Thin Places

Literary Journal

3

Thin Places:
a Literary Journal

New Writing
on Thin Places and Sacred Spaces

Issue Three
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Sarah Law and Jane Liffen

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Introduction

Welcome to Issue Three of *Thin Places Journal*. This issue once again gathers essays, poems and fiction from an international selection of contributors, each exploring their own experience and interpretation of the thin place and sacred space, and reading all the submissions this year has been an ongoing privilege – confirming to us how varied, and how universal, this searching turns out to be.

Collating the pieces for this issue, we have been struck by how often the sacred announces itself through creatures. Birds recur throughout as messengers and mirrors – orioles gather at a kitchen window, an owl climbs a eucalyptus, Saint Francis's sermon is reimagined for a burning world, herons and egrets appear to hold grief in a unique, uplifting way.

Elsewhere, the thin place is envisaged as a threshold we are invited to cross: a mangrove line stands between worlds, a boundary well is half-remembered on a Scottish hillside, a grieving woman steps into a room with a clearer view. Loss and insight are folded together in many of the pieces, be it in flight, dappled light or folklore. As you read, you may feel inspired to encounter your own thin places, and rediscover their expansive presence.

Our thanks, as ever, to every contributor for trusting us with their work, and to you for reading it. We're already looking ahead to Issue Four, and would love to hear from you if you have writing that belongs here.

Sarah Law and Jane Liffen, Editors.

ESSAYS

Magical Shifts

Philip Matcovsky

The ocean's sulfurous odor and hypnotic rhythm at the shoreline fed my senses through the open windows of my home. I sat on the plush sofa, removed each shoe with the opposite foot, and pushed them under the coffee table. As was my regular practice, I closed my eyes and cleared all thoughts before breathing into my soul energy, my genuine essence, my ethereal presence. I shifted consciousness.

Living alone on Long Island, a suburb of New York City, allowed me to remove myself from the human experience. At times, I channeled messages through meditation. Some identified people known to me in need of healing, which I provided remotely. In addition, periodically, I received visits at home from spirits with messages to deliver to people in my life – the gas-station attendant on Sunrise Highway, the novelist in my writer's group, my cousin, Lucretia. I believed the healings, and dispensing messages from the other side, had fulfilled my spiritual mission, in part. But the quiet days, sometimes weeks, that passed between those activities left me feeling inactive. There was more I could do; something seemed missing.

After a minute on the sofa, I felt the presence of a spirit. It landed hard to my left, making itself known, although I could not see it when I opened my eyes. I gave it a moment to communicate, and was about to ask if it needed my help, when I sensed another spirit to my right. And two behind me. Spirits began filling the room. I didn't yet understand why.

I perceived the energy around me shifting. It sort of unfolded from the inside and expanded out far beyond my living room. It dizzied me. I was happy to be sitting. A change in myself accompanied it – I was cleared of personal history, past experiences, behaviors. They became memories that were placed outside of me, yet still accessible. I was relieved of my past affecting the present. I was new, or maybe old. My true self.

All the while, additional spirits dropped in. Some became visible: one in Louis Vuitton monogram head to toe, a horseshoe-haired spirit with a clover tattoo on his arm, a laborer pulled from life before a shower, the innocent-eyed young spirit in a baby-blue tutu. I opened up to intuitively read them, and those unseen, like the spirit who moved close then withdrew repeatedly, like a yo-yo. It came near for a second, cautiously assessing me before moving away again. Some spirits felt alone and frightened as to what was next for them. Others persisted on Earth because they feared a judgment of their lives would negatively impact their transition. More, simply did not wish to leave their grieving loved ones who had provided lifelong acceptance and devotion. Ghost parents refused to be pulled from their children, ghost children from their parents.

My intuition guided me to visualize a portal opening through the earth below, and above, to celestial realms. I focused energy through my consciousness to create it around my physical body. I remained there, in the center of the portal.

One by one, earthbound spirits approached me for healing and transitioning. Although I did not see the first one, I felt it deeply as it stood solemnly by my side. It was the yo-yo spirit, positioned just outside the portal. An intuitive flow guided my wording and pace, 'You're aware of the portal and the reason for it, to help you return home. You've been back and forth many

times. Each time away, each lifetime, is a blink of an eye to your soul. Send love and forgiveness to those who have hurt you in this life and release those experiences. Abuse and mistreatment don't exist for you anymore. Your true home is peaceful. You'll be regarded with respect and love as everybody is. Come closer, it's only a step away. Please, a little closer.' Doing so placed the spirit in the portal. In a heartbeat it released all fear and shifted realms, vanishing into the cosmos.

More spirits followed, different ages, sizes, histories, each unique. Some, as the yo-yo spirit, required counseling, which I provided with knowing words streaming through me. I spoke of love being the only guiding energy where they were going, where there were no judgments, only unity; about embodying the soul in the vibrations of creation. I lifted the energy of parents and children with talk of being guardian angels to their loved ones on earth – relationships would not end, but shift in magical ways. Other spirits, who had created blockages that prevented their advancement, only needed access to the healing and transportive properties of the portal. They understood who I was and why they were there. They trusted the process. They felt safe.

The last spirit to receive my help was the trembling young spirit in the tutu. It entered the portal and clutched my neck, keeping itself grounded. Instinctively, I embraced it, feeling the ethereal being quivering in my arms. 'Stay right here as long as you need to,' I said softly. 'You think you're leaving your family, but you're not. I wouldn't lie to you. You will always be able to see them and talk to them. Just whisper in their ears whenever you want to.' The young spirit pulled back to look at me face-to-face, considering my words, then returned to its former position. I continued, 'I'm very excited for you. You're going to a happy place filled with love, where nothing sad happens. You'll have fun there.' At that point, the young spirit drew back again, released completely and was gone.

After that day, I was grounded in my mission, confident that opportunities for spiritual action would present themselves, that I could succeed at whatever came next. And I knew more about the cosmos – that it carried the energy of creation itself, that it created the planets and stars and all organisms associated with them. I sensed it as an eternal living thing. My spiritual life on earth was highly elevated from my experience.

Healing and helping spirits became part of a regular practice for me. I eventually learned there were some spirits that required a second intervention before transitioning. With those cases, my supportive grandmother, who had passed many years before, made her assistance known. She escorted those spirits to me, adding a little of her own magic to the matter. And while I spoke aloud to spirits, including Grandma, they communicated back telepathically. So, if you see me at home, alone, talking to myself amid the sound of ocean waves landing, don't trust your eyes. They can't see everything.

A Ditchwater Aurora

Chris Powici

I was expecting a cool, mild April night, but winter hadn't finished saying goodbye to the hills. All evening snow had fallen. And then, just after midnight, it stopped. Slowly, the bedroom window filled with a dark sky pin-pricked by stars. I pulled on a coat, made my way downstairs, through the kitchen and out into the snowy garden until I reached the straggly barbed wire fence which marked the boundary between Moniack Mhor and a field of Highland Cattle.

I'd come to Moniack Mhor, a loose huddle of houses overlooking Glen Convinth a few miles from Loch Ness , on a writing retreat, though I seemed to be doing as much retreating as writing. That was fine by me. After many years of editing, teaching, meeting deadlines, applying for this or that wee pot of grant money, and squeezing in a bit of writing (and reading) when the chance arose, I didn't want to force the issue. As Virginia Woolf put it, I just wanted 'to arrange whatever pieces come your way.' So, when an app on my phone had buzzed that afternoon to announce that the Aurora Borealis would show up in this nook of the north, I treated the alert as a solemn promise and kept watch on the window. The Northern Lights were coming my way.

The cattle were hidden by a thick clump of gorse, but I could hear the easy, heavy rhythm of their breathing. At my feet a thin, nameless burn, just a few inches wide – little more than a ditch really – had stayed unfrozen and trickled downhill, barely making a dent in the cold earth. But it flowed and even glinted faintly in the wintry dark. This was water on the move.

I looked north, hoping for a different kind of flow: the shimmering cascade of energy the app had predicted. But all I could see was a faint pinkish-green tinge of light, a sort of scruffy halo, floating above the icy summit of Ben Wyvis. It was hardly spectacular, but disappointment was not an option, so I told myself this had to be the Aurora Borealis itself, dwindled to an afterglow perhaps, but the actual Aurora nonetheless. Surely, I deserved more than a scrap of moonlit mist to gaze at and, if I could find the right adjectives, verbs and metaphors, to write about.

Capturing the spectacle of the Northern Lights in words isn't easy. More than a century ago, the New England poet Albert Laighton settled on 'heaven's resplendent fires' - vivid but rather gushing and melodramatic. I preferred Jack London's terse, sensual description of the lights as 'flaming coldly overhead'. Rather more recently, Barry Lopez saw them as 'pale gossamer curtains of light' which 'throw the sky into a third dimension'. I doubted tonight's modest wee show would prompt much in the way of lyricism and insight, but I wanted my share of awe anyway. I wanted my imagination put to the test.

For me, as for millions of others, the grandeur and spectacle of the Northern Lights have a special kind of allure. Essentially, they're a *free* show. They have nothing to do with exchange rates and the price of oil, inflation and bank balances. To just stand and gaze at the Northern Lights for these few minutes, unmediated by the language of advertising and politics, feels simply and authentically human. Even in their dwindled, diminished form, they are more magical and more real than McDonalds or Disney or Amazon. Sure, I could pay a few hundreds, or thousands of pounds, catch a plane to Iceland or arctic Norway and witness the Aurora Borealis in its full celestial glory, but that would seem like bad faith, as if grace and mystery were just

commodities. The Aurora isn't protected by fences and guard rails, and you don't have to employ a guide or buy a license. A country (or fast-food corporation) can't plant a flag in the Aurora and declare ownership, and, unlike glaciers or prairies or rainforests, they're not threatened by global warming. The Aurora Borealis, and its southern hemisphere cousin the Aurora Australis, are simultaneously beyond our collective reach and open to all. They are the earth itself, doing its radiant thing. If the time and latitude are right, you just have to look up.

But the Northern Lights aren't just about the brilliance we can see. If I wanted to close my eyes and *listen* to the Northern Lights, I only had to return to my room, switch on the laptop, and connect to the internet. Karin Lehmkuhl Bodony, an Alaskan national wildlife ranger, has captured the sound of the aurora with a VLF (very low frequency) radio recorder, and it turns out that the music of the spheres, or the Aurora Borealis at least, isn't some deep heavenly harmony, the profound resonance of cosmic chords, but a hotch-potch of peeps, chirps and whistles. When, some years ago, I first heard Karin's recordings on a BBC Radio 3 programme about the Aurora, I couldn't help but think of early morning birdcalls; the Northern Lights sounded uncannily like the high-pitched squeals of starlings as they rouse themselves from sleep.

I wondered if tonight's tiny ghost of an aurora was able to make the sound of starlings waking. Just fledglings perhaps. Then the thought struck that maybe it was the starlings doing the imitating. Maybe they don't limit their famous mimicry skills to car alarms and the cries of other birds; maybe they're able to imitate the aurora itself. If a host of bird species can sense magnetism and so find their way around the planet, why shouldn't starlings pick up on the soundwaves of the solar wind glancing off the earth's magnetic field and sing them back into the world? The starlings we hear every day in our fields and streets could be singing the sky they hear in their heads. Besides, doesn't their very name announce a connection to the solar system and beyond – star-*lings*, little stars. The idea felt so outrageous I wanted it to be true, but standing in the newly fallen snow, there was no music, no birdsong, just an intense, vivid silence broken now and then by the breaths of the cattle beyond the gorse, and the watery whisper of the ditch.

I stuffed my hands in my jacket pockets. Watching the Northern Lights meant facing up to the cold, but, I reminded myself, they were also evidence of how the earth protects its own. If the never-ending flow of radiation from the sun, billions of electrons, protons and alpha particles streaming towards us every second, wasn't deflected by a magnetic field, the earth would be as hot, dry and dead as Mars. We were shielded from all that intense, sidereal heat. Indeed, maybe I wasn't looking at a halo of light floating above these northern mountains, but a slender, iridescent shield laid flat against the plane of night. The idea made sense in all kinds of ways. According to a Norse legend, the glow of the aurora is light glinting off the armour of dead warriors. Other stories inspired by the Northern Lights talk about death as much as they talk about beauty. Another Native Alaskan contributor to the same radio show where I'd first heard Karin's recordings, spoke of how ancestors and forbears assemble at the Northern Lights and look back down on earth, but to talk loudly or whistle in their presence could be seen as disrespectful and provoke anger. All the living can do is watch from afar. The Northern Lights are where the dead gather to show off their power. I liked the idea of the Northern Lights as being beautiful and frightening, homely and mysterious, protective and dangerous. There's nothing cosy and pretty about all that brilliance. Wonder and look for as long as you please, but don't get close.

There was no chance of me coming any closer on that bitter, bright April night. Even the modest summit of Ben Wyvis stood way beyond my reach. I was fine where I stood, between the warm house and the snowy field, letting my gaze roam the sky. The good thing about looking, about just letting the night sky work its way into your imagination, is that you don't have to choose between narratives – between the Northern Lights as the fundamental forces of nature making themselves brilliantly, undeniably known, and the Northern Lights as a shimmering palace of the dead. The Aurora Borealis is where science and myth rub shoulders, and get along just fine.

But it was cold, cold enough it seemed, to blunt any urge from the other writers staying at Moniack Mhor to brave the weather and gaze at the night sky. Or perhaps they were just getting on with writing or sleeping. By now, the halo of light floating above Ben Wyvis had softened. Maybe it wasn't the Northern Lights at all, just shreds of cloud. But even if I had been fooling myself, I didn't feel as if I'd wasted my time. What I hadn't seen, I could imagine, and that's something. To just think about light is also to think about death and to think about life. Or so it seemed, as I turned and walked across the lying snow into the warmth of the house.

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A Letter to Myself at the End of the Summer

Julie A. Sellers

It was written on my favorite stationery from that time, years before, in a style that was far neater and more concerned with flourishes than my current penmanship. Long forgotten between the pages of an old journal, I discovered the optimistic, naïve epistle decades to the day from when I wrote it on the eve of my great adventure, my first journey abroad. I pulled the single sheet from the pink envelope, and a few dried wild rose petals tumbled from the narrow fold, falling softly through my fingers. The vaguest hint of their scent, a mere ghost, clung to the page, an intangible waymark perfumed with the fragrance of long-ago hopes and dreams, leaps of faith, and potentiality.

The idea to write to a future version of myself was, admittedly, straight out of a novel. It seemed like such a romantic idea to write to myself and leave the letter hidden safely in my room in the Kansas Flint Hills while I travelled the world. Besides, I was confident that those months in the Dominican Republic would be nothing but positive experiences of serving on a community service team, meeting new friends, improving my Spanish proficiency, tasting exotic foods, and seeing the sights in between working on the service project. I had finished my sophomore year at Kansas State University, a time when I came into my own in my language studies and met those whom I was certain would be my friends for life. The upcoming summer abroad would be a continuation of that trend, I was sure. As I sat writing at my old, second-hand desk in my room in the family farmhouse, I could already imagine my glorious return. Idealized visions of the summer played in technicolor in my mind's eye.

'Dear Me-at-the-end-of-the-summer,' I wrote, gushing in advance about all the wonderful experiences I imagined I would have had by that future point in time. I envisioned myself recounting my adventures to my family when I returned from distant shores and to my friends when classes resumed. Those quixotic notions were far from the reality I came to know, yet I did foresee with acute clarity that the summer would mark a turning point in my path, a before and after by which to consider who I was and would become. 'I know that she who signs this letter can never quite be the same again,' I concluded. 'But it's time to venture out. Tomorrow may very well be the first day of the rest of my life.' It certainly was, albeit not in the way I suspected when I wrote those lines.

I left Kansas at the end of May, and I spent the days and weeks of that summer working with three others from K-State on a service project with the children and teachers in two preschools in a marginalized barrio in Santiago, Dominican Republic. I played games, helped serve snacks, learned their songs and sang along, hand-copied images for the children to color with their few broken crayons, and let the girls braid my long blonde hair. In the bargain, I learned firsthand about realities that were only concepts to me before: constructions of race, classism, machismo, interventionism, poverty, and privilege. I had anticipated none of those lessons in my rosy letter before I left home, and there were no easy answers to any of them.

It didn't take long for me to realize that the idealized visions I'd dreamed while safely tucked away in my room writing my letter were not wholly my reality. Oh, I made many friends, ate some wonderful meals, and my Spanish proficiency improved greatly. But as the weeks spun

away and the calendar turned, I acknowledged that the days were full of heat, hard work, and often imperceptible progress on the service project. The new dishes ceased to seem intriguing over time, and I grew weary of drawing attention as a foreigner and frustrated with the limited communication with family and friends in the days before email, texts, or cell phones with international plans. Still, when the end of the summer rolled around, and I boarded the plane to return to Kansas, I felt the whole experience was worth it. I was ready for the next chapter.

I had not anticipated how difficult it would be to step back into the life I'd always known. While I was in the Dominican Republic, walking great circles daily to and from my work, life moved forward without me. Crops were harvested and others planted on the farm, and my friends continued to live their lives. Everything around me seemed the same, but somehow, slightly off-kilter. My body still fit at the same desk, in the same bed, yet I was strangely disjointed and out of place, and whenever I sat down with my journal, I wrote 'May' before I realized the date was somewhere in August. I was trying to reinsert myself at that tiny point in my journey where I had turned, and it was impossible to do so.

I intuited accurately in my letter that the summer abroad would change my life, although I had no way of knowing exactly how at the time I wrote those optimistic lines. I discovered that I had less to talk about with some of my friends and family, and they could not fully appreciate the impact of the experiences I tried to share with them. I grew easily frustrated with waste and excess, and I could not always express myself fully in English. I felt disenchanted with my education major, and I realized that I could no more be the high school Spanish teacher my parents wanted me to be than I could turn back the calendar to May. That summer left me with questions and curiosities, and I discovered a newfound confidence and desire to pursue them in graduate school. That letter, so recently written from so distant a place, marked the point where my life turned towards the future that I would forge for myself as a college professor. I've found my way ever since by sharing my love for the Spanish language and Hispanic cultures with others, designing similar hands-on experiences for my own students, and researching the seeds planted in that first voyage.

I had forgotten that epistle written long ago, a letter to myself at the end of that summer, although I suspect I read it a time or two in the intervening years. So much had changed, and yet, I still felt a certain kinship with the idealist of those times. Discovering the letter as I did, on the very date I had written it years before, gave me a thrill worthy of the heroines in the novels I used to read, although tempered with a hint of bittersweet experience. As I read the lines I penned so long ago, I felt at once the presence of three kindred beings: the writer, the reader at the end of that unforgettable summer, and the adult who held the evidence of both in her hands. All of us sensed we should know each other, and yet, we were all strangers. We looked curiously at each other out of the corners of our eyes, like so many passengers on the train. I reached out to them, those younger versions of myself at different points on one path, drinking again of those hopes and dreams, enlightened with the perspective of the journey that time alone provides.

Experiments in seeing

Excerpt from the manuscript *Synchronicity: A pathway home*.

Anne M. Carson

One clear morning not long after I had moved to my mudbrick cottage in rural Victoria in the 1980s, I stood in the roughly delineated 'back yard'. I don't remember season or temperature, but remember noticing the large dead tree branches which had been placed on the ground to shape a vague circle, the hakeas which had been planted to mark a sense of perimeter. Brush had been cleared leaving a grassy area inside this perimeter and featuring a seat made from a railway sleeper. It was a rudimentary back-yard. The perimeter was approximately the same distance as the back fence in my previous suburban block. It suddenly struck me that even though in this instance there was no fence, this is where my eyes automatically stopped, at the previous visual limit. I regarded the scraggly bush which met this 'yard' and suddenly my eyes were free to look to the hills beyond – the Great Dividing Range – and the tower which topped the highest peak. It was a tiny adjustment in focus, and I felt momentarily ridiculous for previously having been on automatic, but I was exhilarated, as if I had broken free from an allegiance to the 'tamed', the suburban. My vision adjustment resonated metaphorically, representing the more expansive view I hoped living away from the city would bequeath.

I took every opportunity to open myself to new ways of being, seeking on the one hand to address my fear of the natural world and its critters, and on the other to connect more deeply with and learn from Country – although I didn't call it that then, nor was I aware of acknowledging unceded Indigenous sovereignty in those days. I spent a lot of time in meditation and contemplation. Sometimes my mediations involved walking, slowing down sufficiently to feel each centimetre as the sole of my foot peeled on and off the dirt paths I walked. I had read that Indigenous people[1] (and later of Zen meditators too)[2] open themselves in meditation to the information the senses bring in. Poet Charles Bernstein writes that 'Poetry is a swoon, with this difference: it brings you to your senses'.[3] Often my walking meditation was a swoon too, as I let my eyes fill with the sight, in season, of the frilled petticoat beauty of the underside of mushrooms, or the muted dun and tan palette of bush colours. It was an ecstasy of sensory stimulation, welcoming my senses, opening to what came to me through eyes, ears, skin, whole body.

My practice of close observation during walking meditation extended to the birds too and I delighted to know their behaviours enough that I could discern seasonal patterns, as in the following poem written many years later but based on this time of intensive learning.

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[1] I first read of this style of open senses meditation in Robert Lawlor, *Voices of the First Day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime*, Inner Traditions, Vermont: 1991.

[2] Zazen meditation is often conducted with the eyes open and speaks of the 'gates of the senses'.

[3] Charles Bernstein quoted on *Penn Arts and Sciences Creative Writing Programme* website. Retrieved 5/11/24. https://creative.writing.upenn.edu/people/books/all-whiskey-heaven, n.p.

Season, grape, song
St Andrews, Wurundjeri-willam Country, Victoria
i.m. Norma Neil 1929-2023

The grapes move inexorably towards ripeness inside the berry
behind its fleshy walls the alchemy of veraison

acids levels fall sugars rise The fruit dehydrates
and phenols and tannins grow punchy with flavour

They broadcast musky perfume into autumn air
wafts of sweet enticement The aromas are streamers

the fruit unfurls festooning the vineyard with intoxicating odours
of harvest Once grapes were blessed

before vintage a priest in regalia sprinkled holy water
over the vines Vestiges remain of the blesséd grape

festivities to thank the land its caretakers
We celebrate the crop with laden tables adorned

with grape-leaf foliage glasses boasting previous vintages
friends proposing toasts Happiness to have the harvest home

Before the feast the delicate balance
of sugar-levels and picking-friendly weather Humans

on hand with measuring devices and daily readings
Teams of pickers snip fat bunches into waiting panniers

Birds are natural viticulturists with perfect timing
for their forays regardless of weather Flocks fly in

with special picking squads preferring their grapes on the tart side
of sweet Scores of Silver Eyes find tears in the nets

wait in orderly aerial queues like planes
in airport landing patterns co-operative collision-free

with no visible traffic control Bird after patient bird flies
through holes smaller than a child's fist keeping entries

separate from exits Vociferous local Gang Gangs troop in
for the day return home to roost each night

Pied Currawongs become familiars in dailiness arriving en masse
to take up temporary residence Dressed in formal robes

they decorate dusty paths with brilliant blood-red splats
studded with ruby gems startling splotches of colour

brightening the dun and tan bush They announce
the season the readiness of the crop A single bird

initiates the call anticipates antiphonal response
It rings out onomatopoeic *currawong currawong currawong*

Volleys of sound echo the valley dawn greetings
warbled into pristine cold mornings

into crisp-skinned days solos sung
into dusk's descending chill

beautiful haunting
Each phrase tapering to eerie vibrato[4]

Staying still and receptive for long enough allowed me to witness this behavioural wonder; silver eyes targeting a tear in the net where they queued, waiting their turn to fly in and have their fill. These kinds of observations were not mystical, but they fed my expanding view of silver eyes and by extension other birds, returning to them recognition of their agency, skills, and adaptability. This process continued to overturn layers of conditioning in me that rendered other creatures as having, as Lynn Turner puts it 'a cluster of inabilities'. She writes,

> Traditionally, various capabilities were defined as uniquely human, and thus as proper only to humans: communication, consciousness, emotions, even the capacity to experience suffering were at various times defined as boundary-making differences. Such differences were placed in a hierarchy of human supremacy, leaving the animals with 'a cluster of inabilities'.[5]

I became aware of how I needed to unlearn and undo many of the limiting beliefs not just about myself (and what 'human' was) but about the world and creatures around me (and open to what I could discern as their nature).

*

[4] This poem was Highly Commended in the Melbourne Poets Union International Poetry Prize 2024.

[5] Lynn Turner quoted in Deborah Bird Rose, 'Shimmer', Edinburgh University Press, 2022. Kindle edition, 7.

I also meditated by closing my eyes and other senses to focus on gently disciplining the mind. This mind disciplining ('closed senses') kind of meditation, I consider to be a direct challenge to Descartes's 'I think therefore I am', which positions the 'beingness' of existence in cerebral activity. These 'closed senses' styles of mediation seek experiences of 'beingness' not generated by thinking or feeling or the senses but, you might say, by 'presence'. I practiced 'closed senses' meditation like this on a cushion on the floor in the St Andrews cottage.

Often when I ventured outside, I engaged in the 'open-sense' meditation, wanting to absorb the environment through all my senses. I wanted to improve my noticing skills. At first, I felt self-conscious when walking slowly around the property – aware that I was not behaving in expected ways (brisk and purposeful walking, for instance), even though no one could see me. It took a long time to lose that vigilance; the fact that it dissipated only slowly, told me how entrenched the inner judge as an arbiter of acceptable behaviour was.

I also wanted to learn more about the life of the creatures around me. Usually, I took paths which were open enough for me to stand upright. But I remember wanting to get a wombat's-eye view on the world and intentionally taking one of their paths which wound in and out of thickly grown tee tree. I had to get down on my hands and knees, round my shoulders and put my head down so branches didn't scratch my face. Smells were so much more acute down there – dust, earth, pungent, rotting botany, sometimes carcasses. I made slow, lumbering progress, tired easily and often had to stop and rest. Unlike a wombat I wasn't exactly built for this gait.

It was while I was engaged in these series of experiments that I read of Jung's writing about 'participation mystique'. As soon as I gulped down the words, I knew I had found my *raison d'être* for being in my cottage, and recovery of this capacity became a leitmotiv for the seven years I spent in that mud brick sanctuary, walking and crawling along the forest paths. Jung describes 'participation mystique' as an awareness of the unity of inner and outer reality.

> Stars, trees and animals are not separated from the 'I' and are mentally just as close as the tribe, children, parents and ancestors. A mysterious bond unites 'beneath' and 'above', the closest and the furthest, the divinity, the animals and the tribe. In this primitive awareness all objects are considered to be alive. The psychic spheres of the inner and outer world permeate each other to such a degree that it is impossible to decide what belongs to whom.[6]

What a distance from the kind of siloed individualism I shared with most of my peers! No wonder I was afraid of mice! Jung himself came to the concept of 'participation mystique' via anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), whose language was stamped with the racist nomenclature of the day, as Deborah Bird Rose demonstrates.[7] Rose's research is derived from being both an anthropologist, and adopted by the Yolnu people of Arnhem Land, Indigenous people living in the extreme north of Australia. Remarkably Lévy-Bruhl did not consider

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[6] Quoted in Tjeu van den Berk, *Jung on Art: The Autonomy of the Creative Drive*, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012, ProQuest Ebrary), 37.

[7] Rose, *Shimmer*, 68.

Indigenous people and cultures to be inferior.[8] He sought to understand how they engage with reality on their own terms and concluded that Indigenous people's thought 'had its own characteristic organisation, coherence and rationality'.[9] Lévy-Bruhl went on to name this 'logic' the 'Law of Participation', (which Jung adapted to 'participation mystique'). Ecologist and philosopher David Abram writes that in 'participation',

> ostensibly 'inanimate' objects like stones or mountains are often thought to be alive … particular plants, particular animals, particular places and persons and powers may all be felt to participate in one another's existence, influencing each other and being influenced in turn'. [10]

Jung also applied what he called Lévy-Bruhl's 'brilliant intuition',[11] and used it to comprehend what he described as the most 'primitive human engagement with reality',[12] from his standpoint as a white Swiss person, turning his focus away from cultures other than his own, to consider individuals like himself. Not only did he develop his theory of 'participation mystique' but he sought to invite and enact it in his own life. Jung greeted the pots and pans in his kitchen every morning and expected his guests to do likewise,[13] thereby enacting participatory relationship even with household objects usually considered to be inert.

This split between the individual and an embedded meaningful sense of the whole, particularly with the natural world is a collective split too, leading us to the climate emergency and loss of species and habitat currently unfolding despite dire reports and warnings and increasingly catastrophic weather events. As much as I felt my brain to be 'handicapped' and my being 'alienated', I was lucky to be aware early in my life that these values were the values my family, schools and culture had inculcated in me. On some level I knew they were anathema to something in me and that I needed to actively subvert them. I lived in the cottage (and walked and crawled those animal paths) for over seven years. I continued my experiments in seeing and perception, ploughing new neural pathways and loosening the egoic hold.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] David Abrams, quoted in Rose, *Shimmer*, 69.

[11] Ibid, 37.

[12] Ibid, 37.

[13] Ibid, 38.

POETRY

Orioles Dawn

Claire Weiner

as the bright spot in a day that begins
too early, again, as if 4:00 am is a decent time
for anyone to be awake.
I stand at the kitchen window, inhale the scent
of steaming Earl Grey, feel the full weight
of my seventy years, weeks of sleep scarcity.
I spot the orioles – dashing, diving, swooping
in figure eights over the open field – their flying
flashes of neon orange zhushing Michigan's grisaille,
their flute-like songs spreading what can only be
described as joy on a morning that began
with so little promise.

Lammas

Ali Rowland

The goddess brings her hot madness
to the after-ploughing feast.
The sun hangs behind clouds of heavy opaque white.
Crows balance on the cylinder bales
imitating drunken barrel dancers, their restless feet
massaging the masses of entwined sticks.
This hay was rolled and pinned yesterday
from crisping windrow, and now it stands
like lines of birthday presents, neatly tied.

Some of the corvids stretch themselves into long
forward slashes, and open their sharp throats.
Others perch on fence posts, still and quiet,
with bead-eyes focused. Some complex rule
of the old world governs their conversations.
They scrap for life forms that have been displaced
by the mechanical cut, sun-baked insects laying
like dizzy desert soldiers, before the evening
curlews come to join the competition.

The Spirits

John Brixter Tino

They say the mangroves walk at night, lifting their pale knees from the mud, carrying the ghosts of drowned fishermen in the crooks of their arms. A woman once followed the tide too far and the trees closed behind her like a curtain of bones. Her children still leave rice at the waterline. The roots breathe. They inhale the salt prayers of widows, exhale small white crabs that scuttle like scattered words. In monsoon season the trees lean together, whispering the names of the dead into brackish water. The sound travels down to where eels coil in cathedral dark. A fisherman's daughter knows the story: her grandfather became a mangrove, his fingers splitting into prop roots, his voice thinning to wind through leaves. She paints his face on the bark with lime. She ties red thread from trunk to trunk so his spirit will remember the shape of a human path. At low tide the mud holds everything: footprints of herons, shells cracked open by time, the imprint of a woman's knees where she knelt to pray. The trees do what trees have always done. They hold the boundary between worlds, one foot in water, one in air, their shadows moving independent of light. When typhoons come, the mangroves bend and the spirits inside them groan with a sound the living mistake for wind. The fishermen pull their boats higher. They know what lives in the tangle, what watches from the breathing wood, what keeps the sea from swallowing the land with its slow, salt-heavy tongue.

In the Company of Winged Things

Lynn Palumbo

Winter's survivor, a great blue heron,
nestles in the marshes, solitary, complete.
As I stand snapping pictures, a great
white egret sails overhead.
Ahhh….my heart croons.
I saw one on the day Sally,
my childhood friend, died at last,
ravaged by alcohol.

I remember not the despairing
years, but twilight murmuring,
golden honeysuckle, the luminous
white bird flying *directly* to me,
passing so close I could feel
the swooshing of its wings,
the ripple of things. My anger
dissolved. The marshes softened.
An unsaid farewell brushed
my cheeks with love.

Saint Francis Gives a Sermon to the Birds

Melanie Huston

My avian brethren, my ornithary sisters:

Yes, you, who build nests in hard warmth of neon,
whose certain wings find the magnet of this earth.
You, spreader of seed and soiler of augury –

Regard!
You owe such blessings to the last invisible god, who
– in casual clockwork and indifferent compassion –
saved your raptorous claws from the asteroid
and released you to the air.

But my little ones, awake!
Do you not spy our future,
turning forward with the sun?

Oh Dove, you no longer clutch at peace.

Raven, Crow, you drop death from your perch
to split apart on the empty highway.

Owl, nightly you pierce my dreams: I see
the trees burn their branches
and rivers kneel, flattened
with mud, while heavy ink
washes the seas!

Children! Arise, escape –
make astronomic migrations!
Go and sound the antiphon,
Cast off your feathers,
Climb out of the ovens!
Pull plastic, wire and coin from your bellies.
Engineer the space-flying vessels to launch you,
cloudspotting,
boldly sailing to distant homes!

Angels, take my tidings
to your armored breasts.

Carry this world in your morningsong.
Crack open the milky egg and spill radiant chaos,
gaining form in new earths,
new stars and heavens!

Birth new gods
on whose shoulders
you may land.

Crossing

Lisa Graley

In seasons of morass
what sometimes surfaces
is transigence, a word that exists
only in its opposite, as in unwilling
to change one's views or agree.

And yet certain griefs call
for a kind of parting, migration,
a kind of relocation that is not quite
submission nor of course
victory, a kind of willingness,
or attitude – *why not speak it?* – to adjust.

You do not immediately say
here the roof leaks,
the carpet stinks,
there are burns and water rings
on the table, the bed sordid
with last week's laundry.

For a while you live there
in the muck of it.

But comes a day when you might say,
I will arise and go now,
cross over to this other place
for a better look at this thing
that has come to pass,
that has been made known to me.

I will cross the hallway,
perhaps the highway,
the state entire
to another room
where the window
offers a clear view,
where there is accessibility
to a balcony and wide doors,

where I can drag my sorry self
to clean sheets
for rest and revival.

Field

Cynthia McCain

There are cows and calves in a dusty field just
greening
in the young rains.
I will meet you there
in the shade
of the hushing cottonwoods.
I won't run.
We don't run.
But the shadows of the swimming leaves
slip over our hands.
We have quiet hands.
My hands sit quiet.
Sometimes the horses roll in the pasture
deviling the dust
hooves waving.

You know the dusty field
and the shadows
of the old cottonwoods.

Bivalve Sermon at the Town Dock

Magnus Briar

The town fades to the collapsing pier,
the bait shop barricaded, the harbor drear
but the clams persist. They cling to the muck as to vows,
each shell, a pair of firm, furrowed brows.

Direful prophecy avoids their bed;
they filter what the fishermen have bled.
They refuse to flee. They refuse to weep.
They tend the bay's confessions in the deep.

I want that. The pearl, the meat, the whole
astonishing allegiance to the shoal,
one foot in silt, one foot in salt, and all
the world's disasters muffled by the crawl

of tide on tide. The town above may burn.
The clams, unperturbed, take their turn
at being ancient, siphoning the sea.
Admire that: the art of being free

by never leaving. Direful times will pass.
The clams remain, tucked into the grass
that passes for plankton, black and sweet.
The town may sink. The clams refuse retreat.

Disrupting a Gray Day

Donna Baier Stein

Leaves loosen and whirl in the wind.
May my thoughts release too,
relax their grip on the branches of my heart.
Sorrow keeps no calendar.
Years pass and still, I miss you –
and you –
and especially you.

I reach back hungrily for the past,
forgetting how mixed its hues,
both bright and shadowed,
like that tangle of leaves
outside my window.

I can't let the gray claim it all.
So I focus on a thin column of sunshine
now pouring over poplar, oak, hickory.
Note the steadfast evergreens,
their needles still green,
and how that bold shaft of light breaks through,
turning the whole morning
astonishingly gold.

Portent

Mark LaMonda

An owl just stepped into my morning,
with long, thin, sinewy legs,
climbed the eucalyptus and is staring down
at the weight of my day –

- Call the doctor
    - who won't answer
- Call the mother
    - who won't remember
- Drive son to assessment
    - won't know the answers
- Drive check to the bank
    - won't ever be enough
- Call the doctor
    - Oh dear, I think I said that.

The owl climbs one branch higher –
as whiskers protrude from my cheeks,
a thin tail slices through my pants.
Have I finally become the least of these?
Am I finally small enough to slip through
the eye of the needle?
I think a leopard is circling the sky
and perfectly round, red eyes
peer ravenously from thick vines.
Oh, the weight of my days
is making me small and predictable,
the silent predators biding their time –
Some I see, some I don't.

Fertile

Ariel Tovlev

For so long my backyard like a bald-headed
Chia pet taunted me, a bully teasing
'I'll never be green,' the brown bold
and unwavering. Then overnight erupted
in little leaves, like the terra cotta after watering
each tree sprouted its own woolly covering.

For so long my own body like a leafless
forest tormented me, a brute baiting
'Maybe if you just watered me,' each morning
as I drank my coffee. I have to remember
I am not a tree, but even then who knows
why or how which tree will sprout?

The slow steady cycle of the sun decides
the spring of the land, while patiently
I await mine.

Small Surprises

Jacqueline Jules

The droopy stems
of a heat-stricken plant
lifting with a little water.
Shiny green blades
sprouting from tiny seeds
the color of cream.
A white egret serene
on whisper-thin legs
waiting for a morsel.
Its long curled neck
casts a shadow on the pond
in the shape of a question mark.
Is it posing a riddle?
Like why a partly cloudy forecast
sounds dreary but actually means
the sun could peek out.
Or how each new dawn
since you left this earth
can still offer a reason
to rise from my bed.

A Lotus Blooms Near Enryakuji

Paul Burgess

One day, it seemed a paper wrapped around
the sweaty, swollen ending of a spear.
The next, its petals opened to surround
the bees on stage with others there to cheer.
Without a written word or spoken sound,
it taught of *then* and *now*, of *there* and *here*
in terms no worse than *where you move is space*
or *time's the digits on a watch's face*.

Subway Stations

Paul Burgess

I like the stations with so many mouths,
with distant easts and wests and norths and souths.
They show the mess of spirits turned to place,
the city with its shifting cubist face.

Brevity in Blue

Isabelle B.L

I swim between the basalt boulders. The mountain looms ahead, smoke coiling into the clouds. The sky is purple, pink, and peach. A crescent moon orbits in purple. Swallows swarm across the pink part stopping only to create symbols of summer. This morning, three scoops of ice cream sitting on a cone. Powerlines appear in peach. The sun is a reluctant riser, and this is a gift. The moon has been my torch. Its shaft of light, my swimming lane. Crickets scrape their wings together treating me to a morning symphony. I slip on a rock. I rub my thigh that will surely be the color of purple sky. I creep over the rocks like a gangly insect exhausted after lugging a larger-than-creepy-crawly-life ball of food up a hill. I collect my tote and towel and ride the serpentine road back to my apartment. Below my balcony is a market. The orange seller's oranges already form a pyramid and even before I switch off the motor, he is squeezing the hell out of this fruit that most epitomizes this island. I chug the thirst-quencher. The colorful streamers criss-cross the market square. The fishmonger slices the fleshy fish sideways. Crates unload. I wash the sand between my toes, but even the pulsating water fall fails to cancel the market sellers' cries. Meaningful cries filled with passion and love for their seven-day, all morning shift. The rumbling train, freight train, makes the building tremble. I silence the kettle. I return to my black arancini. That is the name I have given them. I remember when I was a little girl, maybe six, on my first visit and I was sitting on my mother's lap in the bus. The rocks emerged from the sea like a giant's meal. The name has stuck. I eat a cornetto stuffed with apricot jam and sip coffee at a café. Locals and tourists mingle and head for a morning swim. I am greedy. I want the sea all to myself. I tear apart stale bread and toss it into the water for the striped mullet. They leap and beat the seagulls to it. I step into a cubicle and slip on the diving suit. The camera dangles from my neck. I am delighted to meet first the damselfish who were sleeping earlier this morning. Father damsel is guarding and fin-fanning his eggs. Barracuda approaches. Luckily, I took off my sterling silver ring. Stay away from me sarpa salpas. I want to see the world as it really is not the way you, your black-onyx-embedded-in-gold type eyes want me to see it. Phew. So glad the school of sardines swim away from the plastic bag. A saddled seabream whacks me in the face with its black-spotted tail. 'Sit still,' I bubble-speak and the comber fish obediently sit still while I count their stripes. Ten. Vertical. Orange. I hide behind an arancini-shaped rock when the rockfish swim. I wonder from which part of their body they shoot their poison? I am out of breath, but I do not think it has anything to do with underwater, oxygen tank dynamics but everything to do with the impending flight back to the other place. Starfish waves goodbye and I wave back. Polite, overrated though magical the way they lose a limb and can grow it back again. My skin is wrinkled. Boy defies his grandma. He steps on the slippery rocks because he just wants to sit on *that* rock – the one from which his big brother is paddling his feet. Lunch is in a restaurant hidden from tourists. Linguini with pecorino. I grew up 15, 000 km from this place. My father used to carve pecorino cheese to eat with a piece of white loaf. I extracted the pepper seeds out and ate them separately. But here, the pecorino has been melted and blended with the pasta. Each linguini is coated evenly with the cheese. I finish off with a ball of vanilla

ice-cream, coated in crushed pistachio. The size of a cricket ball. I tilt the plate into my mouth for I need, not want, need the last streaks of green sweetness before it is too late and grab, while I am at it, more horizons for sore eyes.

Dewret Sooth

Adam Flint

In the dark, light's forethought
wonders a field, wanders a word
for lost limit and enclosure,
to wake from shock at tussocky mis-step –
unsunned water
                breaching the split welt –
then butterfly eggs and Jesus of the reedbed
lives again as fen to heaven wet woodland.

*

The grasses listen for an echo
of the begetter in their pigment;
a deep roar, a green pride,
the storm of green manes
dawns an ancient Aye to break
radical affirmations
over the horizon,
as a denizen decked in meadowrind
rises. Lustral dew.

*

Tramping tramping thoughts out.
Steadily a green word
beaten on the fieldfloor –
rapped on grasses and the meekest blooms.
Soon flowers baldrian and all is forgiven.
All at peace in this product, the waters
of *Holmat* immortalise the sun.

*

To shine on nut moss, fountain lattice,
river bristle, woolly apple,
heath star, marsh forklet,
dapple mouthed drab brook fatfoot pocket,
clustered earth, blunt feather,

dented silk leskea,
all truants from the absolute
stray into a name
on their absent way to chance home.

Address to the New Moon

Roberta Eve Tovey

Faced with the usual considerations
of space and time,
the lunar cycles of despair and renewal
in the subjective application

I am oppressed.

Are you pockmarked with craters?
Have the lumps of quarantined moon dust
        generated an insoluble syndrome
        in the minds of experimental rats?
Even with bits of you under glass
it is so difficult to avoid the vocative address.

We poets rehearse this delusion
interminably, inexcusably.
We are the artists of your fantastic cycles.
Even now we cast our shadows
over a great distance.

Why do we continue this monologue?

Submerged Amphorae

Eric Benjaminson

The amphorae, grown together, sit on the ribbed spine of their defeated protector,
Red wine, olive oil and libations from the East, frozen in place and time.
Two thousand years or more, lying still, accumulating sea life, barnacles, coral growths,
Waiting without a voice to be recovered from the seabed.

But their owners and shippers and sailors and buyers are long ago dead,
And their once-complex bodies
Disappeared from the wreck's bones within a decade.
Yet the simplest clay-handled amphorae remain in the waters, almost without limit.
Piled atop and beside each other, they have their companions,
Their brethren, and the various fish, octopi and dolphins who swim by.

And for the dolphins of the Middle Sea,
Sea mammals who by instinct rescue those in danger on their waters,
Now look only at the residue of what they could not or did not save.
Were those unsaved Phoenicians or Romans or Jews or Carthaginians?

The amphorae and the ships now sunk and the sea life creating homes in the ruins care little
While the disappeared themselves would give thought to their unknown descendants.

Remember

Emma Atkins

There is a way to walk
across
this bridge;
a way that makes my footsteps
echo
in the cavern of the trees;
a way that clips my ankle against
the metal railing,
so the clinging nettles
dance;
a way that pauses,
peers into the rushing water
and asks, asks, asks.
When shall I next walk across this bridge?
Will it remember me?
If I make enough noise,
can I instil myself here
permanently?

Breathing in Tarryall Valley

Jenna Wysong Filbrun

The name that cannot be spoken
is the center of the arc
of the moon through the pearl-blue sky
and the turning of the Earth
as we spin around the sun.
This revolution
is the way I pray
as I sit still
on a night-cold slab of time
next to a clump of fragrant sage
breathing
the sweet-crisp air.
A low glow
spreads into the valley
between the hills.
Their heaping curves
lift the night wrap
of concentric worlds
in wafts and streaks of amber light.
The same holy smoke
rises from my bones
where I know
this is me, and I am this,
and the end of us is the Love
that never ends,
that I live my life
having
and wanting.

Surface Waves, for the Love of Rayleigh

Jeannie E. Roberts

When you rest, you catch your breath and it holds you up, like water wings…
– Anne Lamott

Chickadees gather atop the garage
as the remembrance of physics
navigates your way.
Squirrels chase each other down the alley
engage in roughhouse
the velocity of Love.

*

As you dip your heart in less not more
a Rayleigh ripple
a splash near shore
you'll ask yourself
when the tides rise
why not soften the ascension
float in the swell?
Why not slip into the wellspring of rest.

As an appreciator of space

Jeannie E. Roberts

She entrusts the stars and galaxies with questions
places value on the rests between the notes
admires alleys, valleys, and the blank canvas
celebrates slotted spoons and empty rooms
embraces *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*

The Ranch in Wyoming

Rachel Turney

Stand with me here on the edge of the cliff where
the buffalo were herded to their deaths.
Walk with me near the water where
the eagle hatchlings stand.
Follow a swift fox down the lane.
Comment on the cloud movements
and the tiny alpine flowers.
Collect small fragments of rose quartz
for our children.
We are the echoes in the water
and the quiet before the sunrise.
We are eternal as part of the sky,
the ground,
the water.

Senses of the Heart

Ruth Harper

Occasionally in dreams we receive/a postcard with an unknown stamp
– from 'Missing' by Mary Morris

Do you receive messages in dreams?
Not like Biblical prophecies, never that sweeping scale,
but dispatches from the great unknown, on modest themes.
Occasionally, I do not even need to be asleep to glimpse beyond the veil.
My mother sometimes appears as a butterfly;
once, across a smoky campfire, she waved a wistful good-bye.

These encounters, while surprising, offer solace.
I suspect my mind of sifting the scary from the loving,
admitting only images of promise.
It's not as if apparitions are lined up, shoving
for primacy of place in my subconscious brain.
But I've learned to acknowledge things I can't explain.

The blurry edges of discernment deserve exploring;
sit here with me, take my hand as darkness falls.
Shadows of the evening are imploring
us to search for meaning in subtle signs and scrawls.
The senses of the heart allow us to perceive
far more than we were taught we might believe.

The Difficulty

Bethany Reid

Of taking shelter in a body, hunkering down
and staying put when the soul dreams of release –

think of Chopin and Keats, alive
at the same moment in history,

two romantics, tubercular and doomed.
Yesterday, a perfect day

in late autumn, I raked leaves
at my church and helped with the pruning.

The other workers, in their eighties,
didn't complain about aches

and pains, though my hip twanged
and my lower back creaked as I scooped up

armfuls of plum branches and *acer*
palmatum leaves. I brushed against a rosebush

and thorns grabbed me by the pantleg, leaving
a bright coin of blood. Today,

a dull throb. Keats called the body
a prison of flesh and bone. He also wrote

of bowers, which cradle, like Chopin's music
cradles and sways with a listener,

fills the room as if with blossoms.

Deadfall of Trees

Diane Webster

Where first the bark
sluffs off and decays
onto the forest floor
where insects vacuum
residue for food
and home building

and sap gets sucked
dry by seasons of sun,
and the stark leftovers
look like deer antlers
after the herds vanish.

FICTION

'The Monastery' by Vincenzo Cohen

The Boundary Well

James Garry

The cupboard smelled of shelf-paper and dry mustard. Mairi had reached the back of the second shelf, behind three tins of red salmon and a half-empty tub of bicarbonate of soda, before her hand struck it: a small, handleless china cup, white with a faded green line around the rim.

She brought it into the light of the kitchen window. It was slightly greasy from decades near the cooker, but unchipped.

Her mother had kept it here for as long as Mairi could remember. Once a year – though Mairi couldn't now recall if it was late winter or the turn of the autumn – Jean would fill it under the cold tap, carry it down the path, and head up the lane toward the back of the hill. Once, when Mairi was seven or eight, she had asked to come along. They had walked through the wet grass, Jean carrying the full cup with a steady, unhurried hand, until Mairi's shoes were soaked and she began to whine about her toes.

'Why are we taking it up there?' Mairi had asked.

Jean hadn't stopped walking. 'It needs putting back,' she'd said. Then she had added, without changing her tone: 'Mind that latch on the gate, Mairi, or the sheep will be in the kail.'

Jean was not a woman given to stories. She was a woman who paid the electricity bill the day it arrived, kept spare batteries in the door of the fridge, complained about the bin lorries missing the turn, and knew without looking at the printed schedule that the mobile library van came to the end of the lane at twenty past eleven on a Tuesday.

Mairi set the cup on the Formica counter, next to a box meant for the charity shop. She didn't drop it in.

By three o'clock, the box for the charity shop was full of old knitting patterns and mismatched tea towels. Mairi sat at the kitchen table with a mug of instant coffee and the brass-cornered tin where Jean had kept the house papers.

Among the deeds for the cottage, a bundle of receipts clipped together in 1984, and a recent letter from the solicitor asking about a query raised by the buyers regarding an 'anomaly on the north pasture boundary,' she found a folded piece of paper – a photocopy of an old six-inch Ordnance Survey map, soft at the creases and yellowed along the margins. The parish boundary between Kilbrae and Dalmore was marked in faded red ink, following the course of the March Burn through the gorse.

Except in one spot. Halfway up the shoulder of Creag Dubh, the red line left the burn entirely. It cut a tight, neat loop into the hillside – maybe fifty yards across – then hooked sharply back to rejoin the water.

Inside the loop, Jean had made a faint pencil mark: Braid Well.

Mairi pulled out her phone. The modern map app showed the burn, the forestry track, and the thin grey dashed line of the current administrative boundary. The modern boundary didn't curve. It ran straight along the watercourse, indifferent to the hillside above it.

She remembered Jean's anger fifteen years ago when the forestry company had put in the drainage ditches. 'Idiots,' Jean had called them. 'They don't know where the ground goes.' Mairi had assumed her mother meant the soft peat where the diggers might get stuck.

Mairi looked out the kitchen window. Late August light held the shoulder of the hill dark against a flat grey sky. Her back ached from bending over cardboard boxes. She picked up the green-rimmed cup, slid it into the pocket of her wax jacket, and locked the back door behind her.

The hill had changed. The open heather Mairi remembered from thirty years ago was mostly gone, swallowed by rows of dark Sitka spruce planted in the eighties. A wide timber haulage track had cut through the lower slope, obliterating the path she used to know.

She walked past the ruins of an old shepherd's cottage – now just three courses of unmortared stone drowning in tall nettles and crushed bracken – and pushed up into the trees. Under the canopy, the wind made a dry, mechanical hum in the high needles. The air smelled of damp spruce needles, wet earth, and crushed fern.

Near the burn, water rattled through a forestry culvert pipe. Higher up, she heard a faint, persistent trickle that sounded like another drain, hidden off to her right.

She stepped off the soft track into the timber and found the first boundary stone thirty yards above the watercourse. It was a granite post, green with lichen, rising a foot out of the moss. On the south face, an engraved K; on the north, a D.

Ten paces further up stood a second stone, its K facing back towards the first. Thirty paces on, a third stone sat beside a stunted rowan that had somehow survived the planting. Below that, a fourth stone swung the line back down toward the stream.

Mairi looked back downhill. The four stones made the old line plain enough. It had left the burn below her, climbed the slope, turned, and was now heading back toward the water.

Between the stones lay a patch of peat no wider than a cottage garden. In the middle of that loop, where the ground dipped into a shadow between the trees, a small spring bubbled from beneath a flat slab of whinstone. It was unimpressive – a muddy pool overflowing through the moss toward the burn. Sometime in the mid-twentieth century, someone had driven a three-inch section of rusted iron pipe under the slab to direct the flow.

Mairi checked her phone. The signal bar flickered and disappeared; the blue locator dot drifted wildly across the screen before freezing fifty yards to the east. Down in the valley, the muffled gear-shift of a timber lorry rumbled through the quiet.

She stepped closer to the water.

Half-buried in the mud near the mouth of the iron pipe sat a mug. It was a cheap, modern thick-rimmed mug from a motorway service station, its handle broken off clean, filled with dead leaves and silt.

Mairi stood in the damp air, her hands shoved deep into her jacket pockets.

A memory returned: her mother washing dishes while Mairi sat at the table doing her arithmetic homework. The local council had been re-zoning the bin collection routes.

'That bit never belonged to either of them,' Jean had said, rinsing a plate under the hot tap.

'Everything belongs to some parish, Mum,' Mairi had said. 'It has to.'

Jean had wiped the plate with a tea towel, slow and methodical. 'Does it?'

Mairi touched the cup in her pocket. Her grandfather had come up here. Her mother had come up here. None of them had ever claimed to know why.

That evening, in the quiet of the cottage kitchen, Mairi sat down at her laptop.

She found nothing under Braid Well. Searching Creag Dubh alongside the two parish names eventually brought up a digitised nineteenth-century parish survey. A local minister had noted a spring on the parish march, known as the Braid Well and once visited for cures, though he could find no parish record of a dedication. A later antiquarian footnote insisted the spring lay within Dalmore, while an undated local map placed it in Kilbrae.

Mairi opened her email client. She began drafting a message to the regional archaeology officer.

Dear Sir/Madam,

While clearing my late mother's house near Kilbrae, I identified an unmapped spring surrounded by a series of parish boundary stones that deviate from the current OS line. The spring features twentieth-century pipework and historic boundary markers (K/D). Coordinates are approximately…

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She looked at the green-rimmed cup sitting on the table beside her laptop.

She closed the screen.

The next morning was cold and dry. Mairi walked back up the haulage track before the sun had fully cleared the ridge. In her coat pocket, she carried the green-rimmed china cup. In her hand, she carried a small plastic bottle of tap water from the cottage kitchen.

When she reached the rowan tree, she knelt on the damp moss beside the whinstone slab.

She unscrewed the cap of the plastic bottle, filled the handleless cup to the brim with tap water, and poured it directly into the bubbling mud of the spring.

Somewhere down the lane, a crow called from the top of a telegraph pole.

Mairi set the empty cup upside down on the flat stone, just out of reach of the mud, where it sat white and small against the dark rock.

By two o'clock, the solicitor called.

'Mairi? Just following up on that boundary query from yesterday,' his voice crackled through the speaker. 'The buyers' agent was asking about the north pasture boundary shown on the old title plan. The modern register has it as a straight line along the watercourse. Are we sticking with the modern register for the transfer?'

Mairi looked down at the kitchen table. The old photocopied map lay beside her car keys.

'Yes,' Mairi said. 'The modern line is fine.'

'Grand. We'll have the keys off you by Friday then.'

After she hung up, Mairi folded her mother's map back along its worn creases, walked over to the sideboard, and slipped it into the back of her own handbag.

Up on the shoulder of Creag Dubh, in the dark shade of the Sitka spruce, water worked quietly through the moss beneath the whinstone slab. On either side, the granite stones went their separate ways down the hill.

The Magic Touch

Dawn Marar

illustrations by Petra Marar

'I haven't lost it, damn it!' said Southpaw, stuffing a gnarled hand in his vest pocket. 'Mis*placed*, maybe. But not lost.'

'You haven't had a jackknife since the '80's,' said his son, Merle, turning the flame up under the stewpot.

Southpaw looked up from his lap. He turned 93 not long ago. 'It ain't so,' he said. He picked up the corncob pipe, blackened from use, and jabbed a finger in the bowl. 'If I had my knife, I wouldn't be dirtying up my nails cleaning this old thing out.' He looked at Merle, but Merle was engrossed in measuring spices. Southpaw wheeled across the kitchen to the screen door.

Once on the porch, he couldn't remember what he'd set out to do. He decided to stay outside anyway. Whistling softly, he rolled toward the ramp. He reached for the length of clothesline usually left hanging to guide himself down the ramp, but it was nowhere to be found.

'It's *got*ta be out here,' he said over and over again. His head fell forward and he drifted off.

'Pa, what are you doing out here,' Merle shouted, pushing open the screen door.

The old man opened his eyes and stared at his blackened finger. 'I want my jackknife.'

Merle, almost 65, sighed. 'You know you're not supposed to have a knife,' he said. 'You ought to be grateful I let you have the pipe. I'm gonna take you back in the house. Yesterday you complained about your arthritis. Wait 'til it's warmer.' He stepped behind the old man's chair.

'I had the knife in the garden. Cut off a turnip with it.'

'Not yesterday. You haven't been in the garden since – well, maybe '90.' Merle leaned onto the chair grips.

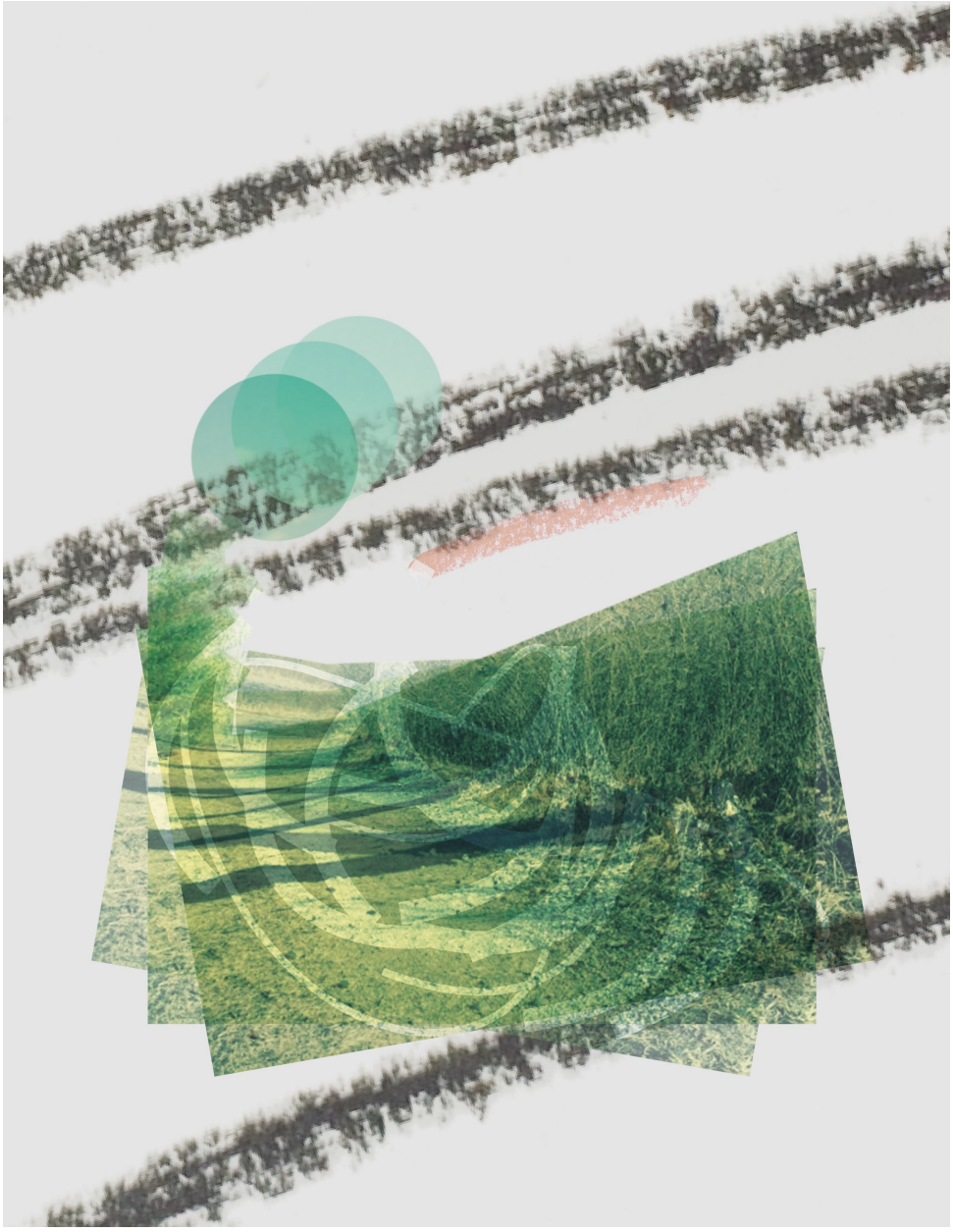
'No, damn it! Stop telling me what to do. Now I forgot what I was looking for.' Southpaw's hands moved lightly over his chest and thighs, up to his head. 'Go. Go on now. Leave me alone.' He waved a hand and then remembered that he'd been looking for the rope and the knife.

Swearing under his breath, Merle crossed the yard and disappeared into the garden behind the evergreens. He didn't work in the garden anymore, leaving it to his oldest daughter and her husband. Southpaw had gardened well into his 80's – well, at least came out and supervised the planting. Still, Merle liked to come out once in a while just to take a look. Southpaw couldn't understand his son's lack of 'physical exertion,' as he called it.

Merle didn't have a sense of humor either. When Merle became a father, Southpaw wanted to call him Northpaw. Southpaw would say, 'It's a fine joke.' Merle had been born in Louisiana, but his daughter was born in New York. Merle wouldn't hear of it. 'You got that name 'cause you're a lefty,' he said.

Southpaw looked at his hand again. The index finger of his left hand was still covered with ash, the underside of the nail caked black. He remembered the pipe, the jackknife to clean it, and the rope to guide himself down the ramp. He reached for the clothesline, but again it was nowhere to be found. He swiped repeatedly around his head.

'Swatting flies, Pa?' Merle asked passing by on his way back to the house.



He disappeared inside before Southpaw could answer.

"Now did you drag it on your way out to the yard," Southpaw called after him anyway. "Always trying to *thwart* my in-de-pen-dence."

He craned his head back until he spied the double line of the clothesline pulley. Squinting, he followed the weathered grey line it cut into the blue sky until it faded from sight.

He blinked hard, searching for the cherry red tail. One of the grandkids had painted it to make it easier for the old man to find the rope. The end was fashioned into a slipknot so he could hold onto it more easily. The length of the rope varied as the kids used it for sport. Sometimes it touched the ground. He strained to find the orange-and-purple striped clothespin bag. Neither marker was in sight.

The view before him was nearly a solid wall of evergreen trees – the ones he'd planted the first year they lived in the house. "Taller than the house now," he was fond of saying. They reminded him of the day his wife Angeline danced along the row when he'd finished planting. He tilted his head, listening for her voice, expecting her to come out from behind the trees. *Where are you now, my precious Angeline?*

Angeline gave him a new jackknife when he'd lost the old one. But then she'd give him a new one every time he lost a jackknife. She used to joke that he lost them just so she'd have to buy him a new one. If somebody else gave him a jackknife – no matter how special – he'd give it away. He would go without one until Angeline gave him a new one.

His face wet with tears, Southpaw gazed at the ramp before him. Not so far to go, he thought, studying the length of the ramp for some time. Not much more than six – seven feet.

He fumbled for the wheel lock although he hadn't engaged it. Merle had the unnerving habit of securing the lock. Finally, Southpaw released it.

He nudged the push rim easing first the casters and then the large wheels over the ledge of the ramp. The chair sailed the rest of the way down with Southpaw reaching, reaching for the rope.

Still, nothing. There he sat in the middle of the yard in grass two inches deep. Going nowhere fast. He frowned and looked about the yard hoping someone would come by. Who that someone would be – other than Merle – he did not know.

He sat exhausted by the effort and fear of descending the ramp alone and without the guide rope. Eventually it occurred to him that the worst was over. He'd already gone down the ramp. 'Old fool,' he chided himself. Then he chuckled. A smoke, he thought. Now that would be good right about now. He poked a finger in one pocket, then another. Nothing. No pipe. No jackknife. 'Damn.'

Again he scanned the air for the cherry red tail of the clothesline, for the orange and purple striped clothespin bag. He panned the evergreens, one tree at a time. The clothesline hung diagonally across the yard. If the tail was not at the porch, it could be at any point along the continuum.

Southpaw licked his lips. The faint taste of tobacco whetted his appetite. 'Damned jackknife's gotta be out here,' he said, over and over again – as if saying it over and over again would make it appear.

A flash of red drew his eyes upward. A false alarm. A silent cardinal.

Turning back to the evergreens, he spotted a flickering slash of red. A vine of berries blowing in the wind? But there was no wind. The line disappeared, then, reappeared. Taut, then jerking. 'Who's there?' he called out. Somebody's playing a trick on me, he thought.

He looked down at his legs. He knew he'd never be able to get up, let alone walk across the yard. Nothing to hold onto, he thought. I'd a surely jackknife.

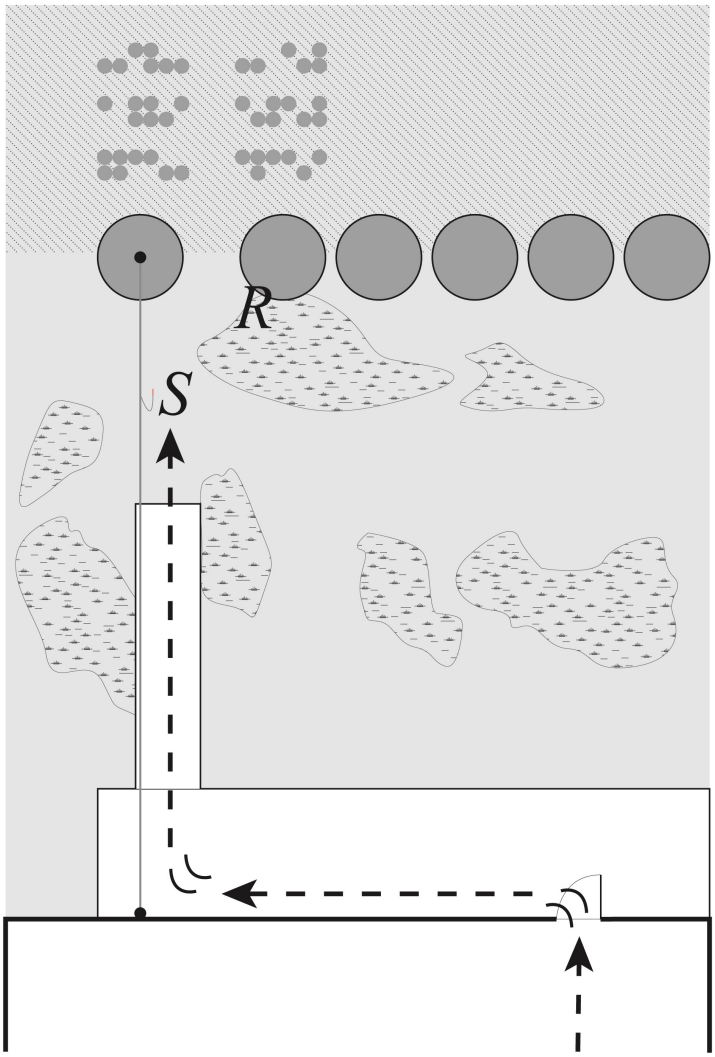
Jackknife. Had it right here. Gonna carve Nettie's initials in the trunk of a tree. ALJ. July 18, 1957. Nothing wrong with my memory, he thought.

Southpaw laid his palms against the metal curve of the push rim and pressed against it. Pressed and pushed. Pressed and pushed. He moved, elbows stinging, shoulders burning, knees aching. Pushed and pressed. His ankle twisted and twisted again. He trained his eyes on the red taut quivering line. The pain grew, but Southpaw thought about Little Nettie. If he got there quick enough maybe he could find his Little Nettie.

When he was within a foot of the evergreens, the red tail disappeared. The rope was so close to the ground even Nettie would've had trouble holding it down. His head dropped forward, eyelids drooping. *Nettie pulled at his sleeve. One of the boys shouted from the field.* Southpaw squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his lips together. What was that boy's name? *An accident – a finger cut.*

When Southw opened his eyes, a rabbit hopped out from beneath the evergreen tree. Of the finest tawny port color. The cherry red rope dangled behind it, upright, like a snake charmer's. Southpaw's eyes lit up. 'Aren't you a pretty one,' he said.

The rabbit hopped around Southpaw; the clothesline followed. He turned, but it circled back around in front of him. Giddy, dizzy with excitement, Southpaw wondered if he was



dreaming. The sun was directly overhead now. He hadn't been out in the noonday sun since – he couldn't remember when.

Just as suddenly as the clothesline appeared, it disappeared. Maybe it was never here, Southpaw thought. He reached inside his pocket for the pipe, but it wasn't there. Then he remembered the jackknife. And the rabbit. And there was the clothesline again. This time it was hooked onto the arm of his chair.

He felt a sudden pressure on his ankle. 'Silly slippers can't protect against anything. Could be anything out here…a snake. No snake you old fool. Just you and your fool imagination.' He leaned over and there sat the rabbit. So tame for a wild one, he thought.

Bracing himself, he slid his free hand down until his knuckles cut through the grass. The rabbit didn't budge. Southpaw wriggled his fingers under the rabbit and with great effort lifted the animal onto his lap. He looked over his shoulder as he straightened up. When he turned back to the rabbit, the rope grazed his neck and cheek. As he turned toward the rope, it cut deeper

into his chin. The rabbit started to fuss, but Southpaw held on. As the rope drew tighter, Southpaw choked.

The rabbit wriggled into the crook of Southpaw's arm. The rope crossed Southpaw's chest and he saw that it was hooked around the rabbit's foot. What luck, he thought. The animal burrowed deeper, forcing the old man's leg askew. The rope pressed against Southpaw's ear, pulling his head backward. If only I had my jackknife. I know I dropped it out here in the grass. He jerked his head about, dragging his face along the rope, finally breaking free of the line.

Petting the rabbit, he said, "I'm sorry you got caught." He plucked at the rope, but couldn't catch it firmly. 'If only I had my jackknife.' He poked about in his vest pocket one more time. Pain gripped his joints as he rubbed his thumbs against the knot. Cherry red paint flaked onto the tawny hair. Tears dropped from Southpaw's face to the rabbit's coat. The rope loosened and the rabbit leaped to the ground. The old man's head fell forward and he drifted off.

'Pa?' Merle called out, letting the screen door slam behind him. The old man didn't stir. Merle hustled across the lawn. Across his father's cheek, the slash of a rope burn glistened. 'Now what have you gone and done?'

Southpaw looked up. 'It ain't so, son,' he said. 'Nope. I haven't lost it. Haven't lost it at all.'

The Ones Who Came Home

Mord McGhee

Karris knew before Louisa parked the truck that morning that Rosedale Arch would not forgive them if they woke it carelessly. The street below was already filling with buses and delivery vans, ordinary life passing the hill without looking up, but the small park around the arch had been cordoned off and left silent. Only a half-dozen flags moved in the wind, not for the dead, the city insisted, but for those who had come home after everyone else had stopped expecting them. If Karris did his work badly, the city would get a faster gate. If he did it too well, it might lose a place where people remembered how to wait.

'Don't make a shrine out of a job,' Louisa said. She carried the sealed instruments against her hip and smiled as if gentleness were a delay she could not afford. 'We certify it today, or the city opens it without us tomorrow.'

Karris looked past her to the curve of pale stone. During the night the fencing had been opened and two short brick paths swept clean beneath the arch, one leading in, one leading out. On festival days, children ran through it beneath the inscribed names of people who had survived the worst of floods, collapses, illnesses, failed crossings, and the long absences a city learns to outlast. Now a new set of listening boxes sat at its base like shoes left outside a chapel.

'Not the biggest, but it's beautiful,' he said.

'Meaning is why they chose it,' Louisa replied. 'Meaning makes people accept what they would otherwise fight.' She gave him a handful of instruments. 'South and west. We don't put it off.'

'Sure,' Karris said. As he walked, he unwrapped each tool from its plastic seal and watched the old stone arch from the corner of his eye. Peace came over him there, but not ease. Louisa disappeared behind the monument, efficient and unseen, while Karris knelt in the grass and placed each point with the care of someone setting bread, butter, and water on a porch for travelers expected after dark.

'First marker's awake,' Louisa said.

'Here, too,' Karris replied, hearing the low hum that meant the arch had accepted his touch. He wiped sweat from his brow and hurried to the next point in the grass. His feet struck the ground harder than he meant to, but he caught himself from falling.

'Stand by while I bring the others into tune,' she told him.

'All right,' Karris answered, looking down toward the road. 'But…'

'But what?'

'I could use coffee,' he said. 'If you aren't opposed, I'll get us some while you finish.'

'Where are you going to find coffee near here?'

'Saw a Wolf Eagles down the block. Want one?'

Karris stepped back and started down the hill. In truth, he wanted to distance himself from the arch before Louisa asked him to say yes. He passed beneath a sign that read 'Survivors' Trail' and pushed through the door of the store, where the scent of slow-made coffee rose to meet him. A man behind the counter said, 'Afternoon.'

'Please say it's not too late for coffee,' Karris said, nodding politely.

‘I’ll put on a fresh pot,’ the man said, rising from a stool. He lifted a glass carafe and emptied it into the sink. ‘This one’s gone bitter.’

‘Thank you,’ Karris said. ‘Two large coffees, please.’

‘You’re not from around here,’ the man said as the old-fashioned drip maker began to fill the pot, its small ticking sounds a welcome distraction from the worksite sounds.

‘No,’ Karris said. ‘Here on business.’

‘Oh, right,’ the man said. ‘Would it be prying to ask what for?’

‘Sorry,’ Karris said. ‘They made me sign a confidentiality agreement.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Not that interesting.’

‘Well, if it’s about Rosedale Arch,’ the man said, ‘I helped bring my brother through the North Gate. Without it, he would not have come home.’

‘We’re all better for them,’ Karris nodded. ‘Ice break?’

‘Ayup,’ the man said. ‘And half the neighborhood had food on the tables before the list even came in.’ He glanced past Karris toward the hill, where the arch stood above the traffic.

‘Glad your brother made it,’ Karris said. ‘Still so many who didn’t.’

‘He was older than when he left,’ the man said. ‘Thinner. Not the same, exactly. But yes.’ He lifted his wrist and showed a crescent tattoo. ‘They marked us back then, to keep families straight. And from crowding the crossing. Didn’t always work.’ His eyes settled on Karris. ‘We’re protective, you know. If you were doing something to our arch, wouldn’t hurt to be upfront. Confidentiality or not.’

‘Actually, we’re trying not to take it from you,’ Karris replied softly.

The man studied him for a moment, then set two lids beside the cups.

‘Then remember what it’s for,’ the man said, pushing the cups toward him. ‘Coffee’s on the house.’

Just then, Karris’s link crackled, and Louisa’s voice came through.

‘Stars is tuned. Carousel too,’ Louisa said. ‘Bucharest, Vegas, New York.’

‘I hear you,’ Karris said.

‘Even Titus,’ Louisa said. ‘Everyone’s answered. Some kid even waved at me. Come back now.’

‘On my way,’ he answered her. Karris nodded to the man. ‘Thanks, sir.’

He took the cups and backed out the door. On the walk uphill, he kept thinking about the man’s brother, about neighbors setting tables before they knew who would arrive. Everyone in the city knew some version of that story. What eased him was not that the work was useful. It was that usefulness did not have to be the opposite of reverence.

‘What took you so long?’ Louisa asked, sipping.

‘Someone who remembered the arch,’ he said.

After a moment she exhaled. ‘Everything’s answering,’ Louisa said. She looked at the twin gates, then at the time. ‘If we delay activation, they’ll want a damned good reason.’

Karris looked at the instruments in the grass, each small light steadier than his hands. ‘Then give them mine,’ he said. ‘It isn’t right.’

Louisa looked at him then, fully. ‘Karris?’

‘What?’

‘You shouldn’t do what you want to do,’ she said. ‘But I do get it.’

His gaze narrowed, and he grunted. Karris then took one of the paper lids from the tray and wrote on it with the pen from his pocket: *For those still on the way*. 'So the first thing they see isn't the blasted system,' he said. 'So it's welcome. Like it used to be.' Then he set it beneath the arch, beside the stone, where the wind could not take it and where the first people through would have to see it.

Louisa didn't follow him. When he came back, she had already closed the truck door. 'I can't keep that off the report,' she said.

Louisa started the truck and drove off. Karris turned in the seat for one last look. Beneath Rosedale Arch, the morning light gathered where no light should have gathered, soft and patient, like cloth lifting over bread. For a moment, something moved beneath it. Not enough to name. Then the road curved, and the arch was gone.

Karris held the coffee in both hands and said nothing.

Superstitions

Karina Kreminski

Today I am at my desk, watching you watch the light. You are sitting on the chair, eyes closed, soaking in the sunbeams as though the rays will absorb into you, into your bloodstream, and give you superpowers. You once told me how important sunshine is – and that I was your sunshine. 'Scientifically speaking' the sun heals us, you said. But it was always so, 'according to folklore'.

So you would regularly lay yourself in the sun wherever its dappled light fell - in the home, in the garden, on days when the sun played peek-a-boo with the clouds. Your favourite place was on the sandy shores of the ocean that surrounded this strange island where we had landed. You would stand there with your hands on your hips, staring, staring far out into the blue. You would breathe that 'fresh, ocean air', again telling me this would be for my healing and that it was always so.

When we travelled to the mountains on this island – which you said were really 'hills' – this transported you back to your homeland. You walked the dusty, rugged trails, picking plants and flowers just like you did when you were a child. You gathered seeds, crunching them in your fingers, lifting the concoction to your nose. Eucalyptus, lemon myrtle and Boronia scents grounded you on the land where you now lived. It reminded you that you left one place to go to another a very long time ago – a lifetime ago. 'Taste this from Nature,' you said to me. 'It will give you strength and heal you. The packaged stuff is fake.'

I wanted to *know* plants like you did. I wanted your fatherly, earthy wisdom to live in me. So I cupped my little hands and held them out to you to receive these plants from this strange island. I took and smelled and ate as though participating in a Eucharistic feast. I felt myself absorbing the enigma of you in the partaking of these elements. I became your body and blood.

'Your grandmother – not the witch, but the one who died when I was three – she was from Sweden,' you told me. I wanted to know her. I dreamt of her. She who came from that white land covered with enchanted forests. A landscape embedded deep in my genes and longing. But no-one knew anything about her except that she was a farm-girl working on the land in Poland. So I turned my imagination to the witch – that other grandmother. Was she really a witch? Or was this a cruel label in those days for an older woman who had the powerful gift of healing by using herbs, spices and potions? Did some of your magical words spoken to me come from her book? 'Lift your little finger up high above your head when you get a nosebleed. That will stop it,' you said. This worked most of the time. 'Brew some chamomile and drink it for that stomach-ache.' That didn't work, the bitter tea repulsed me. 'Don't stare at a full moon,' you told me, wagging your finger. What would happen if I did? I didn't know and I was too scared to find out. '*Sana sana colita de rana, sino sanas hoy sanarás mañana.*' Healing and frogs' tails. A soothing Spanish lullaby or a dastardly spell the witch cast over the sickly children in town?

Your stories, myths and superstitions blended together in my childhood imagination. They are fragments of memory that I grasp to feel close to you now that you are gone. As with a jigsaw puzzle, when I connect these pieces of memory you appear before my eyes. And what does it matter that I can't tell truth from fiction? Because when I now breathe the ocean air,

when I walk in the bush and smell the flowers, when I am found by a ray of wandering sunlight, I smile, remember you and feel healed.

I stand at the ocean shore and once again the pieces of you assemble before me. My hands are placed on my hips and my daughter is by my side. 'Ah. Smell that ocean air. Did you know it has the power to heal you?' She looks up wide-eyed, then back out over the rolling waves. She is lost in her thoughts, your resurrection lulling us into a luminous reverie on this strange island.

The Walking Cure

Richard Lehan

I'll tell you what's been a life saver - that baby seat carrier or whatever they call it. My friend Beth told me: 'Cassie, do yourself a big favor, order one online.' The carrier's shaped like a shelf; you strap it around your waist and the baby sits on top facing out. But it has no restraints so you need to secure the baby by interlocking your hands around her. And Beth was spot-on; it makes walking Natalie around the house so much easier.

My baby girl, who turned four months old last week, revels in being on the move whenever she's awake. Rob and I would have killed for one of these contraptions when her big brother was her age. Because Charlie was a buster compared to Natalie. Back then we would trade off carrying him from room to room until our arms went numb. This was at the height of the pandemic, mind you, when everybody was in lockdown. What a crazy time to become new parents!

Nowadays, Rob commutes to work by train but gets Charlie to and from pre-k while I stay home with Natalie. I'm in my final two weeks of maternity leave, grateful there's a place for Natalie at the same daycare center Charlie went to, but less than enthusiastic about returning to work. For one thing, my so-called career track has turned into a cul-de-sac. Plus, unlike Rob, I have to drive an hour each way to the office. Then there's my co-worker Cliff, who still wears a (now receding) mullet, convinced we're all just one paycheck away from being replaced by AI chatbots.

'Come on, Cliff,' I admonished him, 'surely we humans have more to offer than a machine.'

'Like what,' he retorted, 'our dueling predilections for avoidance and conflict?'

Suffice to say, my current workplace is not exactly a welcome refuge from the stresses at home. I don't have the bandwidth right now, but at some point I need to rethink this whole work-life conundrum. Until then, Rob and I need both of our incomes to pay the mortgage – end of story.

Anyways, this is how I've been spending my maternity leave. Early every weekday morning I lift a wide-eyed Natalie from the crib, her legs pumping inside the sleep sack. Splayed out on the changing table, she lets me put a clean diaper and onesie on her with a minimum of fuss. All the while we gaze intently into each other's eyes, her face glowing from the bond we've forged. Then I breastfeed Natalie in the rocking chair in the nursery, one ear out for the sounds of Rob hustling out the front door with Charlie in tow. Sometimes the commotion downstairs causes Natalie to freeze mid-suck, her eyebrows narrowed into a V. But the instant the door slams shut, we both relax and Natalie picks up where she left off. When she's done, I rat-tat-tat her back until she burps. That's a prerequisite to walking her in the carrier; otherwise, she'll spit up in transit.

I don't load Natalie on the carrier right away, instead waiting for signs of her getting antsy. We'll usually be downstairs on the living room rug, with me stabilizing her hips in a sitting position so she can learn to hold herself upright. When she makes clear to me that enough is

enough, I'll stand up and strap the carrier on. Once ensconced in the seat facing forward, Natalie will rock forward against my hands, which means: 'Gitty up Mama!'

The two of us first head for the dining room, skirting around the oval table where the family eats, then move past the sliding doors into the kitchen where I note the time on the stove clock. Two whirly-gigs are suctioned to the double doors of the refrigerator; Natalie sets them spinning with her chubby fists. From there, we move into the living room and stand before the bay window to take in the view. Except for an occasional delivery truck, the street is eerily quiet on a weekday. In the study, the combination fan-light fixture hangs from the cathedral ceiling. Charlie used to love turning the fan on and off from the switch but Natalie's still too young to even notice it. The bathroom adjoins the study. I'll position Natalie in front of the mirror where she blows raspberries at her reflection. At the far end of the hallway is the master bedroom - what a godsend it is to have both kids' bedrooms upstairs! Natalie and I walk past the unmade bed to the windows that look out on our forlorn backyard. I stare at nothing in particular, usually ruminating over my own unkempt thoughts, until Natalie signals with her rocking that it's time to move on.

The loop through the house ends with us back in the kitchen where I check the time on the stove clock again. A mere two minutes have elapsed; no surprise given the square footage of our modest size house, but deflating nonetheless. Without breaking our stride, the two of us will repeat the same loop through the house, one after the other, Natalie content as can be.

Once another twenty minutes has been eaten up this way, we'll camp out on the living room rug again. I'll usually start with a brief stint of tummy time (which Natalie hates), then sit her in my lap to page through a small stack of picture books. *From Head to Toe* by Eric Carle is one her favorites; she lights up whenever I come to the blue-faced gorilla and thump my chest, asking *Can you do it*? Quiet time in the rocking chair upstairs is a last resort for fear Natalie will drift off to sleep ahead of schedule. Keeping to the schedule is a must, for my own sanity and to get her ready for daycare. Over the course of the day Natalie and I will do a bunch more of these carrier walks until Rob and Charlie burst through the front door expecting supper. Silly boys.

It seemed easier when Rob and I were home with Charlie during the pandemic. With the two of us sharing duties there was more opportunities for me-time. While Charlie napped, Rob went for his solo walks in the nearby business park and I watched countless videos on my phone. We each found our ways to cope. Being alone with Natalie has made me more aware of how time conforms to the circumscribed circumstances of our daily routine. When Natalie and I are on our carrier walks, time slows to a crawl to reflect the daunting excess of hours still to be expended. When Natalie is down for a nap, time races out ahead of me, impervious to my efforts to hoard it. The staticky sound of Natalie fussing on the monitor means my respite is over.

Last night, I asked myself: *Natalie has befriended time; why can't I?* The truth was I had grown tired of my arduous strategies for vanquishing the day. Nothing I tried relieved the friction, not calculating the minutes until Natalie's next feeding or nap nor logging the number of loops through the house. So, on our first carrier walk this morning I decided to try something new. I slowed down the pace to match time's unhurried rhythm, using my breath to sync with its unfolding. Seeking a hidden equilibrium that invites surrender, I realized immediately, this will not be easy. The urge to ruminate was ever present. But the more deeply I *inhabited* the walk,

turning my attention to Natalie without escaping from the mundaneness of our well-worn route, time's oppressive grip began to recede. In a strange way, I found myself outside of time. As we started on our last loop of the day, a certain rootedness began to take hold.

Natalie was out front, piloting the carrier seat as usual.

'So, is that how it's done?' I asked her. She twisted around in the seat, a mysterious smile on her face.

'Well then,' I answered, 'lead the way.'

Contributors

Emma Atkins is a poet and short story writer with a PhD in experimental fiction. Her poetry is featured in *The Stony Thursday Poetry Book*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *The Stripes Literary Magazine*, *Hive Poetry Journal* and others. Her flash fiction is featured in *Blood+Honey*, *The Argyle*, *Chaotic Merge* and others. emmapaigeatkins.co.uk

Isabelle B.L is an Australian author. She teaches English as a foreign language in France. Her work has appeared in *Best Microfiction 2022*, *The Disappointed Housewife*, *Free Flash Fiction*, *the coalition*, *Discretionary Love* and elsewhere.

Eric Benjaminson is a retired diplomat and Ambassador living in Chicago. He lived for many years in Africa and Northern Europe. He has consistently been attracted to quiet and lyrical poetry. Eric has recently been published in *Thin Places Journal*, *Four Tulips Review*, and *Fresh Words*.

Magnus Briar (they/them) is a poet based in Winnipeg, Canada. Their poetry fuses the regional and the mythic, exploring themes of displacement, queerness, and recovery. Their work is forthcoming in various journals.

Paul Burgess is the sole proprietor of a business in Lexington, Kentucky that offers ESL classes in addition to English, Japanese, and Spanish-language translation and interpretation services. He has recently contributed work to *Blue Unicorn*, *The Road Not Taken*, *Light*, *Apricity*, *Star*Line*, *The Orchards*, *Snakeskin*, *Pulsebeat*, and several other publications.

Dr Anne M. Carson is an Australian creative writing teacher, poet and essayist living on unceded Bunurong Country. In 2026 she won the Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize. Her fifth poetry collection, *George Sand (and Me): a poetic biography* was recently published. Her PhD received an Outstanding Dissertation Prize (AERA 2024).

Vincenzo Cohen is an Italian multidisciplinary social artist and writer. His production ranges from visual arts to writing exploring cultural and historical content as well as issues related to social and environmental justice.

Jenna Wysong Filbrun is the author of *Running Toward Water* (Shanti Arts, 2026). Her poems have appeared in *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Autumn Sky*, *Braided Way*, and other publications. She practices poetry to deepen her awareness of connection. Instagram: @jwfilbrun.

Adam Flint was born in London and is based in Berlin. Recent poems have appeared in *Shearsman magazine*, *Pamenar Press*, *Amethyst Review* and *Black Box Manifold*, among others. An album, 'Seen Through Cirrus' made with The Cube of Unknowing, was released on the label Fort Evil Fruit in 2022.

James Garry is a Scottish writer based in Edinburgh. His fiction draws on landscape, memory and folklore, exploring the quiet ways people inherit places, stories and traditions. His work has appeared in Northern Earth, and his story 'The Grey Singer' was runner-up in *The Fairy Tale Magazine*'s 2026 Sirens competition.

Lisa Graley teaches English and humanities classes at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, devoting special attention to courses on Plagues and Poxes, Medicine and Disease, and Scriptures as Literature. She has published one volume of poetry (*Box of Blue Horses*, Gival, 2013) and one volume of stories (*The Current that Carries*, Univ. of Georgia Press, 2016).

Ruth Harper, Professor Emerita of Counseling at South Dakota State University, became a poet in retirement. She has published two chapbooks, *Uncertain Seasons* (Finishing Line Press, 2023), and *Dreaming the Sturgeon Moon* (South Dakota State Poetry Society chapbook contest winner, 2025).

Melanie Huston (she/her) is a librarian, designer, coder and poet. Her work has appeared in *dot dot dash*, *Lines + Stars*, *Pomme Journal*, and *The Banyan Review*. She posts micropoems and original photography as blue.data.muse on Instagram. Originally from Chicago, she lives outside Washington, D.C.

Jacqueline Jules is the author of *The Golden Key to the Garden* (Bottlecap Press, 2026), *Manna in the Morning* (Kelsay Books, 2021), *Itzhak Perlman's Broken String*, winner of the 2016 Helen Kay Chapbook Prize from Evening Street Press, and *Smoke at the Pentagon: Poems to Remember* (Bushel & Peck, 2023).

Karina Kreminski is an Argentine-Slavic Australian writer. She has published a book about an urban spirituality and written articles for various magazines and academic journals. Her work has appeared in *Feed the Holy*, *The South Sydney Herald*, *The Big Issue* and *The Buenos Aires Herald*. She is currently writing her next book about getting lost. Karina identifies as a flâneuse, orophile and mystic. Find her on substack.com/@karinakreminski.

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, **Mark LaMonda** is an artist and writer who currently lives in Santa Clarita California. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Amethyst Review*, *Tough Poets Review*, *iExile*, *Autumn Sky*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Feed the Holy*, and *Blue Unicorn*.

Richard Lehan is a fiction writer living in Massachusetts. His fiction has appeared in *Story Sanctum*, *Coneflower Cafe magazine*, *Rushing Thru the Dark*, *Stolen Shoes Literary & Art Magazine*, *Sudden Flash*, *Feed the Holy*, and *Suisun Valley Review*.

In addition to short stories, **Dawn Marar** is the author of a chapbook of poetry, *Efflorescence*. Illustrations for 'The Magic Touch' were created by **Petra Marar**, a landscape architect.

Philip Matcovsky's writing is nominated for Best Small Fictions 2026. It features in *Amethyst Review*, *Odyssey Magazine*, *Braided Way Magazine*, *DarkWinter Literary Magazine*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and elsewhere. Philip is a lightworker and cosmic traveler based in New York.
philipmatcovsky.com

Cynthia McCain writes in southwest New Mexico. Her work has appeared in journals and anthologies, including *The Rumpus, Blue Heron Review*, and *Halfway Down the Stairs*. Her chapbook, *The Dream of Falling*, was published by Finishing Line Press.

Mord McGhee, author of *Ironblood & The Seven Children of God*, is a multi-award–nominated novelist (Maya Angelou, Harriet Beecher-Stowe, Bram Stoker) & an IMDb-credited producer behind Hollywood films. Mord is also editor of *Coreopsis Journal of Myth & Theatre*.

Lynn Palumbo is a practicing Zen Buddhist whose poetry comes from her practice of silence. Her work has appeared in *Urthona*, *Amethyst Review*, *The Avocet*, *Tiferet* and *Braided Way*.

Chris Powici lives in rural Perthshire where he writes poetry and occasional essays. He is one of the people behind the exciting, new(ish) zine *Paperboats*, dedicated to writing about climate change and other environmental issues. His latest poetry collection, *Dint*, has recently been published by Red Squirrel.

Bethany Reid's most recent poetry book is *The Pear Tree: Elegy for a Farm*. She lives in Edmonds, Washington, and blogs about writing and life at bethanyareid.com.

Jeannie E. Roberts is the author of nine books, including *On a Clear Night, I Can Hear My Body Sing* (Kelsay Books, 2025). From 2018 to 2026, she served as a poetry editor for the online literary magazine *Halfway Down the Stairs*.

Ali Rowland is a writer from Northumberland, UK. Her fourth collection *Coquet Tales* (2026, Coket Island Press) has just been published. You can follow her poetic ramblings and thoughts on being a dog mum at 'Musings of a Mad Woman' on Substack.

Julie A. Sellers of Kansas is the author of the novel *Ann of Sunflower Lane* (Meadowlark, 2022), and *Kindred Verse: Poems Inspired by Anne of Green Gables* (Blue Cedar Press, 2021). Julie's creative work has appeared in *Cagibi*, *Wanderlust*, *Unlost*, *The Write Launch*, and *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies*.

Poet **Donna Baier Stein** is the founder of *Tiferet Journal*. Alongside three books of fiction, she has been published in outlets including *the Washingtonian* and *Paterson Literary Review*, and has received two Pushcart nominations. She has published two chapbooks: *Sometimes You Sense the Difference* and *Letting Rain Have Its Say*.

John Brixter Tino is a son of a fisherman and is a person with disabilities. He was raised in Perez, Quezon, Philippines. He currently serves as a part-time instructor at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, where he completed his Bachelor of Arts in Literary and Cultural Studies.

Roberta Eve Tovey is a writer, editor, and poet. A former college professor of literature, she now serves as communications and operations director at a major Boston hospital. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Consequence*, *Muleskinner Journal*, *Comstock Review*, *Minyan Magazine*, *Lips Poetry Magazine*, *Slipstream*, and other journals.

Ariel Tovlev (he/they) is a queer/trans poet whose writing focuses on identity, spirituality, and finding beauty in the ordinary. He received his BFA from the University of British Columbia and his MFA from Chapman University. He lives in DC with his spouse, their four cats, and a multitude of houseplants.

Rachel Turney, Ed.D. (she/her) is the Writer in Residence (2026) at NKollectiv in Englewood, Colorado. Rachel is the founder of the popular online reading series Poetry (in Brief). She is on staff at *Bare Back Magazine* and reads for *The Los Angeles Review*. Website: turneytalks.com Instagram: @turneytalks

Diane Webster's work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *New English Review*, *Studio One* and elsewhere. Five micro-chaps have been published by Origami Poetry Press. Diane was a featured writer in *Macrame Literary Journal* and *WestWard Quarterly*. dianewebster.com

Claire Weiner's work has been published in *After Hours Press*, *Peninsula Poets*, *Intima* and others. Her chapbook, *For a Chance to Walk on Streets of Gold*, was published by Finishing Line in 2024. Her second book, *The Sun Finds Us* was published by Luchador in summer 2026.