow reassignment in order to abide by the primary light source.

– Kirstin Iverson



Vegetables – Chile Nguyen

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