

JANUS LITERARY

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Masthead

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Glow

Tracy Rothschild Lynch

The bedside lamp is on. One of the two my parents gave us at our engagement party twelve years ago. From Crate and Barrel, which, at that point in our lives, was absolutely fancy-pants. Each has a wrought-iron base, twisted delicately, and ecru shades. Faux paper leaves here and there designed to look as though they are curling, stretching into the room. Twelve years later I still love these lamps and the way they warm each bedtime scene.

It's the night before my surgery. Now the lamp illuminates my body and the next time it does my body will be something different entirely. The bases and the leaves and their simple posture will remain the same --- a bit dustier, perhaps, but still making the room golden the way that they do. I am settling into this glow and thinking about tomorrow and cutting cancer out of me and the mystery of what they will find, when you lean over. You lift the edges of my shirt up over my breasts, exposing them.

I'm gonna miss them, you whisper to my chest, eyes down. I watch the top of your head, salt-and-pepper, hair just beginning to thin, as you kiss each breast.

I know you are sad and I also know that one day I will forgive you for that phrase.

I turn out the light and close my eyes to ease into the black.

Me, too, I say, but I don't really mean it. I just want them gone.

I received a sign that said “It’s okay to ask for help”

So now I may ask for a sign

It was blue on pink
with a list of phone numbers
ones where women across the country ask me
“Have you ever tried writing about it?
What are you going to do
for the rest of the night?”

The sign was posted on the ground-level train platform
as seen from my boyfriend’s back door

I saw it while taking out the trash
wearing a plush green robe and
matted faux fur slippers
because it was cold and
I don’t care who saw

There was always one hotline post
but now there were 12
one for each vulnerable population
with a coalition
or a cause

(isn’t there always a cause)

Sure, because someone cares
in that abstract way
in which I sometimes cry for dogs I’ve never seen
starving children down the road
that theoretical pain
of possibility

Selena Cotte

In 1988, Heather Begins Keeping Count

Jessica Evans

Heather's 1988 kindergarten class is half refugee five-year-olds with hollow eyes from places like Latvia and Kazakhstan. The other half are poor like her.

That year, Soviets being withdrawing from Afghanistan after a useless nine years.

On her first day of school, Heather wears a yellow dress sewn from old curtains. She knows how to read, has her times tables memorized and likes to count - her steps, the number of glasses of wine Mama has, the days since dinner. Heather's smile is crooked. She wears a red bow in her hair.

In 1988, the US ratifies the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with the Soviet Union. The treaty is negotiated by an actor who thinks he's still on stage and a man who wants to be a star.

Heather is enrolled in a magnet school so she can learn Russian. Heather's mama doesn't speak Russian. Kathleen speaks French and German, just like Gene. Gene is Mama's dad, and he thinks the treaty is a waste of time.

"We've got to find a way to defeat those damn Commies," he says.

Gene fought those damn commies and has the scars to prove it.

Mama keeps falling down now that Papa is back. She hides her wine under the sink next to the bleach.

In 1988, Calgary hosts the 15th Olympic Winter Games. The Russians win twenty-nine medals. America only wins six.

Gene shouts about commies during the closing ceremonies. Mama's eye is black again. Heather counts her inhales and exhales in Russian.

Death In Robertsbridge

The old man at the window writes a letter to his son,
late departed for New England, his own life just begun.
He shares all the news from home, of coughs and colds and kids,
and young Archie's new position with Uncle Robson selling fish.

Now and then he lifts his gaze to look out to the yard,
where the pigs grunt out their hunger and the chickens nearly starve.
Was that the suck of muddy footsteps down by the pigsty wall?
Is the swill-bucket still swinging, or was there no-one there at all?

Troubled by unearthly thoughts half-bidden to his brain,
he sets his eyes back to his letter and picks up his pen again:

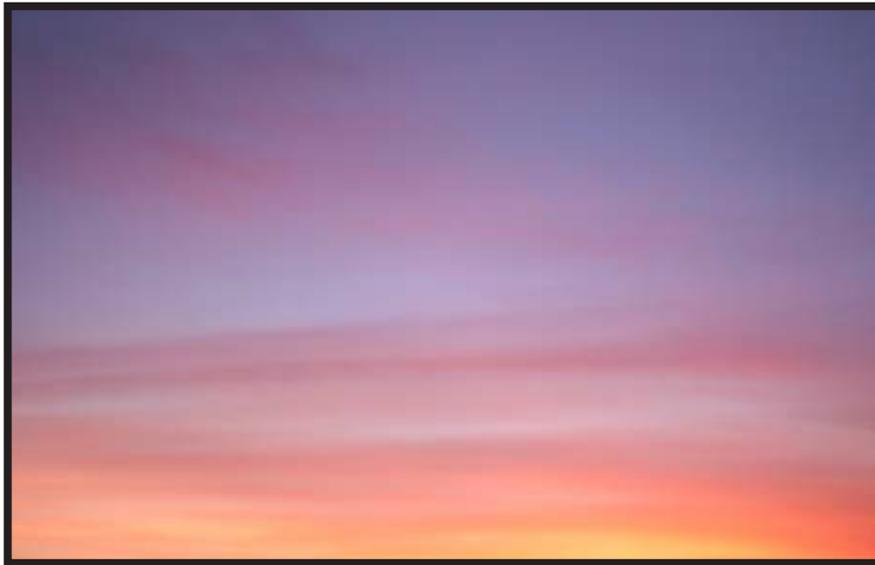
*It's your oldest sister's birthday; my first-born's forty-five.
What a startling reminder of how long I've been alive.
My youngest's soon to marry, twelve fledglings flown the nest;
twelve new lives within these walls and now not one is left.*

*There's several dead and buried in the village these last weeks:
Old Ellis the Butcher, and John Smith down at the Street,
Old Havenden, Will Woodgate, and Doctor Omery;
It's enough to make me worry when time will come for me.*

*And now I see your mother coming from the garden's farthest edge,
where she used to feed the chickens and trim the holly hedge.
My love waits at the doorway but she won't come back inside.
It's the fourth day of October, two years since she died.*

The old man drops his pen at last, chair screeching on the floor;
he rises on unsteady legs and heads towards the door.

Mark Grainger



Praise the Dark

Praise the dark because it always ends, the sun always rises and the black sky always fades to purple, magenta, blue. Sitting on the front steps, ceramic mug warm against my palm, watching the day wake. My father is lying inside, the hospital bed near the window in the living room so he can feel the sunshine on his skin. From outside I can't hear the rattle of his breath. I try to enjoy the moment - the quiet cool of morning, the sky greeting me. Before the day is done my dad will take his last breath but I don't know that yet. The day will be bright and blue. My heart will break and the sun will set. Praise the dark.

Courtney LeBlanc

What a daughter knows of her father

My father was from the island of Luzon, Philippines.

He grew up in a house guarded by palm trees in a gated courtyard.

There was a koi pond, also lovebirds in a cage.

Years and countries later, there were loons and geese by a lake.

My father was a geologist.

Once, he worked in Nunavut where he rode a Zodiac boat to field sites.

My father was a proud man, too proud to mow the lawn but not too proud to let my mother do it.

He worked downtown in glass office towers as an executive. Decades later, he returned as a security guard.

My father possessed a bitter soul and a sweet tooth.

Growing up there was always chocolate ice cream in the fridge.

My father is in an urn, in temporary storage at the funeral home.

In death as in life, none of us know what to do with him.

Sylvia Santiago



You had a house to live in, you were fed

You were too quiet, you were too loud,
you were exaggerating, you were too sensitive,
you ask stupid questions that don't deserve answers,
you're clumsy, you're too careful. You should do the dishes,
dust and vacuum and you love ironing for the whole household.
You're sullen, you're boring, you're not good enough,
you will never be good enough. You're not wearing that.
You don't like that music, you don't want to go out.
You came top of the class but didn't get a high enough mark.
You're selfish, you don't do enough for others, you only think about you.
You will babysit instead of going to that party.
You will not panic when that six week old baby vomits and chokes,
you will not call for help because you will be blamed for making a fuss.
But, if anything happens to that baby, it will be your fault.
You will be told you compensated so well for your hearing loss
that a teacher had to ask for your hearing to be tested.
After your operation you will be given lists of things you couldn't hear.
You won't say anything in public that will meet with disapproval.
To ensure that happens you will only speak without moving your lips.

Emma Lee



Meat Raffle

Rosaleen Lynch

Lottery day, I buy a ticket for the meat raffle instead. I reckon whether the prize is a freezer load of meat or just icebox rations, it's better than a one in fourteen-million chance. Lottery night, me and the kids cheer for numbers I've not entered. I know I've made the right choice when my numbers don't win.

I let myself dream of the rumours of rib-eye steaks and a rack of lamb. Trouble is, however good the meat is, the kids will still ask for something-fried-chicken. Maybe, as well as the good meat, there will be some drumsticks and wings or some chops or burger mince.

I switch channels from the cooking programme that comes on next - will only make us hungry and TV recipes always need stuff we don't have and the kids never like them anyway. I wouldn't even know what to do with a rib-eye. No, if I win the good meat, I'll sell it. Then I can treat them to takeaway, even if we've to live on cereal for the rest of the week. Sunday I'll pray to find my winning number on the church noticeboard. Never seems right to pray to win the lottery, but reckon it's okay to pray for food.



A modern-day changeling

Ever since *you were* a child
people said you were strange
you knew you were *different*.
Restless in your skin
uneasy in your thresholds
magic is a language *lost* to you.
It might have been because you grew up
without a motherland or with
a woman who didn't treat you
as a daughter.
The *bone* spurs on your scapulae *wear*
and given the civilities
you were never able to fledge.
Your reflection in the mirror
will sometimes *disappear*
and often disappoints.
Born of conjure and collusion
you were unwanted *in one world*
and are unloved in *the other*.

Sylvia Santiago



Venice Story

Zoe Meager

In truth, it had been lapping at our ankles for years. It's uneasy eating dinner in six inches of hard water. There were bits of others people's lives floating in our door: cassette tapes with recordings of old scripts, tickets to movies we'd all seen hundred times in our sleep. Sometimes I would splash you, but you'd forget to splash me back.

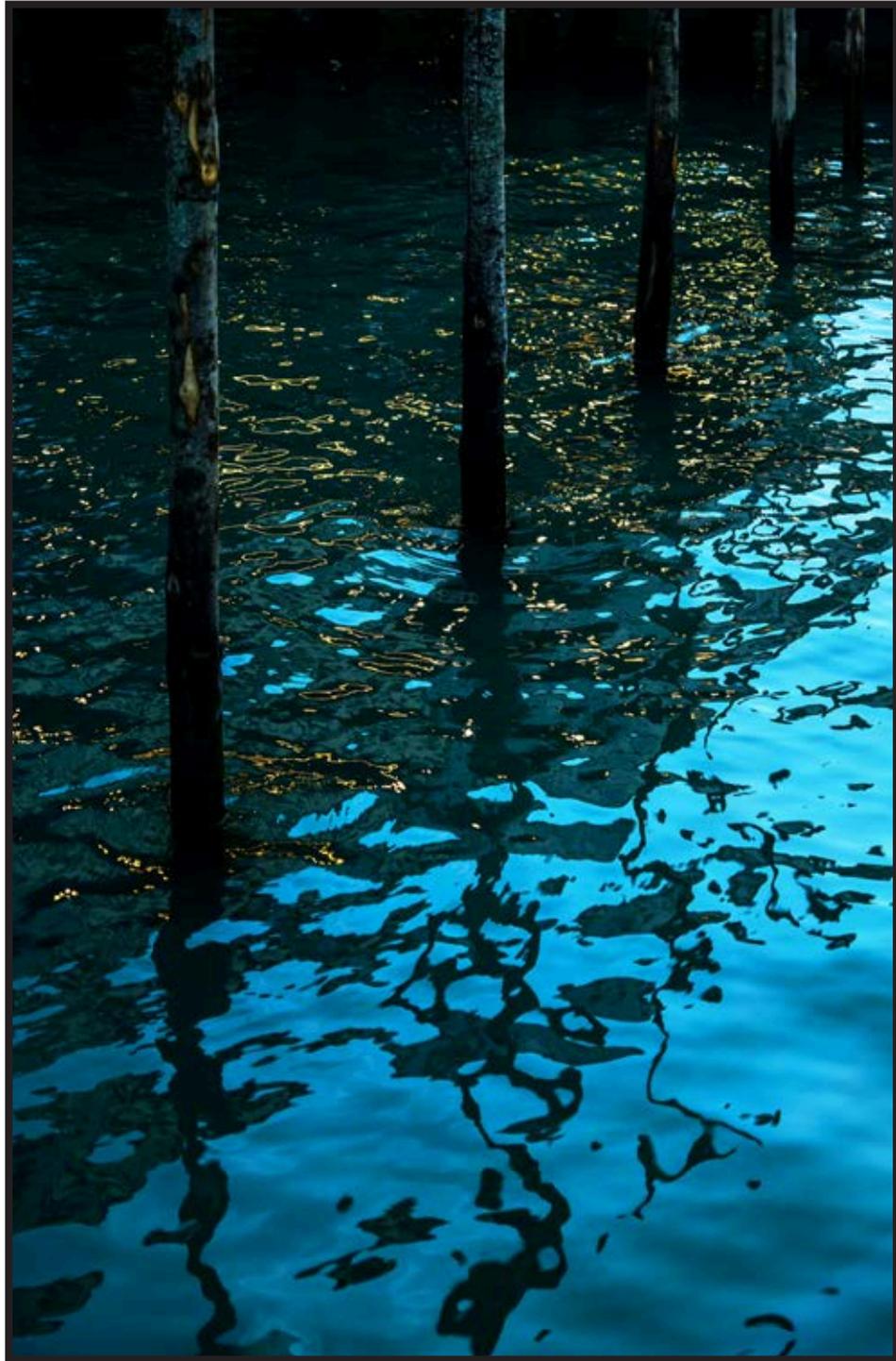
"I want you to get this shit out of here," I monstered.

"The purple socks?" They slugged past us, furry and forgotten.

"All this water! It belongs out there." I tapped the window with a witchy nail. You put your gumboots on and got in the dinghy and rowed off down the canal, trailing a white flag that read *I'm against it*. It rippled in sync with the water.

That night you came dancing home, with brown and yellow sponges that tumbled from your pockets. I heaved a cooking pot across the room and it landed on our little black cat. "We'll be swallowed alive!" I cried, but you just looked at me with a watery smile and said, "At least we'd still be together."

I didn't watch you go, but I followed your reflection in the glass. The boat of you sank away, down and down the canal. The walls the sky the water the bridges between us were darkness, there was only one light to be seen, bobbing at your stern. My voice calling to you would have been strange and frail with the distance.



The sea-wife

I tried to marry a wave.

He came so softly, twice a day, bringing me gifts,
seaglass and songs,
and his devotion to me was a wonder of the world.
And over time, through painstaking erosion,
he gently shaped my heart into a small boat.

I found a ring left lying on the sand,
and knew he meant to marry me.
But next time, he came in as weak as water,
towed by an emaciated moon,
and somehow his devotion was lethargic,
and lacked the power to lift my boat and take it.

I tried to put my arms around him, vainly,
and as he washed away I tasted saltwater;
he must have wept at being made to leave me.
And he whispered, and I caught it on the breeze,
that I should place the ring on my own finger,
and take great care to keep my heart in boat-form.

And he is out there now, swirling and crashing,
his crest festooned with broken bits of boats;
then calming, gently finding foreign beaches
that remind him of the beach where he once found me.
I know how it must pain him not to find me now,

and I sit here,
sea-wife for fifteen years.

Mary Ford Neal

Tides of Time

Laura Besley

You laughed when I bought the chest freezer. 'My grandparents had one of those,' you said. 'Back in the 80's.'

When we were first together, you ran your hands over my curves, called me a woman. I took your jagged inexperience and moulded it into confidence, smooth and strong. Over time, your interest waned. 'It's natural,' friends told me.

In a charity shop I bought a bedside cabinet and a lamp, made the garage look cosy.

After you fall asleep - your face wrinkle-free - I tiptoe out of the house and curl up in the freezer, hoping to stem the tide.

At The Stream

you come to wash your feet,
small ripples, peaking,
go suddenly still.
You keep moving in circles
to avoid
freezing in place.
Why he never touches you
turns your vision grey.
Volcanic rock
birds light upon
before taking sips
from the stream glint.
Here is a cross
between hunger and thirst.

Susan Tepper

A very small moment

Sometimes I think you chose a lonely life

This is said to me quietly
the half-dark swelling through the window
an overripe wave that will not break on the shore

only caress
and retreat

Sometimes I think you're choosing it still, again and again

overfull tide
undone and

undone

Meredith Phipps

15 years, under us a river

*If the wind brushes my hair
off my face like it wants me,
is that tenderness
or only touching?*

...

The woman reading over my shoulder on the plane
says she knew her marriage was over when
her husband handed her the coffee mug by its handle one morning,
making her wrap around the hot ceramic
for the first time in 15 years.

Her hands were always more tender than his,
but he had never,
since she met him,
made her touch.

...

Under us a river
carves and caresses its way through

Meredith Phipps

Enough

Annie Howkins

You said you were a traveller, in perpetual motion, yawing to and from the far-away places I read about when we stood in bookshops, pretending we were looking for a guidebook for a shared destination.

And in those moments, I looked for a hint of what it was that made me not enough to be your anchor, even though your drowning body clung to me in the maelstrom of our snatched nights.

But *safe* and *anchor* are not in your vocabulary, and you probably think the foreign gaudy stamped postcards I stick on the fridge door are enough.

To catch a fish

Lyz Pfister

Because of the way the moonlight bounces off a fish's back, silver in the night. And the way the water is still, love, and silent save its lapping up against our boat. Like a wet rag slapped against a wall, love, let the waves come and slap against the hull. I've already given you the keys to my house and a pair of fishing boots. Drop your hook in the water and catch me a fish, love. Let his skin be silver, the color of the moonlight in my cup. Skim the moonlight from his scales and hide it in your pockets. We'll use it when it rains to make the radio play. I'll give you anything you want, my love. A cold bowl of peonies in milk or a jar of pennies. So row, love, row. Because our oars are only broken ladder rungs, and I've set the ladder's husk aside for another day.

When she remembers the view over the Snake River Canyon, 25 years on

She tightropes between teenage life and adulthood, a thin line balanced across this canyon, where falling is freedom and fresh air and kisses and the taste of first sex and laughter and not a care in the world, even if some of it is illegal and later she will look back and wonder why she waited so long to say no, to the point when he told her he could not live without her, when they sat at that beauty spot just outside of Twin Falls, and she wished she could take back those Dairy Queen dates, those hot fudge sundaes, the mozzarella cheese sticks thrown in for free at the pizza place where the server smiled at them - not knowing what they had been doing - this cute high school couple who came here every Sunday, and perhaps the server thought they were fresh from church when really they were on their way back from making love in his basement room, having blanketed themselves in each other's bodies beneath the cookie dough smell from his mom's Martha Stewart kitchen, when snow blocked out the sound of their sex and Garth Brooks became the backdrop to a memory the girl-not-yet-woman wished she could toss over the foaming spray as the water plunged into the Snake River, longing to fall long after she fell. And she remembers how he told her the stuntman Evel Knievil tried to jump this gap - between here and there - and how even he failed.

Hannah Storm



Dry Heat

she is the mountains,
grounded, owning the red earth—
silver rings bearing colossal turquoise stones
closer, she smells like clementines
yes, I want to be up close like this

she says, where's home?
and I think: I moved too many times, I grieved too many—
you're a tumbleweed,
she says to my silence
I'm heading for California, I say, and I decide it's true

and later, mojitos and live music,
pink sunset and dancing
we giggle and she touches my face—
don't stop, I want to say,
I'm drunk, she laughs

we're outside, in the dark, warm dry
desert air and broken glass underfoot—
tiny colored lights strung up
on a weathered wooden fence,
distant bar chatter, guitar and trains

you passed right through me,
she says, scoops up her bag
I will ache for her, I think,
in California
or Oregon, maybe.

Jo Varnish

little dark age

drinking wine, pre-holidays, friday night
this is what I'm gonna call you from now on, he says, *little dark age*.
he asks if I know what the dark age is,
and the truth is: it's all fragments from middle school social studies—
It was a period where there was nothing to do but suffer,
he explains. he is always writing poetry for me with his mouth
sometimes from afar—like right now, sitting across from me—
other times close up, his lips lending metaphors against mine,
his tongue offering some clever word play in mere movements
or when he's between my legs—
that's where he finds the revelations,
the meaning, the all.
If I am the little dark age,
which I am,
then he is the sliver
of sun.

Danielle Chelosky



not tonight

i'm back at my apartment, I type,
 considering adding: if that means anything to you,
but I don't feel like picking fights not tonight
 the energy has been sucked out of me like it does
every day at 4:46 P.M. during sunset
 I could just die, I think, and instead I
swipe compulsively on Hinge, it's my
 replacement for smoking
 because
 every behavior I do is just a coping mechanism
for this loneliness—eating chocolates,
 writing,
 listening to Elliott Smith,
scrolling,
 living—
 Might have to be this weekend,
a guy from Hinge says,
 but I've lost my interest
it was either tonight or never and it's not tonight.

Danielle Chelosky

Dead Tree

Hema Nataraju

When I was six, I saw the hulking banyan tree in my backyard slowly die. Those wisteria vines around its trunk had looked so magical at first, like they were the tree's green babies clinging to their mama, just like I hugged Mom. The tree didn't shoo them away though. Mom told me later the vines had smothered the tree, hugged it so tight that it couldn't breathe.

But now, when he pulls me in for a hug, I cannot decline. He entwines his arms around me, kisses me so hard, I gasp for breath. "I can't wait to marry you," he says.

I close my eyes, pull the engagement ring to the very tip of my finger. When it's almost off and my brain swirls in scary, delicious what-ifs, I push it back on again.

And then I think of the tree.



Walking Goodbye

Sarah Degner Riveros

Between the Seven Eleven and the football field, one block from the Congregationalist church with a food pantry, you turned your back at the intersection after walking me halfway to my apartment. I followed you a step, touched your back, we breathed "te quiero," into open mouths as you sent me away with one last tight squeeze and a push up the hill toward the triplex apartment that you had found for me to run away from home, but unable to let go so easily, I turned and watched your back loping downhill and, in your turning and smiling, and in my waving and grinning, I saw our grandchildren flash before my eyes. I blinked and you were at the bottom of the hill lumbering on, but I kept holding the vision of us pinning laundry to the line, having found hope in the grayness as soft as worn cotton prefolds handed down from son to niece, nephew to granddaughter. But with a slam to the head at the kitchen stove, you stirred the fear, knocking any peace of a future out of me, and I left you there, years before, your back turned to me, hearts and bellies still full of desire, at the corner of Locust and Brown. I'll keep moving forward, feeding our sons, and holding on to the longing in that walking goodbye.

I Used To Praise God But Then I Lost My Faith

Sarah Mosedale

Into the void steps Harry. He's smaller, quieter, but potentially more interesting. I'd grown tired of god's bombastic ways, how he was so sure he was right all the time. Harry is pleasantly diffident. Just as good looking by the way. And well dressed, too. He doesn't take me for granted like god did. He thanks me when I do something for him. He even does little things for me which, frankly, I'd never noticed god doing. With Harry there's a nice mutual feeling. We look after each other. Oh yes, I am liking Harry a lot more than god.

Orpheus on a dating app

I want that man, the one who drags me on
disconsolate through dating apps
seeking his simulacrum.

The one for whom I swipe right
on men with beards in hipster suburbs,
for whom men in their fifties get a 'like'.

I, Orpheus on a dating site,
trail through the wraith faces
searching for one who is not here

for whose quick smile I fool myself
another face would do.

Meanwhile the men who crowd and ghost
press cold hands against my screen...

and I, Orpheus,
clutching no lyre
look for the one who is among those living
- no doubt entirely happily -
in Clapham.

Harriet Truscott

Life Study
Sherri Turner

The last stroke leaves the brush and I step back. It is like this every time, this sudden disconnect when the work is done.

'You can look now,' I say and he stands, moves behind me.

'It doesn't look like me,' he says.

'It's an impression, ' I say. 'I am an impressionist. '

'Maybe you're not a good painter, ' he says and leaves the room.

I don't tell him the truth or he won't sit for me again. That the painting looks like you, that they always do. He is sure to notice one day, but I am ready for that.

I am already disconnected.



The exact moment

Anuja Ghimire

I am no longer beautiful

The air between us is a blizzard. No gravity to make me fall on you. Frost. Nostrils freezing and toe-numbing cold. Once we were Texas in August. Your breath in my ear lobe could knock me down. Once my lips were lotus. You didn't mind the green moss.

I loved you

The room grew smaller until there was just a bed. Only a fingernail of moon outside the window. Your three fingers thinning my tears until I dried. You felt my cracks. I wore your scabs like a mirror. The curtains rocked in a rhythm of lullabies.

You love me

The house falls down like rain. Bricks from your mouth to your heart. Paint-laced primer from my tears to my feet. We don't run. Once. We taste defeat.

I forgive us

I forget about the forest fire when I turn on the stove. I remember the monsoon when I boil water. Cinnamon, cloves, cardamom to mask the ashes on my tongue. Tea leaves color the water and hide the evidence of spices. Milk to lighten the shadows that I strain. I burn my tongue to not feel later. Throat remembers the prayers I never said for myself.

The Wedding

My cousin is getting married to a Snowman
She breaks the news to me in a twirl-ey voice, from somewhere far, in the land of ice and snow
I congratulate her for her find, thinking of what to say next
Our conversations are frozen in my memory of us in knee length frocks, that evening, ten years ago when I had played hide and seek with her in the twilight
I remember the sweat seeping through our cotton chemises, I remember flushed cheeks, pure laughter
I realise that my city and its memories of whipping heat may not be a great ice breaker now
Not when grown women are supposed to be bonding over cool to-be-s
And yet, what can you ask about things that you know, like the fate of the strongest tree in a forest fire?
I could whisper sweet nothings I suppose,
Have you nibbled on his nose yet?
or be comfortably practical
Temperature controlled indoors you say?
I should try my best to avoid details, their love story for instance
I don't want to know how snow had made her weary and the brandy had given out
How the men who came back with her had to be excavated from under years of wool and fur, and even then the warmth was missing
How the snow never fell, only stood and grew taller
How she gave up when she saw him standing there, his twig-arms outstretched in a warm embrace, bare except for an unnecessary muffler
An elemental attraction, she would explain
So I wait, because there will be a video call along the way, where she will tell me in a frosted voice
How she is late and nobody knows
How she is too far gone for help and not sure if she wants any
How the cold has found warmth inside her, and the sparks were never there
That every day, she can feel it grow, climb up her body, chill her very bones
That some days she cannot walk, because she feels snow falling inside
That she is afraid that this is all a big mistake, and she doesn't want to be a snowflake anymore
I will look into her eyes the best I can, but I will see no pain, only a mirror of thin ice

Sreemanti Sengupta

Lover

You come in damp and white

I notice the morning pasted on your feet

You tell me not to switch channels so much, not to buy fancy clothes, hail taxis or tip the beggars

You say Communism is not dead, not yet

It is being trampled under the feet in vineyards, the stains being washed off guiltlessly

You say you have seen it trapped in bottles, helpless and bubbling, filling up people with false happiness

Your eyes remember the agony of a sinking ship, your clothes the pride of torn sails

God is less than a myth, you insist, and tell me to convert to nothingness

Sometimes, your rebellion takes you to ridiculous places and you justify it with anger

You wait for me to rescue you, I wait for you to stop dying

And still you say you love me

You say it with a cigarette, on a wilted rose, shouting in despair, weeping in terror

I want to tell you I am cheating on you, but I am sure you won't believe me

I want to tell you of my lovers roaming in the vineyards changing channels wearing fancy clothes hailing taxis for me in the rain seeing God as a picture bottles as glass

Sreemanti Sengupta



Heat Lightning

Deirdre Danklin

There's been heat lighting outside our bedroom window every night for eighteen days. It lights up the sky with its hunger. It's hot, the sky says - it's so hot I'm on fire.

You've got your phone in your hand, scrolling through the news.

"Don't look at the news," I say as the lightning flashes.

"Did you hear about the man with the gun who wanted to shoot a female judge for being female and a judge but ended up shooting her twenty-year-old son to death instead?"

"Stop it, don't look," I say.

I take my clothes off. Underwear, cotton bra. Moles on my belly. Moles on my back.

"Did you see the unmarked vans moving into the city?" you ask.

I haven't seen anything, I haven't been outside since the lightning started. The air in our bedroom is heavy. The street shadows slant through our cheap blinds. This is the nicest place we've ever lived - a hardwood-floor place we crawled to. We are lucky. You roll over and put your hand on my belly, thumb by a mole. You kiss the dip of my bones.

"We should shower," you say.

"The CDC says that lightning can travel through plumbing."

"No way."

You grab your phone again. Google it.

But, there's been lightning every night for weeks," you say. "How is anybody supposed to get clean?"

"We're not supposed to get clean," I say as I kiss you - thunder rolling overhead.

The Decision

Ali McGrane

When he asks her to marry him, she instantly says no. And then wonders what she's saying.

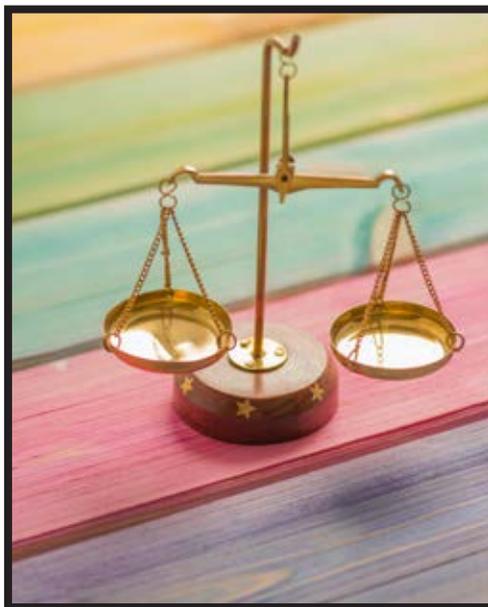
Maybe this no means wow, I don't believe you're asking me, offering me this incredible thing, so sure of the rightness, shares in all of it, wholehearted membership of the team. *And now she's picturing a rugby match, the way the forward clutches the oval ball to stop it sliding free, the onslaught of defenders against that elbowing, torpedo dash.*

Or it's a no that says I'm not worthy and thank you for loving me, for lifting me from the slush pile, elevating this thing between us into something more, something that might make a bestseller list. *But she can't help hearing the sound of covers being ripped from spines, the hungry pulping machine making short work of remaindered stock.*

On the other hand, it might be a no-frills no. Not this, not yet, maybe not ever, maybe not you.

She monitors her systems for clues, the processes in her brain, the bellows of her lungs, the muscled walls of her heart. Belief and disbelief so entwined it's impossible to study them separately, to weigh up their individual taste and smell, to control how they run. She's not the player, she's the ball.

And yet, and yet. She's not the book, she's the pen. And maybe that's the no.





A Blood-Oath

I was born with frown-lines
etched into my forehead—
concern is my natural state

(just because I worry
doesn't mean I miss you),

and I haven't washed
my hair in three days,
but I am as good
at moving on
as an army tank

and some day,
someone is going to love me,
and I won't care enough
to wonder if you're sorry.

Sidney Dritz

To all the boys I never loved

Because you cheered during Rocky IV.

Because you were a ginger and there was no way I was subjecting myself to red pubes.

Because you were literally the boy next door and I couldn't think of you as anything but my goofy blond neighbour. Because a decade later when I visited you in Vancouver, you pulled me into your arms and I wasn't ready for how good it felt.

Because you'd phone at 1a.m. and pester me to go for drinks when you knew I had an 8.a.m. lecture. Because when we went out for dim sum you said that at home in Singapore, one of your maids was Filipina too.

Because you talked about marriage like it was a given, even though we'd only been dating for a year. Because you wouldn't shut up about how cute our mixed babies would be.

Because you wrote a song for me and that didn't creep me out.

Because you said we'd still be friends even when your feelings spiked and mine didn't. Because that was the only time you lied.

Sylvia Santiago



Ray
Travis Cravey

“Let me guess,” she said, snubbing out a cigarette, “you thought you were the one. Different. That she longed for you.”

I shifted in place, trying to shield myself from her words. The dog ran under the kitchen table, rattling the coffee cups as he went.

She watched him run towards the living room, lit another smoke. She stared down the hall and spoke. “Some twenty-five year old girl chose you as her soul mate. You.”

I started to speak but my mouth was too dry to open.

“Are you that dumb, Ray?” She turned and stared, hard, in my face. “You are a vain man. You always have been.” She took a drink of her coffee and a long drag as she stood. “But I have never seen you so dumb.”

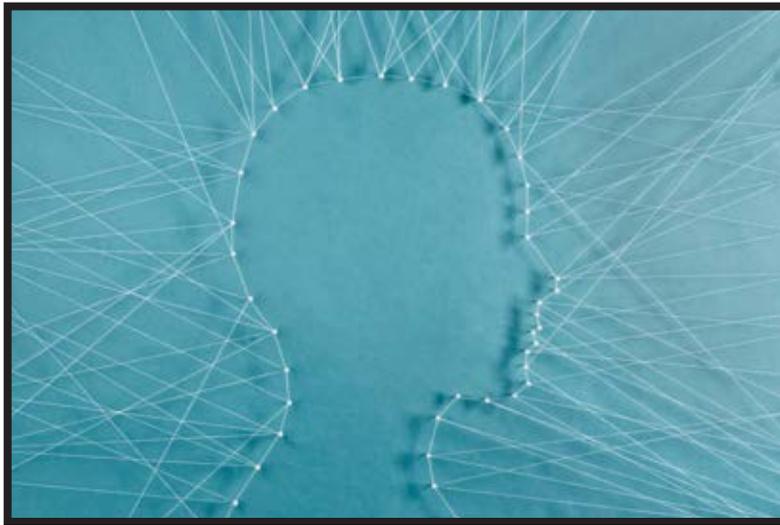
I managed to clear my throat. “It didn’t mean anything.”

She stared. “What?”

I sat up, tried for a moment to meet her gaze, looked, instead, at her left shoulder. “I didn’t mean to.”

“You never do,” she interrupted as she turned and put her cup on the counter by the sink. “You do and say whatever you want and you never mean it. Your parents never taught you better, I guess.” She turned and faced me. “You never mean anything. You’re meaningless. You’re void of goddamn meaning, Ray.”

She walked out of the kitchen and off to our bedroom. I listened to the dog bark at something that had momentarily caught his attention outside.



Loose Threads

Zoe Hare

'This is for you,' my mother puts the plate before me. She knows I don't like it. Outside, a crow regards me with an empty eye.

She smiles and I think of the loose stitch on the belly of my bear.

I fix on the door that is so often shut -- the sound of children beyond -- a ball thudding against brick, a car, an aeroplane.

In the bedroom, I lie on the bed and trace patterns on the rug, lines of thread becoming roads and rivers that I roll my marbles down, roads becoming seas and seas becoming elsewhere.

A piece of stuffing, ash-coloured like dried brain drifts across the floor. I push my finger into my naval so hard I feel sick.

'This is for you.' The dress is too tight but my mother is seeing through it and finding something ugly beneath. Her smile is wet. I wonder what I look like inside - pieces of grey soaked in blood, like meat beginning to cook — the ribs of a cow hung up at the butchers on a hook that makes me think of the end of a pirate's arm.

I'm adult now and she is dying. 'This is for you'. She gives me the ring that I did not want. Later, I look in the mirror and see what I truly am. Un-stitched. An aeroplane I never caught passes overhead. I smile but it dries on my face like glue. This is you.

Bullseye

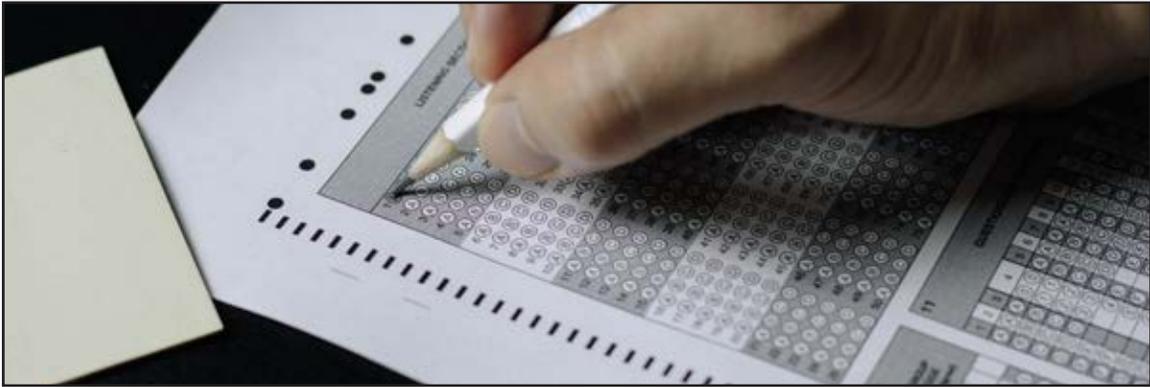
No one says *I do* while envisioning the crumbling end. No one pledges *to have and to hold* while thinking of restraining orders and divorce decrees. What I wanted was the happily ever after — the kiss from a prince that promised love and happiness. What I got was jealousy so intense I couldn't wear red for fear you'd charge — a bull's aggression for the bullseye painted on my body. This is how I learned you read the diaries I kept since I was thirteen: you assured me you *loved me anyway*. Later you took a red marker to them, scrawled *SLUT* in capital letters across the offending pages. I learned to pull myself inward, to become small in my big house, to speak only to my best friend or sister, to understand how even a glance signified betrayal. I did not know the fear I carried would nearly drown me, I was so used to silence I didn't realize you were holding me underwater till the pressure lifted and I rose, gulping for air.

Courtney LeBlanc

Misplaced Nostalgia

I no longer remember the precise feel of your hands. I remember their size, the rough callouses that studded your palms, proof of the hours you spent building your short frame into a boulder of muscle. You are un-Google-able, what I know of you is two decades old. Still, when I think of layovers I've had in your city I imagine seeing you in the airport, I envision us embracing. I don't even know if we'd be friends now but still I think of your lips on mine, not a memory of the timid teenager I was when we dated, too shy to fuck you with the lights on, but of the brave woman I am now. How I'd kiss you hard on the mouth, pull you into a dark corner and lift my skirt. I savor this fantasy, this counterfeit memory. That night, when I fuck my husband, I hold your name on my tongue.

Courtney LeBlanc



Final Exam
Sarah Mosedale

Answer as many questions as you wish; only your three highest scoring answers will count.

If you had your time again:

1. Would you still join the Brownies? Elaborate how membership impacted on your life, both positively and negatively, and discuss how non-membership might have shaped your experience differently. Pay close attention to your mother's role as Tawny Owl.
2. Would you behave differently in school? Consider how your behaviour impacted on you and others, and how it varied according to your perception of the teacher. Identify three factors which promoted 'not giving a fuck' and three which encouraged 'being top of the class'. Were you a particularly needy child?
3. Given three wishes would you: prevent your mother's alcoholism; turn your brother into a loving, happy guy; cure your sister's depression so she did not take her own life at 48? If not, why not? Would you save one wish to swerve your own appointment with manic depression? You did OK in the end didn't you?
4. Would you have that child, the one you didn't realise how much you wanted till it was too late? Discuss the likelihood of your relationship with its father prospering given what you learned subsequently about both of you. What did you spend a decade grieving for - the child or him or a fantasy of yourself you would never realise?
5. Would you choose to feel less deeply, less strongly, making your grief and rage easier to handle? Would you choose a quieter mind? Well, would you?

Contributor Bios

Laura Besley has been listed by TSS Publishing as one of the top 50 British and Irish Flash Fiction writers with her story ‘On Repeat’ (Reflex Fiction) and her story ‘Silenced’ has been nominated for Best Microfiction by Emerge Literary Journal. Her flash fiction collection, *The Almost Mothers*, was published in March 2020 and her collection of micro fiction, *100neHundred*, will be published in May 2021. She tweets @laurabesley

Danielle Chelosky is a New York-based writer who is an editorial assistant at Hobart Pulp and a music editor at Flypaper Lit.

Selena Cotte is a poet, journalist & shapeshifter living in Chicago by way of Orlando. Her poems are published or forthcoming in journals such as Peach Mag, HAD, Rejection Letters & others. She can be found online @selenacotte, wherever you think that may work.

Travis Cravey is a maintenance man in Southeastern Pennsylvania. He is an editor @malarkeybooks and editor-at-large @versezine. He’d be happy to show you his stories if you want, just ask. He’s on Twitter @traviscravey.

Deirdre Danklin holds an MFA from Johns Hopkins University. Her work has appeared in Hobart, The Nashville Review, Pithead Chapel, Longleaf Review, Typehouse Literary Magazine, and The Jellyfish Review, among others. She has been nominated for Best Small Fictions and The Best American Short Stories. She lives in Baltimore with her husband and orange tabby cat.

Sidney Dritz is (currently, constantly) reevaluating what to do with the rest of her life. Recent poetry publications include The Lumiere Review and Rejection Lit, and she writes about movies and television monthly at @dailydrunkmag. Follow her work as it develops on twitter at @sidneydritz.

Jessica Evans writes from Arlington, VA. She is the EIC for Twin Pies Literary, poetry editor for Dress Blues, prose editor for Knight’s Library, and serves as a mentor for Veteran’s Writing Project. Work is forthcoming in LEON Literary Review, Emerge Literary Journal, and elsewhere. Connect with her on Twitter @jessica__evans.

Nepal-born **Anuja Ghimire** (Twitter @GhimireAnuja) writes poetry, flash fiction, and creative nonfiction. She is the author of *Kathmandu* (Unsolicited Press, 2020). She’s a two-time Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee. She works as a senior publisher in an online learning company. She reads poetry for Up the Staircase Quarterly. She enjoys teaching poetry to children in summer camps. Her work found home in print and online journals and anthologies in Nepal, U.S., the U.K., Scotland, India, Australia, and Bangladesh. She lives near Dallas, Texas with her husband and two children.

Contributor Bios (cont.)

Mark Grainger is from the south of England but now lives in Germany, where he writes and translates. He recently won the Austrian Cultural Forum London's translation prize and was commended in the Stephen Spender Prize 2020 for poetry in translation. His poems have appeared in Green Ink Poetry, Minison Project, 192 Magazine, and Acid Bath Publishing's WAGE SLAVES anthology. He also shares poetry on Twitter @marktgrainger.

Zoe Hare is a UK writer of long and short fiction.

Anne Howkins started writing flash fiction in 2019 and relishes the challenge of writing very short stories. Her stories have appeared in print and online, most recently at Retreat West, Flash 500, Reflex Fiction, Flash Fiction Magazine, National Flash Fiction Day, Lunate, Strands International and Bath Flash Fiction Anthology 2020.

Courtney LeBlanc is the author of Beautiful & Full of Monsters (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), chapbooks All in the Family (Bottlecap Press) and The Violence Within (Flutter Press). She is also the founder and Editor-in-Chief of Riot in Your Throat, an independent poetry press. She loves nail polish, tattoos, and a soy latte each morning. Read her publications on her blog: www.wordperv.com. Follow her on twitter: @wordperv, and IG: @wordperv79.

Emma Lee's publications include "The Significance of a Dress" (Arachne, 2020) and "Ghosts in the Desert" (IDP, 2015). She co-edited "Over Land, Over Sea," (Five Leaves, 2015), is Reviews Editor for The Blue Nib, reviews for magazines and blogs at <http://emmalee1.wordpress.com>. FB: <https://www.facebook.com/EmmaLee1>. Twitter @Emma_Lee1.

Rosaleen Lynch, an Irish community worker and writer in the East End of London, loves stories - conversational, literary and performed. Words in Jellyfish Review, EllipsisZine, Fish, Mslexia, The London Reader, Litro and other lovely places and can be found on Twitter @quotes_52 and 52Quotes.blogspot.com.

Tracy Rothschild Lynch has written poetry and creative nonfiction for more than 20 years. She holds an MA from Virginia Commonwealth University and an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. When not writing, she reads, plays tennis, watches movies, and divides her time between her home in Glen Allen, Virginia and London, where she currently lives with her husband Mike and a handsome one-eyed Shih Tzu named Fergus. Her two daughters attend university in the U.S. Teaching creative writing to emerging writers is Tracy's absolute favorite thing to do. She has been published in HerStry online journal; Medical Literary Messenger; Life in 10 Minutes; The Cancer Poetry Project, and Brain,Child: The Magazine for Thinking Mothers. She's a 2013 Pushcart Prize finalist.

Contributor Bios (cont.)

Ali McGrane lives and writes between the sea and the moor. Her work has appeared in *Fictive Dream*, *The Lost Balloon*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Cabinet of Heed*, *FlashBack Fiction* and elsewhere. She was shortlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award 2019 and nominated for Best of the Net and Best Microfictions 2019. Find her @Ali_McGrane_UK.

Zoë Meager is from Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work has appeared abroad in publications including *Granta* and *Overland*, and locally in *Landfall*, *Mayhem*, *Turbine | Kapohau*, and *Bonsai: Best small stories from Aotearoa New Zealand*. There's more at zoemeager.com

Sarah Mosedale: 2nd Place Flash Fiction 500 Winter 2019, published in *National Flash Fiction Day Anthology 2020*, *Ellipsis*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *Funny Pearls*, *Lunate*, *Flash Flood Journal*, *Flash Fiction Festival Three*, *NFFD Write-In*, *Paragraph Planet*; open mic at Manchester's *Verbose* and *That's What She Said*. Tweets @moseywriter

Hema Nataraju is a flash-fiction writer based in Singapore. Her work has appeared or will be coming soon in *Atlas & Alice*, *Mac(ro)Mic*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Moria Online*, *Spelk Fiction*, *Sunlight Press*, and in print anthologies including *Bath Flash Fiction 2020*, *Best MicroFiction 2020*, and *National Flash Fiction Day*. She tweets about her writing and parenting adventures as @m_ixedbag.

Mary Ford Neal is a writer and academic based in Glasgow, UK. Her debut collection will be published by *Indigo Dreams Press* in 2021, and her poetry is recently published or forthcoming in *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *perhappened*, *Dust Poetry Magazine*, *Capsule Stories*, *Twist in Time*, *The Winnow*, *Marble*, *IceFloe Press*, *Dodging the Rain*, *One Hand Clapping*, *Eye Flash* and *Crow and Cross Keys*. She is an assistant editor of *192 Magazine* and was *Pushcart* nominated in 2020. She tweets about poetry and other things @maryfordneal.

Lyz Pfister is a Berlin-based writer and translator. She is the editor-in-chief emeritus of *SAND* journal and the author of the blog *Eat Me. Drink Me*. She recently published her first book, *Palate*.

Meredith Phipps (she/her) is an undergraduate student at *Barnard College*. She bounces back and forth between *Manhattan* and northern *Indiana*. She is an experimental work editor for *Wrongdoing Magazine*. If you want to read her work (she's very flattered), check out her Twitter: @merzi1999

Sarah Degner Riveros grew up in *Irving, Texas*, and studied in *Illinois* and earned her doctorate at *Columbia University* in *New York*. She teaches *Spanish* and studies *Creative Writing* at *Augsburg University* in *Minneapolis, Minnesota* where she is currently working on an *MFA* in *poetry* and *creative nonfiction*. She is a single mother of five children. Her work is forthcoming in *Sonora Review* and *Vassar Review*, and has appeared recently in *Barnstorm Journal*, *Yes, Poetry*, *Willawaw*, *Bearings*, *Porridge*, *Brain; Child*, *Murphy Square Quarterly*, and *Azahares*.

Contributor Bios (cont.)

Sreemanti Sengupta writes poetry and short prose and is a Best Small Fictions (2020) nominee. She has a book of poems 'Losing Friends' to her name. Her haikus have been translated to French and some works read at the City Lights Bookstore NY. She owns and runs The Odd Magazine. Read her at <https://senguptasreemanti.wixsite.com/sree>. She tweets at @sreemantisen.

Sylvia Santiago writes occasionally, worries daily, and wishes upon stars nightly. Her writing has appeared in Gasher, Parentheses Journal, deathcap, and elsewhere, and is forthcoming in Crow & Cross Keys. She can be found on Twitter @sylviasays2.

Hannah Storm writes flash fiction and memoir, and her work has been published widely online and in print, and been nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best Micro Fictions. Her debut flash collection is published this year by Reflex Press, called 'The Thin Line Between Everything and Nothing'. She lives in northern England, and is the director of a journalism charity.

Susan Tepper is a twenty year writer and the author of nine published books of fiction and poetry. This year she received her nineteenth Pushcart Prize Nomination and a Nomination from Gargoyle for Best American Mystery Series. Currently, she is in pre-production for an off-Broadway play adapted from one of her novels. www.susantepper.com

Harriet Truscott is a poet and editor living on the edge of the fens. Some of her other recent work can be found in Butcher's Dog, époque ézine, 14 Magazine and Magma Poetry. She tweets at @HMTruscott.

Sherri Turner has had numerous short stories published in magazines and has won prizes for both poetry and short stories in competitions including the Bristol Prize, the Wells Literary Festival and the Bridport Prize. Her work has also appeared in several anthologies. She tweets at @STurner4077.

Originally from England, **Jo Varnish** now lives outside New York City. She is the creative nonfiction editor at X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine and creative nonfiction contributing editor at Barren Magazine. Her short stories and creative nonfiction have recently appeared in PANK, Hobart, Jellyfish Review, Pithead Chapel, JMWW Journal, and others. Jo has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and Best Small Fiction, and is studying for her MFA. She can be found on Twitter @jovarnish1.