THE SERAPHIC REVIEW

ISSUE 7 | MARCH 2025

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Jen Blair

Fictions of Walking and Falling

In one story, the machine parts
of my mother's hips develop wings,
ceramic feathers on a titanium grid,
and this is how she walks now,
angel in all the wrong places.

Another story, after her fourth
hip, she did not fall in physical
therapy but when she did, the wound
opened a second mouth on her thigh,
and this was the mouth of fear.

In another story, the honey for her open
wound came packaged in small white
squares, honey coating a seaweed bandage.
For 400 days and nights after she fell,
she never fell, she washed her hands
and packed the gash on her thigh
with sweetness that went to the bone.

My mother falls in fire and wine. She lights
her own way down on each descent.

Nest in Place of the Heart

A plan for thinning the blood, little bird, for flight, your own mother's blood. Born bloody, secrets nesting inside, born birdlike, brown and tan, unclassified. Let's make a plan for classification. Small, speckled eggs, underlying cream or blue. Born slight, born blue, cyanotic, some loss of oxygen before you breathed air. Let's plan for breathing, plan for bleeding each month. Let's say a body is a clock, a metronome, a sounding device. Say a body should be earned. Born secret, little hatchling still holding your breath. A plan for tracking, for unbirding a self. Tick. Hatching and hatching again, until I die, oh pity, until my mother dies, until my other mother hides herself. That dream of breath. Let's plan for flight, music in the mouth.

Jen published a chapbook, *Outgrowth,* with Dancing Girl Press. She lives and works in Chicago.

Sam Williamson

Ethereal Love

We were sitting in the living room, dominoes lay strewn across the table. Our laughter echoed through the space, mingling with the also familiar voice of Don Francisco drifting from the television, who was introducing a new contestant. Lavender and anise lingered in the air, blending in harmony with the warm aroma of cookies baking in the oven. It's your turn. You removed your glasses and leaned closer to your dominoes, only a couple of centimeters between the tiles and your eyes, flickering between wide and narrow as you pondered your next move.

It's Saturday. With Mom and Dad out of town once again, I get to stay over for the night at your house. Did I ever tell you how much I cherished, and continue to cherish, this place? The snug wooden furniture, your endless blankets and scattered ball of yarn, the pictures of relatives and saints adorning every single table, angels hanging from the walls. Cracked ceilings, ants sneaking in through the windows to steal your bread, dysfunctional devices, eclectic mugs and plates, uneven floorboards—it was all part of the charm. We would brew tea accompanied by fresh marraquetas with palta, sitting by the windows as you told me tales of your childhood, splashing the occasional names of relatives I didn't have the chance to meet. At night, Sábados Gigantes filled your tiny screen, which I watched while you prepared dinner. After many hours of playing board games, cards and dominoes, you glanced at the clock and announce, much to my dismay, that it's time to go to bed. Once you had closed all the windows, adjusted the thermostat, set the alarm and reminded me of taking my medications, you would read to me until sleep overtook me and turned the lights off, for I feared being alone in the dark.

Despite our bond, I was taken aback when I inherited the house. Juggling my last semester of college, my internship and home maintenance was challenging, to say the least. Furthermore, domestic chores were never my strength: the first week living there, I managed to burn the rice, shrink half of my clothes and forget to pay the electric bills. It was a very cold weekend. Perhaps you took notice of this, and decided that your presence continued to be needed in this world. At first, creaky floorboards and doors didn't seem suspicious, neither did the flickering lights and the sudden reappearance of objects (thanks for finding my keys, by the way). It wasn't until I saw your fingerprints in the bathroom mirror, small and delicate, with a message that read "August 5, José's birthday. Write him a message and get a cake for Sunday. Love, Grandma", along with a smiley face and multiple hearts, that I realized you were still here. With ethereal tenderness, you guided me through the trials of adulthood. Ancient whispers in the wind, helping me to follow your own recipes. Gentle caress, your warmth found in the light and the dark, motivating me to finish my tasks and sleep at a reasonable hour, with unearthly hugs to help me find strength in hardships, allowing me to do the same for others. Minimal adjustments, tidying paintings, furniture and memorabilia, silently accompanying me while I vacuum and clean. Notes and messages appeared in mirrors and reflections, ensuring nothing was forgotten — "Buy more cheese", "Wish Vale a happy birthday", "Call the plumber", "Practice your presentation", "I am proud of you", "You are not alone". At night, while I set the alarm, you closed windows and turned the lights off with spectral grace.

Dear Grandma, I wanted to thank you for being my biggest ally, my guiding star, my best friend. Yet, as I observe your weariness and the melancholy that surrounds your figure, I sense that it may be time for you to let go.

I am married, with children of my own, who could quite possibly have children of their own as well. Each day, I rise early to make them breakfast, check the weather and catch up on the news. I drive them to school before heading to work and at noon, I play with them, the same games we did together. I help them with homework, which sometimes is difficult even for me, but I do my best. We have a calendar to track special events, tasks, medications too. When they fall ill, I prepare your chicken soup; when they are sad, I bake your cookies. At night, I tell them bedtime stories, stories about your adventures and all the love you had for this world. Maybe it is time to release your hold on this realm, embrace the tranquility you deserve. Please, do not feel burdened for leaving me behind, for I am a grown up now. It is my turn to turn off the lights.

Sam Williamson is an aspiring writer and a medical student at UDD. Commended at Wilbur and Niso's Writers of the Future, she has also been a finalist at the UANDES Story Contest. Her story, "Light," earned third place in the Miroptics Contest. She lives in Santiago, Chile.

John Schiano

A Walk Upon the Beach

Bundled in my weathered chair,
soothed by the low sun
that steeps my solitude,
I look towards the sea's far edge
and hear them singing.

Do they sing to me?

Hoping an answer,
I often trudge the salted sand,
trouser bottoms rolled against
the sea's mindless treachery.
When I least expect it,
a grasping wave might
clutch me with numbing fingers
becoming wretched company.

On this morning's aimless maunder,
when the ocean's breath deepened
and the clouds convulsed,
palls of gray began to advance
across the sea's gnarled face,
and the singing ceased.

>>>

Their sudden silence
and the tattered peaks tumbling closer
turned me back toward my cottage.
Dusting sand from my cuffs,
I found at my feet a smooth round stone
with a near perfect circle the color of bone.
It nestled so snugly into my palm
I tucked it away and carried it home.

It's on my stone mantel now, gray against gray.
I'll be venturing shoreside no longer today.

My chair is rimed by shade again.
Tugging it forward into the waning sun,
I slowly ease into it,
lift my eyes
to the fading horizon
and hear them singing.

John, a former New Yorker and a disabled veteran, received his Fine Arts degree from The Cooper Union. He's won several awards for his poetry and artwork from *Winsor & Newton,* the *Poetic Genius Society* and *Shadow Poetry*. His hybrid work appeared in the September 2024 issue of *Ink in Thirds* and one of his drawings will appear in a future *Ink in Thirds* issue. *Rising Phoenix Review* published his poetry in September 2024. *#Ranger* published one of his Calligrams in February 2025 issue and will publish a second later this spring.
At this time, he's experimenting with visual poetry and hybrid art.

Alyssa Findlay

The Shepherd of the End

The Shepherd does not remember most of the souls who cross the river. He watches them step onto the far bank, disappear into the thick haze, and lets them vanish from his mind. Each soul is as unique as a star death, yet none linger in his thoughts. What use would it do, when he cannot help them on the other side? He is only a guide. The end of human existence is not his domain.

The first soul he remembers arrives still within the grips of a war. A shrill cry, one the Shepherd has heard countless times but never held onto, echoes across the plains. He understands why it happens. No human is prepared for death, as much as they like to pretend they are.

This time, the scream is not of fear, but of pain. He turns, prepared to reassure the soul that it is okay, that they are safe, but stops when he sees the man clutching at his stomach as if it still bleeds. He is crying, cheeks wet with agony as he tries to keep his entrails inside of his body.

"You cannot feel your injuries here," the Shepherd says, staring down at the man. His hand tightens around his crook. "You will not lose any more organs. The state you are in is the one you will remain in until you cross the river."

The soldier looks up, his grimy face slick with sweat. The Shepherd wonders what the man is seeing. He must still be in the trenches, a rifle in hand as he prepares to go over the top.

"Sir," the Shepherd says, walking towards him, reaching out one gentle, calloused hand. "Your battles are over. You can rest."

The soldier, eyes unseeing, flinches away from him. "Please don't kill me," he hisses through his teeth; the Shepherd notes that more than a few are missing.

"Nobody will kill you," he tells the soldier. "You have already died."

His relentless sobbing ceases. "What?"

"I'm sorry," the Shepherd says.

"Are you Death?" the soldier asks. That almost makes the Shepherd laugh.

"No," he says, "I am a Shepherd, and it is my job to guide your soul into the afterlife."

He expects the soldier to fight back, to try and hurt him. Many do, those who cannot accept their end, those who died fighting. It surprises him, then, when the soldier nods, asks no more questions, and allows the Shepherd to guide him across the fields.

The soldier is a quiet man. His mind remains within the trenches. He flinches at sudden movements; his eyes dart back and forth. When thunder rumbles across the fields he throws himself to the ground and covers his head. The Shepherd says nothing during the soldier's episodes. He waits for him to calm down and give a nod. The Shepherd cannot help his wandering eye, going too often to the soldier's stomach, where a hole allows him to see every damaged organ.

"How did you die?" the Shepherd asks.

"A shell," the soldier says. "They attacked our trench. Thought there was some lieutenant stationed there." The soldier shrugs. "I wouldn't've lived long afterwards if I had survived. I watched them shoot my best mate in the head."

The sentence hangs between them before the Shepherd speaks.

"I'm sorry."

The soldier shrugs again. "It ain't a tragedy," he says. "We knew what we was gettin' ourselves into when they shipped us off to Gallipoli. It was an honourable way to go."

The Shepherd sees nothing honourable about a death far from home and from love. A human soul needs love, else it can't exist.

Nothing is more honourable than heeding that.

The soldier tells the Shepherd stories of him and his friend, how their battalion would sing together on the way to their trenches, when walking away from them, when going over the top. Two days and nights pass before they reach the riverbank.

"Here," the Shepherd says, gesturing to the gentle current. "Wade across and keep walking. You'll find your way to the afterlife through the mist."

The soldier, trained to follow orders, asks no questions. He nods, thanks the Shepherd, and wades across the river. The Shepherd watches as the fog swirls around him and he is gone.

The next soul he remembers is a girl. When he turns he sees her standing, in a pink dress, dripping wet.

"Hello," he says, careful to keep his voice low, for children's souls are prone to scare easily.

"Hello," the girl replies. She steps forward standing on tip-toe to peer at him. "Who are you?"

He smiles at her. "I am the Shepherd," he says.

"The Shepherd," she repeats, wide-eyed. She pokes at his crook. "I love sheep."

She cannot be much older than six or seven. Though he lacks emotions, he aches to think that she is lost so soon. Silent, he does not want to break the reverence of the moment. She tugs on his robes.

"Do you see that river?" he asks, pointing. "That is where we are going."

The girl stops her exploration. "I can't," she says. "Mummy said I'm not allowed near the river."

"Your mummy told you that?" he asks. She nods. "Do you live near a river?"

"Yes," she says. "There's a river behind our house. Sometimes Daddy takes our puppy and they go swimming, but I'm not allowed to."

"Is that so?"

The girl nods. She seems to falter for a moment, looking up at him with less curiosity and more confusion. "Where is my Mummy?" she asks. "And my Daddy? And my home?"

The Shepherd digs his crook into the soil. "They are a long way from here," is the answer he settles upon, careful to select the gentlest of words. "You won't see them again for a while."

"I need to go home," she says. "Mummy is waiting for me. She made pie for dinner, and Daddy will be home from work soon."

The Shepherd cannot cry. But he imagines that this feeling — the tightness in his chest, the closing of his throat — are the symptoms of tears that humans feel. Perhaps he can weep, but not in any way that matters.

"Mummy and Daddy know you are here," the Shepherd says. "They understand that you need to cross the river. I promise, they will not be upset if you come with me."

"But Mummy and Daddy always tell me not to talk to strangers," the girl replies, hands pressed over her eyes, and the Shepherd cannot tell if she is trying to conceal sorrow, or truly does not understand what is happening.

"Well," says the Shepherd, "I am not a stranger. I am a friend."

The girl looks up. "Promise?"

He nods. "I promise."

The girl is lively as they walk. She stops him to pick flowers, or to look up at clouds.

"Look," she says, "that one is shaped like a cat. There! See, that one looks like an ice cream cone. If you turn your head, that one is Santa Claus."

The Shepherd, happy to indulge her wonderment, looks up at the sky, trying to discern which cloud she is referring to. Sometimes, he points out his own clouds. He sees a peacock, a circus tent, a fish.

Some cloud shapes he does not share with her. A hospital bed, a flatline, a gun firing, a headstone. These are not shapes he is willing to teach her.

Even when they lie down to sleep under the inkblot sky, she talks. She asks about the stars above, about insects and planets. The Shepherd does his best to answer, until her talking trails off into silence.

While the girl sleeps, the Shepherd watches the stars move above. They are a facsimile of the human heavens, designed to comfort the souls passing beneath it. He does not understand the craving for something like the sky to be familiar; to humans, it is unknowable as the mind of another, far from the home they pretend it is.

Mostly, he thinks about the little girl. He wonders about her life, her parents, her pet dog. He wonders what kind of pie she favours and what breed the canine is and for how long her family will grieve her. He does not understand mourning. He pretends, attempting to empathise so his charges will feel safe, but it is as real as the sky above.

They step onto the riverbank after five days. The Shepherd almost doesn't want to say goodbye, but he motions for her to wade into the water.

"I can't swim," she tells him, casting doubtful glances at the river.

"Then I'll carry you," the Shepherd replies, against his better judgement.

When she nods, he lifts her and wades into the river. The water is warm, the current gentle; he understands why hardly any humans hesitate when crossing.

He places her on the opposite riverbank and gestures to the fog-ridden land beyond it.

"Keep walking," he says. "You'll find a wonderful safe place soon enough."

The girl, stricken, shakes her head. "No," she says, bringing back that ache again. "It's scary."

"I know," he says, "I know. I'm sorry. But you have to go. You can't stay here."

"I want to stay with you," she says, tugging at his sleeve. The water breaks around his crook.

"Mummy and Daddy are that way," he says, pointing into the gauzy distance. The lie scrapes its way up his throat. "Just keep walking and you'll find them, alright?"

This seems to placate the girl; she smiles, waves goodbye. With a farewell, she turns and skips off into the mist.

The Shepherd begins to hate the fields. Though he recalls no more souls for a long time after the girl, the knowledge that he is guiding them to an end he will never understand is like swallowing sand. All he has ever known is the plains and nearest bank. Carrying the girl was the closest he has come to crossing.

When the next soul arrives, he is surprised to see that they are covered in blood that is not their own. Their laboured breathing suggests they were running before they arrived.

"Hello," the Shepherd says, gripping his crook tighter. "Whose blood is that?"

There is a coldness to his demeanour. Usually, he does not analyse transgressions. He is no judge of mortal deeds.

"Who the hell are you?" the man asks, wiping the blood from his face and staring at the Shepherd.

"I am the Shepherd," he answers. "Who are you?"

He has never asked this of a soul before. Though it will mean nothing, he finds himself intrigued.

The man does not answer. With a sigh, the Shepherd gestures to the river. "Come with me. You need to cross over."

Creases appear on the man's forehead. "I'm dead?" he asks. "How?"

"Well, what were you doing, before you found yourself here?" the Shepherd asks.

The man's answer is halting. "He got what was coming to him." His limbs are stiff as he steps backwards, hands thrown into his pockets as if he could disguise the red staining them. "Okay? He was an asshole. He deserved it."

The Shepherd turns away, his stomach a roiling tide. "And yet you managed to end up here instead of him," he manages.

The murderer is silent. The Shepherd walks, not stopping to see if he is keeping pace. A night passes but they do not sleep. They do not converse. The murderer tries, perhaps believing the Shepherd to be forgiving. The Shepherd wishes the fields weren't so peaceful. This man deserves no easy passage.

The crossing over happens without ceremony. The Shepherd tells the murderer what to do, and the man does it, walking into the thick fog and vanishing from view.

As he watches, the Shepherd can only feel a dull, wasplike buzzing. It makes no sense for that little girl and this monster to cross the same fields. He finds himself praying to the stars to let him leave. They make a convincing false god.

Every passage afterwards is draining. The Shepherd no longer cares about the souls. Let them wander. They are all sinners, vile and cruel and hiding it with a layer of pity.

When the next soul arrives, clad in white and gaunt with fear, the Shepherd's racing mind stills for a moment.

She trembles where she stands, the soft breeze of the fields tangling in her gown and fluttering it about. The woman has tears streaming from her eyes, her face red with anguish.

"Help me," she sobs.

He opens his arms and she crashes into them. She clings desperately, as if he is an anchor, a lifebuoy. She knows what he is. It is a human instinct to recognise benevolence.

"Don't worry," he whispers. "Do not be afraid. You are safe now."

Her legs give out and she collapses. He catches her, sitting with her on the grass.

"All that time," she whispers. "I fought for so long, and now it's all for nothing."

All humans fight before the end. None of them come quietly. They all look at death as if it is a punishment. But death is not cruel, he knows. It cannot hate.

"I know," he says. "I know. I'm sorry."

They sit, and the Shepherd watches her as she hugs her knees and cries. When she runs dry, she looks up at him.

"So you're Death?" she asks. He shakes his head.

"No," he says. "I am the Shepherd, and I am here to guide you to the end."

"What if I'm not ready for the end?"

"You do not have a choice, unfortunately."

The woman is silent. When she speaks again, her voice is like fragile porcelain, liable to break at too high a decibel.

"So that's it, then," she says. The words are devoid of any emotion. "I don't get to finish my degree, call my parents one last time, tell my best friend I love her."

The Shepherd shakes his head. "I am sorry."

After a moment's silence, she says, "So where do we go now?"

"We — you — cross the river," he says, pointing to the bank, far away. "Then you walk into the veil of mist, and enter the afterlife."

"A river," she says. "So the last thing I feel that is close to real will be water."

"Yes."

"I love the water," she says. I used to swim all the time, you know. Whenever I had the chance I would dive into a lake or run into the ocean." She laughs. "Once, I was at a party, and I jumped from the balcony into the swimming pool. It was stupid, but I've never felt so alive."

She shines like a star when she speaks. A real one, not an imitation like the ones above them.

"Your life was beautiful, wasn't it?" he asks.

"It was," she says. "My life was wonderful, until the end."

He asks her what killed her. She does not answer, and he does not press the matter.

They begin the quiet walk across the fields to the river. He is lost for words. Never has he seen a soul so bright. She is ethereal, some small god. The Shepherd does not know the visage of his own creator, but he is sure it would pale in the face of this human woman.

Eventually, he finds words to speak. "Who were you?" he asks. The question is intentionally broad. "Who are you?"

She stops walking as she considers the question. "I was a scholar," she says. "I studied physics. It was the most interesting thing in the world. Especially space, the stars, the cosmos. I loved learning about the universe. I still would, if I could. If the afterlife has a library I'll stay there forever."

The Shepherd nods. She continues, voice distant. "I was a friend and a confidant." The woman is lost within a memory the Shepherd cannot begin to understand.

"My friends said I should be a therapist, but I was a better friend than a listener, I think."

They have come to a complete standstill. "What do you mean by that?"

His curiosity is alien and ancient. He has not cared for a soul in so long.

"I love to talk," she says. "I think that would've made me a bad therapist, because I would've talked with my clients about irrelevant things. But I was a good friend, I hope. I love my friends very much." She gets an unfamiliar look in her eyes. "Well, the one upside to this whole dying thing is that I might see someone I haven't in a while."

The Shepherd does not speak. He recognises the quivering of her lips, the pinching at the corners of her eyes. It is a common occurrence in human souls: that longing that eclipses, for a moment, the anguish. He wonders if he is beginning to understand that feeling.

"My best friend," she says. "She was my everything. Our parents were friends before we were born, so we knew each other forever." She sucks in a breath. "And she died when we were seven. I heard about it a week after it happened. It wrecked me. How do you even explain to a kid that young that her best friend is never coming back?"

When he sees tears trace her cheeks, the Shepherd guides her to sit down.

"We can rest here for the night," he says. "We have made it far enough today."

She does not speak of her old friend again. The Shepherd wonders if she will find her in the afterlife; if she will ask if her friend, a child forever, remembers her. He watches as she sleeps — the gentle rise and fall of her chest, her slightly open mouth, her lashes fanning against her cheeks. Something stirs in the pit of his belly.

He looks up at the sky, glances in the direction of the river, picks a blade of grass and rolls it between his fingers. None of it is real.

Over the rest of the journey they talk like new friends. Every so often the Shepherd excavates something important from her, small pearls he clings to. On the third day, she stops the conversation in its tracks and asks: "Who are you?"

"I am the Shepherd," he says. "I guide souls to the afterlife, and—"

"No," she says, shaking her head. "Who are *you*?"

He considers the question, and finds he has no answer.

After a week their journey ends, and his stomach drops at the thought of her leaving. He will fall to his knees before her and beg her to stay if it means she will grant him one more moment.

She hugs him as he whispers goodbye. He reciprocates, holding her as tightly as he dares, until she pulls away. Somehow, he lets go.

"Goodbye," she says, her voice warm as a real sun. "Thank you for helping me."

He is silent as she wades into the river. The water eddies around her white dress. Before she reaches the other side, she turns back, looking at him over her shoulder, and smiles. The Shepherd melts. Out of the river she steps, into the enveloping haze.

He stands for a while in the water, his crook anchoring him against the current. The Shepherd knows that he should return to the top of the fields, that he has a job to do.

It no longer matters.

His right hand loosens; his crook falls sideways into the water. He watches as it floats along, to a destination he will never see. Perhaps it does not exist at all.

The slipstream is stronger than he recalls. It feels like yesterday he was here, carrying a child in a pink dress, urging her to an end and a beginning all in one. He needs something other than forever.

He does not mind the souls he is leaving behind. If his creator is so omnipotent, they can create a new guide. A new river.

Stepping onto the far bank is simple. The fog is no more than water vapour, condensing onto his skin. It is welcoming; he wonders if he will remember what he was once he goes. When he walks far enough, he will no longer be able to hear the rushing river.

He remembers what the woman asked him. *Who are you?*

The Shepherd does not know, but he wants to find out.

Alyssa Findlay is a student and writer from Melbourne, Australia. She enjoys matcha, collecting vinyl records, and hardback classic novels. You can find her work in Antler Velvet Arts Magazine, Glass Bead Magazine, and on the Aniko Press website.

Jennifer Choi

The Day I Cut My Nails

The back of the universe glows faintly, the forecast says cloudy.
Light spills through the gaps in the clouds,
& within it, there must be whispers from galaxies billions of light-
years away.
Like a trace of cream left on my lips, the clouds scatter,
& the forecast is a lie. Today,
I'll buy a nail clipper for one dollar.

From the moment I was born, my nails were strong.
Like everyone's, but more precisely,
they were the outer layer of me.
Since I was young, all I learned was how to cut them,
never imagining I'd water them, or sing to them softly
like my mother cared for the flowers.

It felt as though I had to choose
between being the troublemaker
or the perfect child,
but I was a model only in not fitting into either.
& so, in the case of nails,
I was nothing but their outside.

>>>

Today, the back of the universe continues to glow.
You coat your nails with polish, while I clip mine.
We throw away what's needed for politeness, & keep what
we desire,
but the thick growth on our fingers remains *indifferent to either side.*
I only think of the nails tossed into the tissue, the weather, & myself.
The discarded nails always smile faintly.

Jennifer Choi is a passionate high school student. Her love for poetry began at an early age, and she finds inspiration in exploring themes of identity, love, and the complexities of the human experience through her writing.

John Grey

In Summation

I stroll the beach,
pick up shells, drop them,
get on my knees
to examine driftwood,
invent a history
for whatever the sea discards.

I drive my car,
as instinctive as my last breath by this,
so my mind can wander
far from road and traffic,
hands on the wheel
but everything else in the past
or at the shore.

I hike the forest trails,
embed myself in pines and oaks,
sniff wildflowers,
do my best not to startle shy creatures,
hold stones up to the light,
spend a half-hour with moss on a tree-trunk,
or relax in a meadow, face to sun.

>>>

I sip coffee while reading the newspaper.
I talk to people I know,
sometimes smile at those I don't.
I don't have a dog
but I appreciate dog-owners.
I love just enough
to consider myself a lover.

The earth spins on its axis
whether I am in the world or not.
But there are moments of stillness
that are my responsibility.

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident, recently published in New World Writing, City Brink and Tenth Muse. Latest books, "Subject Matters"," Between Two Fires" and "Covert" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Broken Plate, Amazing Stories and River and South.

Sulwa Siraj

The Sun Left Me Too Soon

time has never made sense to me,
a thief that comes and goes,
stealing my seasons,
taking the long days of summer
and shortening them into a shiver

when i was young,
i thought time could be tricked
close your eyes long enough,
and the sun would return,
chased back to the sky
by the stubborn will of a child

my father often
would ask if i wanted to age backward,
it was a game,
a riddle to unravel on birthdays or before bedtime

tempting me to retreat, to fool time into slowing
his question, like a quiet plea,
contained a hope to keep the sun alive,
to stop the cold, crushing weight of time from settling into his bones

>>>

i think now of his burdened bones,
clinging to a fading light,
and i wonder if i've let him down,
if the sun left me too soon,
forgetting my name,
leaving me in the dark,
where days blur together
where i cannot wake.

Sulwa Siraj is a writer ready to dig up and polish her notes app poetry and share it with the world. Inspired by her childhood spirit animal and forever muse, Matilda, she hopes to make her younger self proud through her literary endeavors.

Tai-Long Riddle

(my) mother

the salt washes through our mouths –
we are frothing at the seams, sitting at a

separate density despite being cut from the same star, limbs
tossed askew into the very same sea

you crossed with your own birthright.

you stood on sand I will never find again, speak
tongues I can only mimic soundlessly, and

when you cradle me in bleeding arms, all I can
think about is how you told me you can't swim;

that you are lying through your teeth; that
you saw me in the water and pretended I was alive...

I find myself stitching us closed and close,
rolling with the tide and hoping one day

you can shush me gently,
and towel us dry.

Breaking The American Sentence

Ma! It's not my word - instead, it comes from the mouth of my mother,
who speaks twice as many tongues as me, speaks twice as many worlds,
asks half as many questions...
Once, I heard her molding her mouth American - she
said that she can't ever get it right, spent twenty five years teaching
kids the alphabet and she still can't get it right.
Compensating, she
called me an English sound, only finding defiance in the letters. No one
spelled it right the second time. I grew weary fast, letting them wash away
half of me in the classroom. She knew this, and loved me still.

In the later years, when I stopped being her image and stopped wearing
those dresses, started screaming at the walls and peeling at my skin, the
malice I harbored failed to make me forget myself.
I knew I was
a child parroting the mother tongue, speaking words too big to hold.
Her family thought my birth name was too light to hold down my second
generation feet -
so I put aside pride and found weight in my new
title - Great Dragon.
Into adulthood I flew, singing 我愛你

and hoping my 妈妈 could forgive me for all those years
American.

Tai-Long Riddle is a computer science student, and probably a poet. They enjoy the idea of reading more books and eating more fiber. They hope love finds you, too.

Claudia Wysocky

Unfinished Exit

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me
a map of the city,
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.
And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back
from vacation, from college,
from life.
You haven't killed yourself

because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine,
who you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude
in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at
your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.
And now every time you try to write a poem,
it feels like a
eulogy.
A desperate attempt to
capture something that's already
gone.
But maybe that's why we keep writing,
keep searching for
the right words,
because in this world where everything is
temporary,
poetry is our only chance at
immortality.

So even though you haven't
found the perfect ending yet,
you keep writing.
For Catherine, for yourself, for all the lost
souls
who never got their own
missing person's poster.
Because as long as there are words on a page,
there is still hope for an unfinished exit
to find its proper
ending.

Claudia Wysocky is a Polish poet based in New York, celebrated for her evocative creations that capture life's essence through emotional depth and rich imagery. With over five years of experience in fiction writing, her poetry has appeared in various local newspapers and literary magazines. Wysocky believes in the transformative power of art and views writing as a vital force that inspires her daily. Her works blend personal reflections with universal themes, making them relatable to a broad audience. Actively engaging with her community on social media, she fosters a shared passion for poetry and creative expression.

Laura Langer

The Child and the Cemetery

I squint, blinded by a sunburst reflected off a monument. The half filled jug in my hand slips out, spilling water into brown cracks between sparse grass, seeping into thirsty ground. I quickly wipe my sweaty hands on the front of my t-shirt and snatch the jug before more water is lost, pushing it back under the rusty spigot and refilling it so I can get it back to Grandma.

From here I see Grandma far out beyond the rows of marble headstones. She appears tiny from where I stand, bent, plucking at dead flowers from an urn. As I haul the jug to her, I see four empty ones strewn about her feet like garbage, the same old milk jugs she uses every summer to water flowers at the cemetery.

Grandma smiles when she sees me, thanks me for filling the jugs. I hear a deep rattle emanating from her chest with every inspiration. Her floral house dress is soaked around her chest and under her arms. "Can you fill these up and throw these out, too, doll," she gasps and points to the empty jugs, handing me a fist full of crunched brown geraniums. I drop the dead flowers into the trash before returning to the watering station, empty jugs in hand. Once they are all full, I carry over two at a time, lowering them carefully at her feet.

Her red face alarms me. I glance around the small cemetery looking for other adults. I'm too small to help if she collapses, but I swallow this worry and walk back to the abandoned jugs, glancing over my shoulder every few steps. She is bent over at her mother's grave when I return, tipping glugging water into a tall urn. I hand her what I hope is the last of the water-filled jugs. Drops of sweat drip from her forehead.

Her chest continues to rattle.

She gasps again. “Let’s go home and get cleaned up for church, doll.”

At home she sits at the kitchen table, clutching the arms of an oak chair. Audible stridor escapes her throat with each breath. A slammed door signals my mother’s return. She drops her purse when she spots Grandma in the kitchen. Her voice drowns out Grandma’s breaths. Grandma should not have gone to the cemetery on such a hot day. Grandma never thinks of my mother’s feelings. Grandma makes bad decisions. The words pierce. I flinch and so does Grandma. She turns to me. It is my fault, too, she says, for not suggesting to leave sooner. I should have known better, she says, before ordering us to get ready for mass.

Grandma’s church is almost two centuries old and towers over all the buildings in town. Dark jagged steeples pierce the sky. Inside, wispy angels float in clouds on the vaulted ceiling. Stained glass wraps the building, religious narratives illuminated on each panel. The church is massive, each footstep issuing an echo that rings with an indecipherable end.

We genuflect and slide into the pew in front. Grandma lowers the kneeler and pulls out her jeweled rosary, whispering Hail Marys and Our Fathers and Glory Bes, the tips of her fingers gently rolling the beads one by one. My eyes are drawn high above the altar where a bearded man - God, I think - floats in the heavens, arms outstretched, surrounded by beautiful angels. I stare and then tightly squeeze my eyelids. I think I used to be one or will be one someday; one of those angels, or maybe even God.

It’s then I see the child to the left of me, held out by a stone man to the side of the altar. I do not know who the man is, but everyone knows the child. His face is immobile as marble holds him, immune to the passage of time the rest of us succumb to. He is held high, chubby arms extending just like the floating man above.

And it's in his plump little fingers (that mothers love to kiss) that it starts. The movement is subtle at first, but the fingers begin to wiggle like a real child. His pursed lips do not move and yet he is speaking. I stare intently, wanting to believe what I see and also uncertain of what it is; unbelievably witnessing marble come to life in the smallest of ways, through the tiniest motion of fingers, the tiniest motion of arms. Tiny rotations, the tiniest flailing, as much as hard stone can muster. Is this communication, I wonder? Is this language? Is this statue telling me its secrets the only way it can? I immediately answer 'yes' to myself and continue watching, my eyes fixated on those smallest of movements. It's the only thing I can do. I know he knows I see him, as his chubby arms inexplicably stretch further, as if he wants me to take him from the stone man; the way a toddler reaches out to his mother, pleading with little arms for her to snatch him up. I want that, too. I want to take him and I want him to take me, yet I know I cannot and that he cannot. I can only watch. Maybe he sees me, too. I hear what his arms are saying.

Grandma's illness does not last long and the hospital calls to tell my mother she is dead. My mother screams and does not stop. I listen from the top of the stairs and then go to my room to pack, knowing we will need to go to her funeral. No one tells me Grandma is dead. After I pack, I sit on my bed and wait for my mother to tell me. It is dark when she enters my room and speaks. "Look at you sitting there and you're not even sad. You can't even cry for your grandmother. You're a cold-hearted, little bitch." She slams my suitcase shut and takes it with her as she leaves my room, leaving me. I sit and wait until I'm told to get into the car.

The air feels like needles on my face the day of Grandma's funeral.

Inside the old church, Grandma's casket rolls down the long aisle. Next to me, my mother weeps loudly, reaching out to relatives who place sympathetic hands on her shoulders as they pass. She then smiles strangely and thanks them. I sit motionless and watch.

I don't hear what the priest says, but the scent of incense billows and infiltrates the stagnant air as the thurible swings and clangs all around her casket. The smoke invades my nostrils and I turn to see the stone child. I have avoided him until now. A part of me does not want to be distracted during these last few moments with Grandma; a part of me does not feel deserving of his attempts at communication; and a part of me feels foolish. Staring intently at his cherubic form, it takes only a moment for his little fingers to writhe and for his outstretched arms to rotate urgently in those small circles. A sudden warmth fills me entirely and then seeps slowly out of my chest, an invisible stream penetrating the space between us. I think I can see it for a moment, all the atoms and the space between them, but my vision fails and I am suddenly cold again. They push Granda's casket up the aisle to the back of the church.

My mother drives our green pick-up to the cemetery to plant spring flowers, like Grandma did. The only time she speaks to me is when she asks if I remembered to place the bags of soil in the back of the truck. I did not and am afraid to say so. Once I admit it, her arm flies toward me, striking the side of my head. She says I purposely try to make things hard for her.

At the cemetery there are several graves to tend to, belonging to relatives I did not know who died long ago, but now Grandma is here, too. It's her grave I'm drawn to, the grass not yet sprouting where the dirt has covered her like a thousand blankets.

Topping the granite headstone is a small statue of Mary cradling her baby in her arms. I stare, wondering if it will move for me the way the one at church did. I feel older now, though, and it's harder for me to believe in moving statues, in hidden messages, or in dreams I cannot know.

I hear my mother's voice.

"Look at these weeds," she announces, pointing to the dandelions sprouting around the base of Grandma's headstone. She places a hand on the monument, stabilizing her body while reaching down to yank at a yellow bud. Instead of pulling it up, her body continues to fall to the ground, as if she is the one being pulled. A low moan slips from her throat as her body slumps and settles on top of the dirt mound, surrounded by a smattering of dandelions. Right then, a car rolls through the cemetery entrance and within a moment it stops. An older woman emerges, ushering me to her backseat while she dials 911.

From the car window my eyes drift from the woman attempting to revive my mother upward to the stone infant, nestled in his mother's arms instead of with the strange man at church. She cradles him as you expect a mother would, one hand supporting his head as the other gently gathers him from below. I squint hard, willing him to move, silently begging with all the intention I can muster, but the blare of sirens breaks my concentration. My gaze softens and lowers to the stranger hovering over my mother, still attempting to save what is gone.

Laura Langer is a clinical assistant professor at the University at Buffalo in the Department of Communicative Disorders & Sciences where she conducts clinical research for people with Parkinson's disease. She is also a writer, artist, and musician.

Irina Tall (Novikova)

Dance

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: Gupsophila, Harpy Hybrid Review, Little Literary Living Room and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection "The 50 Best Short Stories", and her poem was published in the collection of poetry "The wonders of winter".


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