

Skipjack Review

2026

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From the Editors...

New Year, new review—new Skipjack! We'll spare you the trite cliches and naval-gazing, all that superficial bullfish that goes in one year and out the other. All we have to say is, So long, 2025! You and your dumpster fire cologne will not be missed. Get your clammy hands off us!

But seriously, 2026 is an opportunity like never before. The trouble is, the fishgibbons and evildoers of this world are thinking the same thing and licking their icky lips. Whether ChatGPT drinks one bottle of Evian or sips a fraction of a teaspoon of Pure Life per prompt, pinky out, this year we must take a stand against datacenters, and all things AI, before drops in the bucket turn into a wave of mutilation intent on doing more harm than good.

Issue 6 is a lifeboat emerging through the fog; a pale rider on a six-legged horse; a shared root zone; a pickup game of baseball in the summer of another life; a father-daughter fishing trip; a taking up of the washboards to scrub our minds; or maybe a bottle of Zinfandel, but who can remember?

Thank you for embarking on this new start with us, dear chum. Thank you for supporting *Skipjack Review*. Above all else, thanks for being you. This world is all the better for it.

Cheers,

Em, MM, and Jim



Being Stuck Behind a Bus on the Way to School

conjures up memories of a bus
ride in Italia, through the Appennini

mountains in a rapid bus blur.
Behind me, a woman in

Florentine print dress,
(a pattern perhaps more often on Castelli ceramics)

has lips an unnatural red,
cheeks layered in foundation,

nails precise and almond-shaped,
thin gold bands on five fingers.

She cradles in her lap a small animal
with pink bejeweled collar.

The creature stands on its
hind legs, scans for a snack,

spiders or scorpions
Ferret? un furetto?

I ask her incredulously,
Eeez meerkat,

she says in English with stilted Russian accent.
I must have heard wrong,

I ask, dall'Africa?
She nods and I wonder

if the meerkat considers bus riders
his mob or his predators.

When we arrive at Tiburtina,
the meerkat is shuffled,

alone in his carrier,
alone for his lifetime.

After the Storm on Base

Several were reported
outside the BX:
Boletus Ruffocinnamomeous.
Instead of gills,
blotchy pores.
Symbiotic plants
nurture its shared root zone.
Tend to thrive near
hazlenut, oak, birch.
Brick red cap will turn
to cinnamon with age.

Megan Blankenship

Descendant's Invocation

Dadgum if grieving's not a full-time endeavor. Are you still with me, Steve? I think I feel you in what snags my senses—a porch light's chuckle on the darkling hillside, or is it Venus, hovering low? An owl's offended growl coasting on cicadas' backs. This body's tendency toward addiction. They say you get one great dog of your life. Wendy died old, wide-eyed with pain, just as Georgia was conceived. O, gather here to me, spirits, ye saints of my songbook! I call you, Steve. I call you, Wendy. Bow-shot toms, extinct moths, unknown builders of the persistent stone fences of Gorby and Hogeye, I summon you now. Take up your washboards and scrub my mind. Burn what I know and what I want on the altar of what I love. Earth and air, grief and gratitude are two flanks of a cavity easily ingressed, a bold summer doe passing dappled through oakshade. This body only feels like a cage. This body is a rawhide knapsack carrying me through paradise, and all of y'all with me.

Ozark Fauna

What Arville was gnawing on
turned out to be a bobcat head.
Folks will set traps by their deer
feeders to keep out the possums
and raccoons. Did you ever hear
your daddy call a biscuit a cathead?
Lately I've started swerving
for moths and lightning bugs.
Nobody I knew growing up
spared any grief for animals,
nor trees, nor natural streambeds,
yet we were all scared of the city,
still are. The other night
I was mourning again for all
that seems to be dying around us,
but Jake assured me there's no
shortage of bobcats in the Ozarks.
And certainly we're wealthy
in possum flesh. On a brisk
butchering day, my tiny friend
Ada found the hogs' blood
beautiful. It's pink, she said,
her favorite color. Of course
there's no special order to what
outlives what, and no god making
what we think should be so to be.
Still I ask, be patient with me.

Jason Ryberg

October

A Halloween wind
is moaning a low oboe
tone through October's
dark haunted forest of strange
birds and boney xylophones.

We Spoke of Marriage, 1980

I think it was a bottle of Zinfandel, but who can remember?
You were on a business trip to L. A.
to film an ad for Buick, or perhaps Pontiac, on the Malibu coast.
Malibu is ash and dust now. It was dazzling then.

You were on a business trip to L. A.
We plunged our Midwest bodies into the surf and rode the waves.
Malibu is ash and dust now. It was dazzling then.
I wore a bikini mostly made of strings the color of sea glass.

We plunged our Midwest bodies into the surf and rode the waves.
Your fair skin turned to burnt toast.
I wore a bikini mostly made of strings the color of sea glass.
We spoke quietly about marriage—yours, mine.

Your fair skin had turned to burnt toast.
We drove to my place a few miles from the beach.
We spoke quietly of marriage—
yours now always disharmonic, the finale of mine.

We drove to my place a few miles from the beach.
You said, “I can’t be the bad guy.”
Your marriage now always disharmonic.
I said, “There’s not always a bad guy.”

You sat on my couch, “I can’t be the bad guy.”
I played Tom Waits on my turntable.
There’s not always a bad guy.
We opened another bottle, but who can remember.

Inhabit Nature

I am an office rat, working the nine-to-five, which is really eight-to-five with an hour-long lunch break that my supervisor regularly interrupts.

I tell my son that I want to quit. Sitting is the new smoking and I sit the equivalent of a pack a day. When I get the chance to stand at the office, I am printing, copying, punching holes, stapling, removing staples, and shredding paper in a drab windowless room. I want to be outside, surrounded by trees, I tell him. I want to be a tree.

Ben says he knows of a place and he promises to take me there next Thursday after his last court case. “It’s just what you need,” he says “a little time away from the office, out in nature.” A forest ranger turned environmental lawyer, Ben doesn’t need much convincing to spend a few days in the woods.

It’s a nine-hour drive from Boston to Millinocket. Ben picks me up around ten in the morning and I press my face to the window and watch the city fade into harbor towns and then the road begins to climb and wind and I feel nauseous. I open my window and gulp balsam-laced air until the beauty of the wild slipping by hypnotizes me and I fall asleep.

*

At eight o’clock on Friday morning we walk through the doors of “Inhabit Nature.” The building isn’t much to look at on the outside, but the inside is filled with tall philodendron and dripping pothos plants, bromeliads, and monstera—a chaotic jungle in which there is, supposedly, a check-in desk. The windows are foggy with humidity and I am already growing damp around my collar and armpits. I shouldn’t have worn polyester.

“Greg, you’ve got guests!” Ben booms into the greenery. Greg appears—a tall, lanky, loping sort of man. “Ben, my dude!” He wraps Ben in a hug and his long arms seem to go twice around Ben’s petite frame. I actively resist the urge to untangle him from Greg’s clutches.

Greg turns to me and for a moment I'm worried he's going to hug me, too. Instead, he announces proudly, "I've got you folks all set up. Ben said you wanna try out our new forest program?" He grabs an ipad from a desk, the lone piece of furniture among the leaves.

"New program?" I ask.

"We just finished piloting this one and it's wicked good. You're gonna love it."

I look at Ben for assurance that we are not about to do something I will regret, but he is gently examining one of the blooming philodendron, tipping a leaf with the pad of his finger.

We go over the forms. Yes, we are in good health. No, we are not at risk for and have no history of strokes, heart attacks, panic attacks, vertigo, etc etc. Yes, we understand there are risks. What risks? Nothing to worry about, standard stuff. I sign it. Ben takes his time reading the fine print.

The room for the forest program is small. I take the bed on the right, Ben the one to the left. The electrodes are cool against my skin, but I am sweating profusely. Why didn't I wear cotton?

"Do I pull the lid down?" I ask Ben, but he is already cocooned, closed off to the world. I close the lid as I lie down and take a deep breath as the lights fade into darkness.

*

A soft wind teases my branches and leaves. The sun is gentle, warm. I feel in my bark that I am a great-grandmother of a tree. My roots stretch deep into the earth, entwined in delicate mycelium. In the morning, I am wet with dew; at night, I relax my branches and bathe my trunk in moonlight. When it rains, I drink deeply from the water running down my leaves, down my twigs and branches, down my trunk in rivulets, down my roots and into the ground. I am satisfied and then, for the first time in many rising and setting suns, I think of Ben.

I think of him when the rumbling begins in the ground and neighboring root systems tingle with fear and pain. The trees around me quiver and a falling tree breaks off one of my branches. I hear the tree moan as it falls. I bleed amber sap down the stub. I scream from my heartwood to my bark. I know in my roots that the fallen tree is Ben and I begin to shake.

I think about paper, about the reams of it sitting next to the copier

at my office. I think about the paper shredder and all the forests it took to make the papers we destroyed after every board meeting. I think about my son and his love for trees. How he used to hug them before he knew how to walk. I think about the tree he inhabits, lying on the forest floor, wood dust gathering on its trunk and its stump being turned into mulch.

The lid of the bed pops open abruptly and I blink and gasp as I readjust to my body, the bed, the sim room.

“What the hell, Greg?” Ben bellows, clambering out of the bed. “I thought you said you got all the permissions for exclusive use of the land?” His face blooms red but Greg is pale as an aspen.

“I don’t understand. We filed all the paperwork. I thought we were good.”

Ben helps me sit on the edge of the bed and asks if I’m okay. I lie and nod. He propels Greg into the lobby, lecturing him about final approvals and legalese I don’t understand, demanding to see the paperwork.

I sense that I am swaying. My hands are shaking and my pulse is pounding in my ears. My right arm aches. Do phantom limbs extend to trees? I examine my arm for signs of physical damage but there is nothing. Somewhere, a tree bleeds.

“Mama,” Ben calls, “I’m going to have a talk with the logging company.” He suggests that I stay behind, have coffee at that cafe on the corner.

But I am done sitting down, sitting by, sitting silent. I think about the cry of the tree as it fell and the forests that have passed through my fingers. A tingling starts in my scalp and skitters to my toes, an electric current of rage. Roots or not, Ben can feel it across the room.

“Or you come with me,” he offers. The invitation is superfluous. I am already barreling out the door toward the parking lot.

Shae Pant

Doll's Eyes



From the Artist

The piece comes from my long-standing fascination with the real Doll's Eyes berry (*Actaea pachypoda*). The plant gets its name because the white berries really do look like tiny glass eyes from old dolls—staring, perfect, and poisonous. I wanted to capture that unease: how something so still can feel like it's watching back.

The drawing reimagines that gaze through a girl whose eyes have become the berries themselves—half-innocent, half-menacing, caught somewhere between curiosity and danger. It's an image about being looked at and looked through, about beauty that warns even as it invites.

For context, I also wrote a poem called *Doll's Eyes* (which I've submitted to your poetry section) that explores similar ideas through voice and desire, though the artwork stands fully on its own. (The poem takes a different tangent where sapphic love and danger entwine, echoing the toxic allure of the berries that watch and poison alike.)

-Shae Pant

River Road

Despite the catechism's drilled-in dogma,
I worshiped my ancestral gods in secret—
white oak, hickory, sweetgum and magnolia.
I touched the bark that shrined them reverently,
never pestered them with wishes or with prayers.

Grown up, living in a city, its few trees
grimed with exhaust, dispirited and dying,
I didn't believe in anything anymore. Later,
in the suburbs, the old faith flickered back
on shady streets where thirsty trees lean over
asphalt—baffled by its sluggish, stygian flow.
I share their thirst, I know their bafflement.

One particular river in the Ouachitas where
the woods were cut a hundred years before.
The crooked trees of the riverbank escaped
the axe, kept their ancient grace and power.

Going back isn't going to happen. To believe
in anything I'll need to start with street trees—
London planes, tulip-poplars and red maples.
Fast growing, not as old or wise as river trees.
When they lean too far over ersatz water,
when they reach out to touch the powerlines,
they're punished by dismemberment into
idols crudely carved from lifeless wood.

Superfluities

Out of the matted layers of dead leaves,
ranged on a bank that's steeped in morning light,
trout-lilies rise up. The trees above still bare.

Gambling on the loan of April sun, all
but a few have flung themselves open,
flaunting their golden-tasseled sex.

Beneath their exuberant reveal,
spring-beauties also bloom—modest,
parsimonious and low, sized to an insect eye.

How to explain the extravagance
of trout-lilies? What is it that evokes
this potlatch opulence of show that's so
contemptuous of expediency and thrift?

Something that can bend dull matter into bursts
of perilous beauty. From a branch above,
a cardinal, courageously colored, risking
everything, lifts his throat in gorgeous song.

DEAD HERRING PRIZE

EMMA GALLOWAY STEPHENS



Emma Galloway Stephens

Containment at Table Rock

The mountain ain't done burning yet.
Is this fire an act of God
or of a careless cigarette?
Is the fire that eats the trees
slander or apocalypse?
Behold the rot the fire reveals—
hear what slips the burning bush's lips.
God help both heedless hiker
and widowed possum, babies on her back.
Fire burns both saints and sinners black.

A Conversation with EMMA GALLOWAY STEPHENS

JIM: *What was your experience with the fire that inspired this poem? (This could be witnessing it personally, seeing it on the news or social media, or any other way that it impacted your life and compelled you to write about it.)*

EMMA: The Table Rock fire and its twin, the Persimmon Ridge fire, took place about an hour north of where I live in upstate South Carolina. The fire started in late March of 2025, about five months after Hurricane Helene ravaged the area. The fire would've been more manageable had it not had hundreds of storm-fallen trees to fuel itself. The fire consumed a state park that I had visited a little over a year prior with friends, and rapidly spread to residential areas. We could smell the smoke for several days, and its haze orangened the air. It took days for them to even contain the fire. Authorities pinned the fire on a group of teenagers who had been smoking in the woods.

I followed the event closely. My community was already reeling from the devastation of Hurricane Helene (we weren't hit as hard as western NC, but we were clearing up trees, picking up power lines, clearing flooded basements and patching roofs for months afterwards –my spouse and I lost power for nearly a week after the storm hit). The fire felt like a caustic irony –we'd already had a trial by flood, so to have a fire nip at the flood's heels seemed apocalyptic. I spent my spare minutes praying that God would protect my neighbors up there by Table Rock. As far as I know, there was only one confirmed human casualty, if that. The fire consumed over 16,000 acres.

The fire reminded me of global, national, and personal tragedies happening while the wildfires burned. I saw a pattern of human suffering at the hands of careless, thoughtless people far more concerned with immediate gain than long-term human flourishing. But I also saw a pattern of the harm blowing back upon those causing it –the fire burning both the saints and sinners black. The Table Rock fire felt like a perfect metaphor for the destruction I witnessed –something frightening and dangerous, but also a threat with an expiration date. No fire lasts forever. This present smoky darkness will also pass.

JIM: *This piece is short and sweet and as sharp as a briar patch. Do you give much thought to rhyme scheme and structural elements when composing a piece? Or do you prefer to let the chips fall where they may and impose form later?*

EMMA: I can't claim my rhymes are always completely intentional. My brain defaults to rhyme unconsciously, sometimes; it's not unusual for me to draft a poem without seeing or hearing the rhymes until I read it back to myself. That said, I find intense satisfaction in rhyme, so I will also find myself hunting for rhymes (especially slant rhymes) as I draft. If I want the line to feel like a gut punch, I seek rhyme. Many of my poems end with rhyming couplets –it's the most surefire way I've found to make a poem's taste linger in readers' mouths.

Looking back at my drafts of "Containment," the rhymes don't appear until the second draft. The first draft pieces together the images, and the second uses rhyme to close the seams. The poem took four drafts to feel complete to me.

JIM: *What connection with nature from your childhood is still with you today and how does it shape your writing?*

EMMA: My childhood connection to nature accounts for the majority of my writing impulses, I think. I grew up in a rural area and spent many hours wandering the woods on our small property at the foot of Paris Mountain. Growing up, my favorite books featured characters reckoning with the wilderness in their adventures. My family vacationed somewhere in the Blue Ridge Mountains every summer; we'd drive for hours on the Parkway, stay in rentals at the top of windswept hills, visit tiny mountain towns that had more trees than paved roads. The hills have a loud silence: you won't hear airplanes or traffic noise, but without those sounds, it's easier to hear the cacophony of birds, the wind, and the rustling of little creatures. The forest feels sacred to me. This sacredness invites invention and creates space for strings of language to form in my head.

Now that I'm an adult, I make a point of spending as much time in the woods as I can. I have an annual state park pass and I live within 15 minutes of a state park — I make as much use of that pass as I can. Many of my poems come from hours of hiking and listening to music or audiobooks — and praying. I don't think my writing life would exist at all without the constant inspiration of the Appalachian landscape.

JIM: *What was the book or piece of writing that first made you want to write?*

EMMA: It's hard to isolate just one book or story or poem. My parents are both teachers and readers; my mother is a professor of American literature. She read me Shakespeare when I was still floating around in utero. They played word- and language-based games with me constantly. They read to me daily. I like to joke that I was "bred in a lab" to be a writer. Thanks to my parents' care, words have always been the air I breathe.

The Nancy Drew books may have been the first to make me think that I could be a writer. I read them voraciously when I was 6 years old. I daydreamed about being a mystery novelist. I would ramble off stories to my mother, who would patiently type them out so I could hold them in my hands. I turned a few of them into clumsily illustrated picture books.

But I didn't consider becoming a poet until I read "The Waste Land" when I was in my early twenties. I was taking a course on modernist poets and my professor spent several lectures breaking it down line by line. I was enamored with its irony and intricacy. I'd written the occasional poem on and off from the time I was 9 (and I really mean one poem every few years or so until college –I didn't daydream about being a poet). But after studying T.S. Eliot, I found myself wanting to write with the same sharpness and precision that characterizes his work. I started writing poems in earnest around the age of 26. I'm 33 now, and I'm not at Eliot's level, but I'm pleased with how far I've come.

JIM: *What is your writing routine and process? (And is there anything you wish you could change or do differently? Any tricks of the editing trade you'd like to pass along?)*

EMMA: I have ADHD, which means my brain chemistry doesn't reward me for sticking to habits or routines, and often won't let me do even the things I love doing –including writing. Thankfully, I have a group of friends that meets once a week to write for an hour and a half. I'm usually able to draft two poems in that amount of time, which I'll either revise or discard. Having the accountability of friends makes it easier to be consistent, even if I'm not producing a huge volume of work. This sacred 1.5 hours/week has resulted in two chapbooks, 51 published poems, one writing award (The Dead Herring!), and one completed MFA –the effort adds up.

I would like to work towards writing even when I don't meet with my friends. I'm trying to be better at writing down lines when they occur to me instead of waiting for a long block of time to write down accumulated ideas. I often forget my best ideas long before I'm able to write them down. The trouble with my brain and rituals is that I struggle to perform outside of that ritual –if my friends and I can't meet to write, I don't write at all. I want to change that. Which means creating a new or parallel writing ritual. Which I struggle to do unless I have external accountability. We'll see how this next year goes.

My go-to revision practice is built into my drafting process. I'll write a few lines, then get stuck, not sure what to say next. So I rewrite what I have, making small adjustments, hoping the changes will prompt new lines. Usually I'll get a few more before feeling stuck again –so I repeat the process, rewriting the poem from the beginning while making little changes (syntax, word choices, adding or subtracting rhyme, breaking lines in new places) until I reach what feels like a good concluding line.

I draft by hand with a ballpoint pen in a dedicated notebook –this tactile practice helps me process ideas quickly, more thoughtfully, allowing me to make a mess of the page and physically rearrange words in a way typing doesn't allow. Once I like what I have on paper, I'll type it out, then start polishing and sending it to a small circle of friends for feedback.

This last step is crucial, and I don't make time for it as often as I ought –but my poems thrive when I make changes based on the feedback I receive. It's humbling to learn my poem isn't as clear as it could be after all of the work I've done on it already, but my work is always better after allowing others to make suggestions toward improvement.

Coast is Clear, They said

Deposit decoy
Stonefish salesman steals away
Europcar scrimmage.

Inn towel rations
Factory-made smorgasbords
German gogglebox.

Blue lagoon shoreline
Sand toys and scalps crab walking
Go-slow street vendor.

Pedalboat rental
Party boat collision swash
Inner ear puddle.

Short-winded black sole
Frozen sand bucket rescue
Tourists on the fritz.

Choppy waves dipping
Lifeguard is whistling red flag
Performer canceled.

Airport gill sonar
Delayed flight, flooding gate change
Jaws in A-minor.

Lacuna

Late sun leans in
on the pond's rim,
golden and unhurried,
through the yellow arms
of witch hazel.

The bracken bows low,
still holding its tattered grace
like a prayer half-remembered.

Light gleams, no urgency,
merely the calm of an early night.

Memory and longing
are the human sides to this.
They return, again and again,
until they forget their names.
They whisper, instead,
what they dream of becoming.

John Grey

Green Mountains

I hike in green mountains.
My mind is as refreshed
as my lungs.

What better to do
but wander
with an eye out for the trees,
an ear for the birds
and the crackle of brush,
where timid creatures live.

My boots snap twig,
clip-clap on rock.
Then I stop for a moment.
A breeze blows gently.
The trees rustle.
A bracing respite
when I've heard enough from me.

That Stank of Spring

Several times each spring, Ladd Callander could count on being ordered out of his parents' home. It depended on the weather and the arrival, at Jewel Pharmacy, of the season's first baseball cards. Most often, he found himself trudging home through March snow flurries with five or six wax-packs of photos and statistics. The mumps-like wad of sugar-dusted pink gum enclosed with the cards lost its flavor within three village blocks.

So March and April gave him days of grace to organize the year's Great Lakes League and to play the opening games. Ladd sought out the cards of rookies and marginal players, enough to fill out small rosters for 5 or 6 teams. He used three decks of playing cards, each card indicating a particular play on the field. Some were marked. Red 4s were walks, black deuces and treys were strikeouts, all 10s were singles. The black 6s wiped them out with a double-play. Ladd kept detailed game statistics.

By the second week in May, his mother began to strongly suggest that he remove himself from his cross-legged seat on the area rug of his bedroom which served as a stadium.

"Is your homework done, before I go any further?" She stood in the doorway, hands on hips.

"Didn't have any." The Flint pitcher gave up a three run homer on the next turn of a card, the ace of spades. Toledo went ahead, 6-0. Ladd did not make the usual crowd noise with his throat.

"Of course not," Janice Callander said. "It doesn't matter. I want you out of the house. Get some fresh air. Blow the stank off of you. And if you can't find something to do, I'll put a rake in your hand. There are still leaves stuck in the lilacs from your half-assed job last fall."

Ladd turned over a single. That did it. The well-traveled veteran on the mound had to come out and each team carried only three relievers. "Really? Do I smell?"

“I wouldn’t surprise me. This whole room smells. Open a window,” Now Mrs. Callander’s arms were folded. She was getting serious. “It’s like mushrooms or something in here. Are you wearing that deodorant I bought you?”

“Yes. Can I just finish this game?” Ladd sorted through the cards in the dugout area then made the pitching change.

“Just hurry it up.” His mother turned to the clothes hamper in the hall closet. Ladd heard her go down the stairs with a hug full of dirty laundry.

His game was only going into the fourth inning, a good half-hour from completion’ But, Ladd didn’t want to give his mother any excuse to make a more intrusive visit. It might be a short leap from her complaints about the musty bedroom to pointed observations about stains recently appearing on his sheets. How about a rain delay? Ladd looked out the French windows that were so handy for hailing persons on the front walk or hiding items in the snow. Sun brightened the haze of green buds on the elms whose roots had continued cracking the sidewalks through the winter. Well, but it could still be raining in Toledo.

Callander needed a light jacket but didn’t dare get grass stains on the one for school. He put on a hooded sweatshirt missing its drawstring. So, he needed a cap too. Several were buried on a shelf above the coat closet, trapping the funk of sweaty foreheads past. He went out the back door and through the enclosed porch. His old bicycle leaned against the step railing. He’d been riding it to school for two weeks, the chain oiled, the chain guard pried into the correct position. All it needed was a fielder’s glove hung on the handlebars for the season. But, it might be too soon for that. Maybe after Memorial Day. April was so rainy and cold that the mitt hadn’t gotten much use yet. It was not yet oiled.

Mom was right about the weather, though. There would certainly be a pick-up game with friends somewhere commensurate with his skills, which were middling. Failing that, he could go hang out at the village library—see if any so-called high achiever girls came in to do weekend homework.

He retrieved his glove and slid it onto his handlebars, an accessory for the balance of summer. He peddled down the driveway and onto 5th Street. Celeryville Elementary, an ancient 3-storey brick monolith

which once served all grades, was four blocks away. But, Ladd and his core of semi-athletic friends had outgrown the confines of that playground as adapted for baseball. The chain-link fences for left and centerfield were far too close to home-plate now. Lost was the satisfaction of watching fly balls land on the side-streets beyond, bouncing high, sometimes narrowly missing passing cars, arrested finally by the shrubs and foundation of the Congregational Church. In right field, you could hit the roof of a doublewide temporary building used for elementary Band. Ladd kept riding.

If there was any baseball being played at 11 am on a Saturday morning, Terry March's backyard over on Main Street was the next likely venue. It wasn't the March backyard, exactly. Nearly three full acres of weeds separated the residential neighborhood from the Pure Oil Truck-Stop and Diner. A Dutch Reformed church and its parking lot next to the truck yard also faced onto Michigan 53. Someone was mowing those outfields besides Terry and Mr. March. The turf was lumpy but all of their ankles were young and flexible.

Ladd could hear the arguments and chatter of early adolescents in competition as he turned into the March driveway. A convenient path had been worn along the edge of their backyard. He ducked a clothesline, skirted a burn barrel for trash and shot through the gap in a greening privet fence. He laid his bike, lacking kickstand, next to four others behind a low backstop built by Terry's father.

“We got Callander to even sides,” Michael Plymouth called.

“You can have ‘im,” Eldon Pratt yelled from a huddle of kids waiting to bat. “And sides still ain’t even!”

“Take right-center,” Plymouth told Ladd.

“Yep.” Ladd jogged into right-center field, adjacent to the backyards of March's neighbors two and three houses up Main Street. Pratt rhymed with fat but Ladd and the others could only think it. The boy had the build of a late-career Babe Ruth. He was a half-hearted bully who seldom got physical. But, he had a cutting, sarcastic sense of humor that no one wished to have unleashed on them. Pratt was also part of the reason why the elementary school fences had become too short. He crushed the ball and lumbered around the bases like The Babe. Sometimes he called his shots, which wasn't difficult with the fences 130 feet away and no pitchers allowed to throw hard.

“Okay. We've got enough guys,” Plymouth announced. “Nothing's

an automatic out anymore.”

The team that took Ladd by default now featured three infielders, two outfielders, with Michael Plymouth pitching. The team at bat was supposewd to provide a catcher of integrity. Positions were determined, in most instances, by where the kids played in Little League last summer. So...Ladd expected right field.

Adam Olivo dribbled a grounder to shortstop. He cursed in Spanish all the way up the line until Danny Brinker threw him out. How difficult it was to make solid contact continued to amaze to Callander.

“Two out,” Michael Plymouth said. Danny Brinker turned to give the left fielder the two-finger, two-out signal.

“I heard him,” Wayne Roy yelled back.

It was Eldon Pratt who now approached the plywood plate, (compliments of Mr. Clark’s skill saw.) He flexed a wide-barreled bat behind his neck, emulating the Detroit Tiger slugger, Rocky Colavito. “Don’t knock the Rock,” Pratt growled.

Ladd began retreating because Pratt would hit lefty, just so they wouldn’t lose a ball into the truck yard. Ladd thought he’d backed up enough but Plymouth waved and yelled: “More!”

Pratt was very fussy about which pitches he would swing at. After four not-quite-right soft tosses, Plymouth said “Aww, c’mon.”

“Well, throw me a goddamn strike.”

On the next offering, the mini Bambino launched a towering fly to right. All Ladd had to do was make three steps to his left and wait. The ball was mesmerizing as it grew in size, descending. You cannot drop this. Pratt was making a show of trotting slowly around the bases. The scuffed ball arrived, at last, with a satisfying smack as Ladd squeezed it. Say something now, lard ass.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Pratt grumbled.

Michael Plymouth’s team jogged in for their next turn at bat. Ladd didn’t get a hit but his teammates scored twice allowing him to make the first and last out. The two groups recounted earlier runs to reaffirm the score. They described the details on numbered fingers of any in dispute. Ladd headed back out to right field.

“Hey, Mike. I have to leave.” Hughie Taggeson walked around the backstop to his bicycle instead of to first base. “My old man’s makin’ me go fishin’ with him an’ my gramps.”

“What the hell, Hughie! They won’t be biting in the middle of the day!”

“Hey, I told ya when I got here.” The boy lifted his junker bike off the ground. “Ya think I even wanna go?”

“Well, shit. We just got even sides.” Plymouth took rare advantage of being an early adolescent boy comfortably beyond adult earshot. Mike was a Boy Scout in Ladd’s troop and was always on the Honor Roll. He and Ladd had even served at Congregational as acolytes to earn the Religion merit badge. “Callander. Can you come in and play first?”

“Sure.” After catching the dizzying fly ball, Ladd was ready to risk line drives.

“Great. Right field is dead again,” Plymouth said.

The remaining outfielder, Wayne Roy, moved into left-center. Danny Brinker backed up from shortstop to shallow left. The second baseman, Clayton Woodridge, moved closer to his base, another square of plywood painted white and set into the worn ark of trodden base path.

Terry March led off for Pratt’s team. He chopped a high-hopper to Woodridge who hung onto it. Ladd hung on to the throw. The second kid up hit a pop fly between Brinker and Roy. Wayne came sprinting in to make a lunging catch then stumbled, skidding to his knees over the soft ground.

“Damn it.” The boy brushed at the muddy stains on his knees, discovering a tear in the denim. “My Ma’s gonna have a shit fit.”

With two out and two bloop singles on base, Eldon Pratt came up again. Plymouth gave him the usual five unsatisfactory pitches.

“Would you please throw me something decent,” Pratt whined. “The Tiger game’s on TV at 1:30. I don’t wanna still be here.”

“Try this one,” Plymouth said. Then he tossed a perfect eephus bloop pitch. Pratt cursed, waited for the lob to come down where it passed perfectly through the strike zone. He lunged, topping the ball toward third base. By some crazy English, it rolled to a stop before Brinker could reach it and make the throw. Eldon huffed to first base and gave Ladd a subtle push as the throw arrived, late. Bases loaded.

“Hey!” Ladd said.

“Well, stay outta the base path, grape-nuts.”

Ladd studied the spring earth from which grass had been worn

away. There was a scent, a faint rot of November mortality mixed with some kind of verdant reprise. The stumble-prone depressions would have been avoided for touch football; would have collected water and snow since last August.

“There’s no leading off, Eldon,” Plymouth said from the pitching slab.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll tag up before I go.” Pratt backed into Ladd again, nearly butting him into foul territory.

“Okay, then. You’re fair game.”

Pratt had effectively screened Ladd’s line of sight to the pitcher. The big kid stepped back as Michael Pratt made the pick-off throw. The toss caught Ladd between the eyes, breaking his glasses at the bridge of his nose. He saw the traditional burst of sparkles, felt the crunch of bone, the burst of blood and snot. Stunned, he dropped to his knees then rolled onto his back. Geez-us, geez-us. Don’t crush your own glasses. He felt one half of the pair under his neck.

“God damn! Are you okay?” Eldon Pratt knelt next to him. “Couldn’t you see it comin’?”

Plymouth and the other fielders had come running. “Terry, run get a wet cloth would ya? Better call his mom, too.”

“I’m going. What’s your number, Ladd?”

“Sebben, doo, four...” Ladd shifted onto his side to bleed into the grass instead of choking on it.

“That’s really gross, it has to be said,” Pratt informed him.

“I’ll look it up,” Terry March yelled, sprinting through the gap in the privet.

“You’ve gotta sit up so you can tip your head back,” Plymouth ordered.

“I’ve got him,” Pratt said, lifting Ladd by the shoulders of his jacket. “Geez-us, Callander. Where’s all the snot comin’ from? If you get any on me, I’ll puke.”

Ladd was soon upright with his head tipped back after Pratt argued briefly that he should tilt it down between his knees.

“You’re crazy,” Plymouth told him. “I’ve got a First Aid merit badge.”

They quickly discovered that squeezing Ladd’s nose was way too painful.

*

Both of his parents showed up in five minutes. Mrs. March met them with a baggie full of ice cubes as they escorted Ladd back to the car. They drove him to the little hospital in nearby Almont. After an injection of Novocain, a tall doctor with strange glasses put a forceps up his nose. Oh. They're for magnifying. The physician wiggled and jerked the forceps then peered up Ladd's nostrils. Ladd spilled a few tears without really crying.

“You’re going to experience some swelling and hematoma.” The doctor’s blue smock came down only to mid-thigh. “Don’t touch it or sneeze for a few days.”

“Two shiners for the price of one,” Clark Callander said. “And your schnoz looks like a boiled tomato.”

“Tanks doe much.” Ladd climbed down from the examination table.

Mr. Callander showed his insurance card at the front desk. He paid cash for the anesthetist who’d given the injection. They escorted Ladd out to the Rambler. “You’re gonna have to wear taped up specs for a few paydays, sport.”

I was wondering how I could look even nerdier.

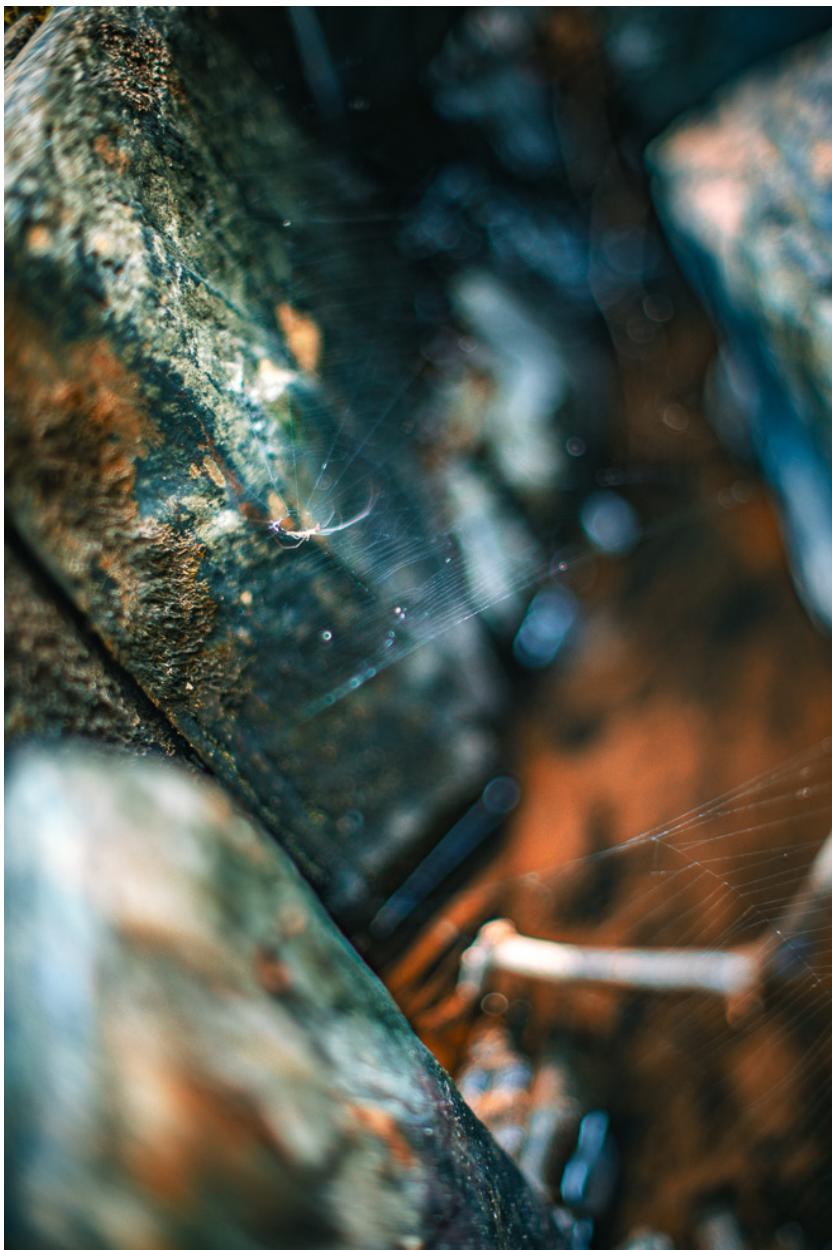
“Maybe you really shouldn’t go outside,” Janice Callander said when they were out on the road.

Great. And home in time for the ball game. “Whud if I stard to thmell again?”

His mother turned to face him over the seatback. She winked.

“Well, you didn’t smell yourself before and now you won’t be able to.”

Web Among the Rocks



From the Artist

One of the things I value most when making art is capturing the beauty that is all around us, making magic out of the ordinary and sharing that magic with everyone I can. In recent years I have started working with a tilt shift lens which lends itself to a softer more dreamlike quality. This image feels like it embodies those feelings, a moment of stillness and beauty found among the sunbaked rocks.

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-Coriander Focus

Trying to Focus on *Slaughterhouse-Five* in May

In May the million beech trees of our forest
leaf at once and the botanical scent
of that new life fills my house, my street,
my yard and even the prison class
where my students are trying to focus
on Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*,
Billy telling us, "so it goes" while he lives
in his own prison, but the woods are close,
and my men are talking about teaching
their kids how to fish, and they remember
their days in the Adirondacks, and they
tell me what it's like when you're hunting,
and what they'd have this time of year for dinner,
how little league's coming soon now that it's May.

Departures

Despite the sunset ripening
to starboard, I look up: steel ribs
swallow the river as we slip

beneath the Manhattan Bridge,
our twilit wake
cut off by a tugboat towing

sediment. If I had worked the caisson,
what would I believe? Down there,
in a pine box with Jonah

and the crew, we shovel muck to sink
—slowly—toward bedrock,
our hearts whipping

in that terrible air, so rich
his vocal cords can only flap while a spark
flares and roars until—

My body remembers to breathe
out. The
water bends.

Liberty carries a torch
for the skeletal cranes of Red Hook.
Jersey laughs like Dad, but with a pipe.

Pale Rider on a Six Legged Horse

A few things for themselves.
-Wallace Stevens

Dive bombers
autumn in the fall
descend, descend,
Repel from
copper-foiled
silver branches,
Camouflaged
leaf piles of
rain gutters.
O' yellow sac spider,
balmy seasons
have granted
quarter from the
icy killing fields,
The arctic jaws
are shattered
wizened winter
has not passed
thru here while
our shovels rust
in mote twilight
corners of sheds,
My joints no longer
creak and knuckles
uncracked

But you art
truly a profiteer
in the war man
wages against
his own watch,
For this all
the skyscrapers
will sink not
underwater
but enormous
white webs
spun of invisible
silk strings.

Of Mice and Windmills

What mighty vision but whispers
in the relic horns of Ammon

that prod free from
the unraveling

straw brim
of the old man

Thane with
striped gray feline

throned
in wire basket

welded to the handlebars
of a blue steel frame bicycle

parading
to the gathered

on the Strada Parco,
is lost to naming;

but by observers it appears
it is the gray tomcat

he is riding,
A beast of glaring

electric yellow eyes
with black moons

captured
in its red harness

and chariot
of wire

My Father Teaches Me to Fish (An American Sonnet)

A trick of his made the silver herring dance.

I watched him thread line through the baitfish,
always heavy gauge- for salmon will take the bait,
snap thin filament and run deep.

My dad knew to play out a lot of line as we mooched
in depths off Point No Point.

I was eight years old, had a rod too,
watched the tip for a quiver, for a strike.

I was ready with a hook and a net to boat the fish,
lay it flopping on the deck. A blow to the head.

An end to suffering.

That trip Dad taught me how to gut a fish—
up through the bung hole to the gills.

To pee in a Folger's can. Life's necessary skills.

Catherine McGuire

Mountain Collage



From the Artist

Mountain Collage was done using torn papers that I had pre-painted, and then oil pastel details. I really like to let the colors and textures dictate the image – somewhat the opposite of having a plan in mind. These greens and browns wanted to be landscape, and easily adapted to trees and shrubs. The blue ink-stained paper became distant mountains, and that speckled beige paper wanted to be sky. There's a meditative, right-brained feel to making such collages – something is guiding me, but not the verbal side of my brain. It feels like a collaboration, with something that wants to be.

- Catherine McGuire

Dive

The water is colder than freezing, but I wade in anyway, lips blueing as the sun slips deeper into the inky lake. We move at the same pace, the sun and me: inches at a time, the world around us rippling with each step. With the last rays of evening stretched thin across the horizon, I throw my arms up toward the trembling sky, then take a deep breath and plunge toward the bottom.

It is our last night here on the beach. In the morning it will be time to pack up and leave our great-aunt's condo, time to put back the four hundred miles between Lake Michigan and my sandy feet. But the night has only just arrived, and I wriggle beneath the waves like one of the tiny fish that dart around my feet, imagining myself as a mermaid or a siren or some other magnificent and creature. Imagining myself inside a body that feels slippery and powerful and mine.

I kick hard, squint through the murky darkness and see nothing but the tiny bubbles threading themselves out from between my pressed lips. No sunken chests of gold, no sign of the drowning sun lodged in the mounds of sand beneath me.

I hold my breath until my lungs are about to burst, gliding with the current and dragging my fingers through the silky sediment until I find a rock to grasp onto, and then I allow the air inside me to carry me back up to the surface. Gasp, shiver, blink away the cold water streaming into my eyes. I look down at my cupped hands to see what treasure I've found. It's a petoskey stone.

There's a story about this rock, one of the picture books in the condo's living room that we used to read before bed. Something about how the sunburst patterns on these smooth stones were etched by the rays of dawn. There's a story, too, about the two islands ahead and the great dunes stretched out on the horizon behind us: the Sleeping Bear Dunes, they're called, because once upon a time a mother bear and her two cubs were driven out of their den by a forest fire, swimming for the safety of the opposite shore. The cubs didn't make it and were

transformed into islands; the mother became the sand dune, curling up to wait for them forever.

Standing chest-high in the water, staring out at the vague shape of those islands in the distance, I feel as though right now I, too, am in a story. I feel as though I am transforming, unfolding softly into each wave that carries me further from land, letting the tidal drift fill me with a magic that swells just below the surface. What kind of legend, I wonder, will they tell about my body when the waves erase me from view?

My parents have always joked about how well I swim for a Midwest kid who's never seen the ocean. How I can spend hours wading and shivering but can't stand a moment of dry sand stuck between my toes. But the truth is that mermaids cannot survive on shore. Without the water to carry me, I am awkward and uncertain; my steps falter on sand and even more so on concrete. Without the water, I feel fragile and vulnerable. But when I can swim I feel smooth and strong and if I were allowed I would stay here forever, deep in the water where I can become anything at all.

But far before forever, it will become too dark and too cold to stay in the water much longer. Soon my father will wave for me to come ashore, to wrap towels around my shoulders and follow him through the tall grass to the lights of the condo. Even underwater I can see the last bits of the evening fading and I know that we will be leaving soon, that this is the last night I have here. That this might be the last chance I have for a long time to slip into myself again, to feel my legs and arms and lungs and heart moving with the current, not against it.

I shake some of the sand out of my hair and dive back into the lake, ignoring my father's call, determined to find just one more beautiful stone before I go.

AUTHORS

Megan Blankenship is a writer living in the Ozark Mountains. Her poetry has appeared most recently in *Phoebe*, *Greensboro Review*, and *Southern Indiana Review*. In 2018, she spent six months living alone in an off-grid cabin in the Pacific Northwest as the Margery Davis Boyden Wilderness Writing Resident. Find her at meganblankenship.com.

John Brantingham is currently and always thinking about radical wonder. He is a New York State Council on the Arts Grant Recipient for 2024, and he was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been in hundreds of magazines and *The Best Small Fictions* 2016 and 2022. He has twenty-two books of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.

Sarah Gane Burton is a freelance writer living in Michigan with her husband, two children, and a dog. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Medical Literary Messenger*, *Third Wednesday*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and the *South Carolina Review*. She enjoys botanical gardens, thrift stores, and looking at other people's bookshelves.

E.R. Davis is a poet, English instructor and artist. A graduate of Northeastern Illinois University, she splits her time between Chicago, IL, and Abruzzo, Italy. She uses artwork and collages to create animations of her poetry that she shares across various social media platforms. Her work has recently appeared in *The Disappointed Housewife*. David Elliot Eisenstat has contributed poems to *THINK*, *The Pierian*, and *Rust & Moth* among others. The Managing Poetry Editor for *Variant Lit*, he lives in Brooklyn. Find more of his work at <https://www.davideisenstat.com/poetry/>.

Chris Dungey is a retired auto worker in Michigan. He rides mountain bike and a Honda scooter for the planet. He follows Detroit City FC and Flint City Bucks FC with religious fervor. More than 90 of his stories have found publication in litmags and online, most recently in *Twin Flame Literary*, *Book of Matches*, and *Backchannels Journal*. His new novel from Amazon KDP is called *Evacuation Route*. His most recent story collection from Amazon KDP is called *We Won't Be Kissing*.

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Coriander Focus is a full time creator, working most in the mediums of multimedia photography and written word. She spent her youth deep in the mountains of rural Appalachia where her love of wild places was cultivated, out of that passion came original art and poetry inspired by the natural world and its influence on our internal experience. Coriander explores work that tells a story about how we relate to ourselves and our bodies using photography, poetry and multimedia art that frolics through the forest.

She has worked as an artist and has had her work displayed nationally across galleries, shows and publications since 2010. Notable highlights of Coriander Focus' recent career have been Peter Bullough Foundation - Summer AIRS (2025) Her Voice, Her Vision - Chesapeake Arts Center (2024) Windows to the Inside - Woman Made Gallery (2023)

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *River And South* and *The Alembic*. Latest books, “Bittersweet”, “Subject Matters” and “Between Two Fires” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Rush*, *White Wall Review* and *Flights*.

Carol Hart earned a PhD in English from the University of Pennsylvania, which somehow led to a career as a health and science writer. Her poems have appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Arion*, *Roanoke Review*, *Scintilla*, *Eclectica*, *2River View*. and *Paperbark*. She lives in the Philadelphia suburbs.

Ari Koontz (they/he) is a queer trans writer & artist with an MFA from Northern Michigan University, where they also served as Nonfiction Team Lead for the journal *Passages North*. Their work has been published in *Storm Cellar*, *BULL*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *Alien*, and elsewhere. Ari currently lives where the water meets the woods and can be found at arikoontz.com or on IG @ari.koontz.

Linda Lamenza is a poet and literacy specialist in Massachusetts. She lives in the Boston area. When she's not teaching, you can find her near the ocean or in her garden. Her work has appeared in *Lily Poetry Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *The Comstock Review*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook, *Left-Handed Poetry*, was a finalist for *Hunger Mountain*'s May Day Mountain Chapbook Series. She is a member of the PoemWorks community in Boston as well as the Italian American Writers Association (IAWA). *Feast of the Seven Fishes*, her first full-length book, was published by Nixes Mate in 2024. Read her previously published work at www.lindalamenza.com

Sigrun Susan Lane is a Seattle poet. Lane has published three chapbooks, *Little Bones* and *Salt* from Goldfish Press. *Salt* won the Josephine Miles award for excellence in poetry from PEN Oakland in 2020. The third, *Drive*, was published this year from Finishing Line Press.

Her poems have appeared in a number of regional and national publications including in: *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Bellowing Ark*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Half Way Down the Stairs*, *Floating Bridge Press*, *JAMA*, *The Mom Egg*, *Malahat Review*, *Passager*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Whale Road Review*.

She has received awards for poetry from the Seattle and the King County Arts Commissions. She has been chosen as a Jack Straw Fellow for the year 2025.

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Zoé Mahfouz is a multi-talented French artist: an award-winning bilingual Actress, Comedy Writer, Screenwriter, and Content Creator, whose work spans fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. An alumna of the London Film School with a Master's degree in Screenwriting, her style is often described as "very tongue-in-cheek," "kookie," and "random." Her sitcom scripts have received praise from major international film festivals,

including the *Filmmatic Comedy Screenplay Awards*, *Hollywood Comedy Shorts*, and the *Toronto International Nollywood Film Festival*, a Canadian Screen Award-qualifying event. Her other writing has appeared in more than 80 literary magazines and best-of anthologies worldwide, including *Cleaver Magazine*, *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *NUNUM*, as well as *Ginyu Magazine*, a respected journal of avant-garde and contemporary poetry, and *The Asahi Shimbun*, one of Japan's largest newspapers.

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Jason Ryberg is the author of twenty-five books of poetry, six screenplays, a few short stories, a box full of folders, notebooks and scraps of paper that could one day be (loosely) construed as a novel, and countless love letters (never sent). He is currently an artist-in-residence at both The Prospero Institute of Disquieted P/o/e/t/i/c/s and the Osage Arts Community, and is an editor and designer at *Spartan Books*. His work has appeared in *As it Ought to Be*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *I-70 Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *The Arkansas Review* and various other journals and anthologies. His latest collection of poems is "Bullet Holes in the Mailbox (Cigarette Burns in the Sheets) Back of the Class Press, 2024)." He lives part-time in Kansas City, MO with a rooster named Little Red and a Billy-goat named Giuseppe, and part-time somewhere in the Ozarks, near the Gasconade River, where there are also many strange and wonderful woodland critters.

Shae Pant is a queer, autistic goblin interested in the intersection of disability justice and design, collecting tiny trinkets and having an unwavering devotion to Shrek as both art and ideology.

Emma Galloway Stephens is a neurodivergent poet and professor from the Appalachian foothills of South Carolina. Her poems have appeared in *The Windhover*, *Red Branch Review*, and *Door is a Jar Literary Magazine* among others, with work upcoming in *Salvation South*, *The MacGuffin*, *J Journal*, and *The Christian Century*. You can read more at egstephenspoetry.com.

Claire Weiner's work has been published in *After Hours Press*, *Burningwood Literary Review*, *Michigan Jewish History Society*, *Peninsula Poets*, *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine* and elsewhere. She spent her non-writing career as a clinical social worker helping people make more sense of their life stories. Their chapbook, *For a Chance to Walk on Streets of Gold*, was published by Finishing Line Press in spring 2024. Claire's second book, *The Sun Finds Us* will be published by Luchador press later this year.

