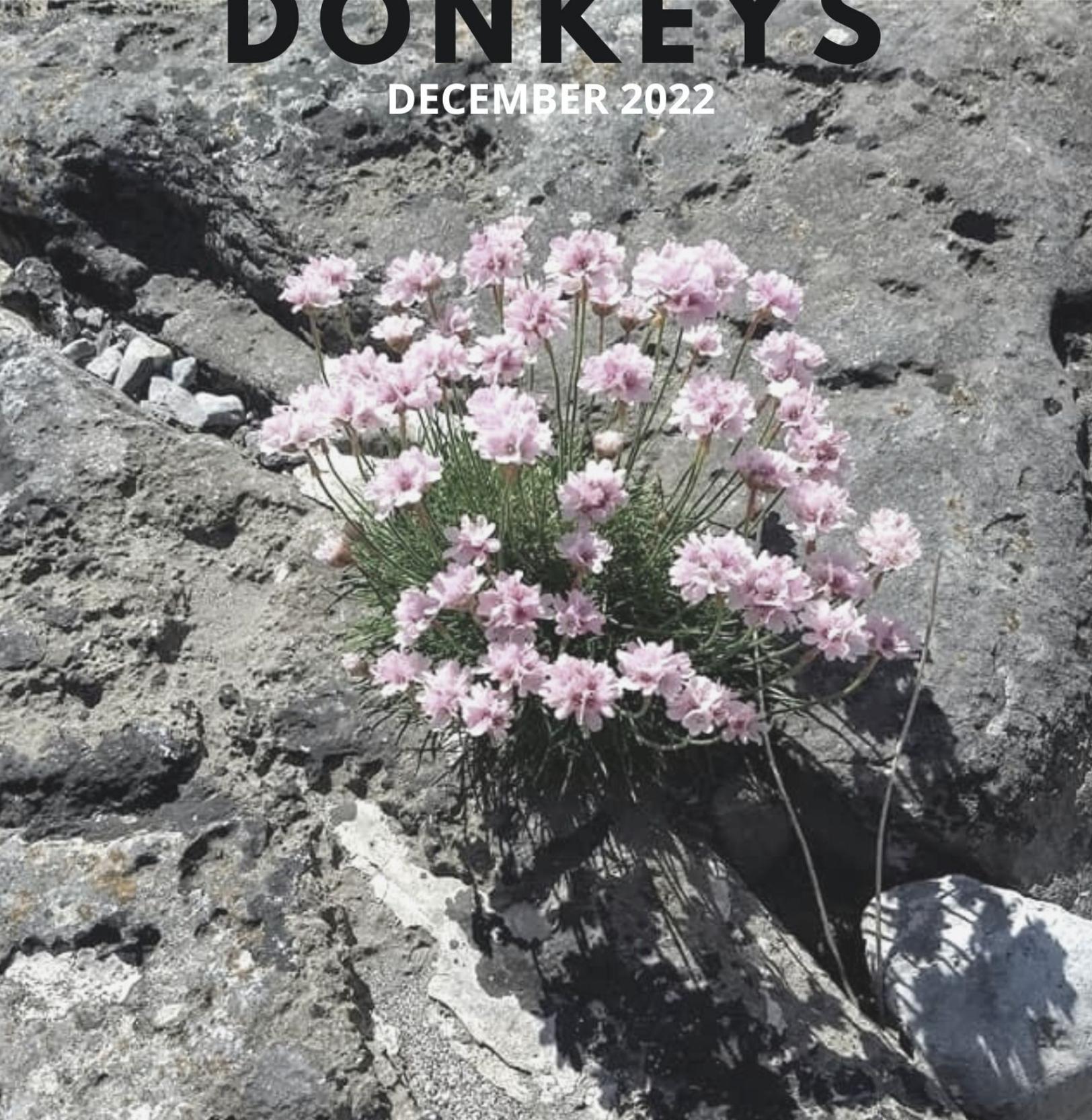


VOLUME I • ISSUE III

MANY NICE DONKEYS

DECEMBER 2022



Many Nice Donkeys

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear donkeys,

It's December 23, 2022 as I'm writing this. I'm in the basement at my mother's house, Cincinnati is dealing with a historic winter storm, and – not to be cliché – I'm thinking about endings. To name a few: the last line of *The Great Gatsby* (“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”), the final track off Noah Kahan's album *Stick Season* (“The View Between Villages”), and that god-awful final episode of *How I Met Your Mother*. I think about that one a lot. Good or bad, endings often *stick to the wax paper edges of my skull* (Morgan Roth, page 28).

As writers, I know we always spend a lot of time thinking about the final moments in our pieces. Final lines. Maybe even final words. How best can each of us leave our readers feeling satisfied? What do we risk when we wrap things up in bows that are too shiny? *There are choices / to make when it comes to doors and windows* (Kerry Trautman, page 19). And those choices can be quite hard.

How do you even know when an ending is an ending, let alone if it's the right one? I think maybe part of the point is that we probably don't ever know. A poem is never finished, only abandoned. *I'll never place the words / as right as they could be* (Sam Frost, page 17). And yet, I know we'll all keep trying to – despite it all. There's a lot of beauty in the way we persist for the sake of making art.

Not to be cliché (again), but I can't believe my pals and I have successfully released three issues of *Many Nice Donkeys* this year. We really did that – and by “we” I mean you. We can't say thank you enough to all the people who continue to be vulnerable with us by sharing their work. To anyone who stops by to read something, I hope you skipped this letter and went straight to the good stuff.

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I'm excited and honored that the issue I've helmed gets to carry you through this ending and into the new year. This issue is a bit shorter than the previous two and, while that's not on purpose, there's no better time of the year to have extra time. Whether you're the reflective type or not, I hope you take some of that time to admire your own work – whatever that work may be. You have a lot to be proud of. I (probably) don't know you, but I genuinely mean that. Even in the moments where it may not feel like it's true. You made it to this ending and there are many more on the horizon. *It is just a day* (Eve Greenlow, page 14).

Let's go find the next ending.

Sláinte,

Maggie Fulmer
Editor-in-Chief
Volume I, Issue III

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The Scenic Route

Marking miles & always closed –
the bar, the church, the drive-in.
The yellow farmhouse. Rusted
Chevys huddled under a sweetgum

& today, on the sunset side
of the one-lane bridge, a cow

bloated as a balloon in Macy's
Thanksgiving Day parade. We skid
into gravel. One kid on lookout &

the other singing *the worms*
crawl in, the worms crawl out,
I check the eyes for maggots.

Stuff like this never happens to us.
Then I remember Louisiana
when waters rise & ditches
cough up recliners, fridges, six-packs

of Dixie beer. Or that drive on I-70,
what I told at the party when we
finally got there: A deer tracks death,
circles in the grassy space between

ramp & freeway. The gore zone –
named for shape, not reputation.

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Lynne Jensen Lampe

An accident, a traffic clot, you
hollering at the doe to save her,
as if dying can be startled to stop.

Lynne Jensen Lampe's debut collection, *Talk Smack to a Hurricane* (Ice Floe Press, 2022) concerns mother-daughter relationships, mental illness, and antisemitism. Her poems appear in many journals, including *THRUSH*, *Moist*, *Figure 1*, and *Yemassee*. A finalist for the 2020 Red Wheelbarrow Poetry Prize and BOTN nominee, she lives with her husband and two dogs in mid-Missouri, where she edits academic research.

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Guy Biederman

Mud Print

There's a mud footprint on the floor by my bed. A man on a rotary phone tells me I need to get some sleep because next week will be a big one. The house is crawling with others. A woman with red bangs wants a glass of milk. A man wearing blue asks for water. The garage door is open. People walk around peering in boxes, closets, and drawers, looking for something. But nothing is lost except for me and that may just be a case of mild bewilderment. I pet my tabby who looks healthy and alert, though he died last summer. I can't seem to get to the fridge to get that woman her milk. And how am I supposed to sleep with a houseful, it being mid-morning, I'd guess. Why the need for extra sleep? Don't they know I don't play well with uninvited houseguests? And that muddy footprint. Who's going to clean that up? I pour a glass of milk, small, saving some for coffee which I'll need later if these people ever leave. But Red Bangs has apparently joined the search party for whatever they're seeking. I pet the cat, hold the milk, think about the mud print, wondering if I'm the one who's found what everyone else is looking for.

Guy Biederman lives on a houseboat, enjoys a scotch on the dock, is a reluctant psychic and part-time pareidolia doula who writes while on duty as a tuxedo cat valet. His work has appeared in many journals including *Flashback Fiction*, *Carve*, *Bull*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Disappointed Housewife*, and *Flash Frontier*. Guy's sixth book, *Translated From The Original, one-inch punch fiction* was published by Nomadic Press, December 2022.

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Miranda Michałowski

I'm doing really well, thanks

because saying "I miss you" tastes like rotten
peaches – I've decided to bite my tongue.

because picking up the phone is reaching
into my own grave and extracting a tooth.

because I'm a schoolgirl in the teacher's
office gobbling down the truth –

I say:

yesterday I went to the ice cream shop
and bought a scoop of the pretzel flavour, even
though our favourite is banana-caramel

and sure, pretzel is nice
but we both know caramel is sweeter.

I say:

there's so much room in my house without
you in it – nobody to block the sunlight pouring
in through the open window, so sometimes I
roll up the carpet and dance like it's the ending
of *Matilda*, but it's just me, socks slipping on
glossy floorboards and I like to think I'm
Miss Honey, but I worry I'm not as kind.

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Miranda Michałowski

I say:

Madame Tussauds is making a wax figure
of my body because every eyeball on this
planet thinks that I'm beautiful.

I say:

God himself gave me a ticket to heaven
and I don't think of your fingers at all.

Miranda Michałowski (she/her) is a Sydney-based writer with a passion for queer and feminist stories. Her first play *Young Bodies/Somebody's* will be published by Playlab, and her second play *Saturday Girls* was shortlisted for the 2022 Rodney Seaborn Award. Her poetry is published in *Red Ogre*, *Moon Cola* and *Defunkt*.

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Samuel Milligan

Here to Make Friends

“Why are you here?” says a large boy with a sweat stain in the middle of his chest. He is leaning against a neck-high brick wall with a Garfield doll leering over his right shoulder. It takes me a second to notice the doll’s head is twisted backwards. The patio is too dark in some places and too bright in others. Someone has ignited a single tiki torch, the kind that’s supposed to keep away mosquitoes and other flying biting things. It’s set in a little metal cage atop a long metal spike and I watch a pair of fingers play with the snuffer that’s attached to the cage by a dark, thin chain. There’s no way to tell if the mosquito lamp is about to be snuffed or if the person with the fingers is just nervous and looking for something to do with their free hand.

“I’m trying to make friends,” I say. I turn, pretending that someone from inside the party has waved to me and I have to leave right now to go catch them.

“You’re shit at it.”

“Didn’t say friends with you, ugly,” I say. I go to take a sip of my cider and then I’m sitting on the concrete porch and someone is handing me my front right tooth. Everything smells like citronella. My toes are wet. I have no idea where my cider’s gone off to, but my tooth hurts like hell, even though it is sitting in my muddy palm.

“We wanted to get a Ziploc, but it just isn’t my house,” someone is saying. “I don’t know the drawers like that. I’m so sorry. He gets like this sometimes. You know how things are.”

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Samuel Milligan

“Sure,” I say. I can feel a mosquito under my knee and I flex my leg. I hope it is dead, smashed into a little smear of blood that I will wipe on someone’s car leather as I slide into the backseat. That is how I will get away from this place, this porch, this dark sky fighting the tiki torch. I will be invited into a car by people I know and who know me and who have known me so long that it isn’t even a big deal that I’m in their car. I’ll have no new smells to consider and I won’t think a lot about whether I’m leaving trash behind or not. I’ll just be in the car, and I won’t even notice that I’ve left the crunchy smudge of dried human blood and insect legs behind on the leather.

I see myself falling asleep in that car, with all my soon-to-be-long-known friends, the new gap in my face hanging open like a stairway, and everyone will take selfies with me, even the driver, and we’ll narrowly miss driving into the bridge abutment and down into the salt flats, swerving wildly back into the correct lane, but I’ll never know, I’ll stay asleep, and it’ll be a story I hear the next time we all see one another, and I’ll throw open my mouth and laugh.

Samuel Milligan (he/him) writes when he isn't fishing his cat out of the kitchen sink or playing pickup basketball with the old men in his neighborhood. He believes there's nothing wrong with trading a little paint when you parallel park. He knows his chocolate chip cookie recipe by heart. His work has appeared in *Rejection Letters*, *Bear Creek Gazette*, *Expat Lit*, and elsewhere.

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Third-Degree Birthday Wishes

The silence of this moment is almost unbearable. I can't hear the leaves desperately screaming in the wind but I can see them. The screams of the air are hushed by less than an inch of glass. This sixth floor hallway is entirely too empty. No one has walked by in twenty minutes. Some part of me believes my woe drives them away.

Today is my mother's sixtieth birthday. It is a Thursday. I sit in the hallway waiting for my class to start on the east coast while she sits for a meal with her mother and husband on the west coast. I picture them at a restaurant, the one that serves frijoles with the chips and shames those who stop at the pico de gallo. I see the three of them with their reading glasses on, holding the menus comically close to their faces, barely brushing the tips of their noses. They scan the menu in the hope of an adventure, but they will get what they always get.

My dad will order fajitas and lick the plate clean. My mother will order whatever sounds like the healthiest option and eat maybe half of it. My dad will finish it off. My grandma will order fish tacos and ask if there is any champagne. There is not.

They will start with pleasantries and my dad will tell jokes loudly. They will be funny. My grandma will ask about my brother and his girlfriend who I adore. They just moved in together before facing their final year of undergrad. There are many questions my ninety-seven-year-old grandmother will ask. My father will answer and my mom will add color-commentary laced with passive aggressiveness.

I imagine that I come up in conversation. My grandma, who last heard from me the day I found her facebook page, will ask how I'm doing with genuine interest and unadulterated sadness. Never with guilt. My mom will pretend like she knows. She will pretend she knows the

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Eve Greenlow

names of the most important people in my life. She will pretend to know my favorite spots to eat. She will pretend my pronouns are she/her and she will pretend she has never heard the word “pansexual” escape from my lips. She will pretend my blackness doesn’t threaten her. She will pretend that half of her family doesn’t look at me with disgust and disappointment, just as I pretended that a part of that family never touched me in the middle of the night on the floor of my grandma’s house. She will pretend to be the victim. My dad will order a churro.

It has been two years since I stopped talking to my parents. They probably blame leftist propaganda, as my grandmother did, while I blame their silence. But it’s been two years, and I miss her. And the leaves performing outside this six-story window are begging to be heard. So I pull out my phone and search for her name in my contacts and write.

Happy birthday! 🎈

I include a balloon emoji. I want to convey festivity, but my words would fail me. She responds five hours later, after I’ve gotten home from my class and made dinner and checked my phone sixty times.

Thank you. Hope all is well.

I feel incredibly small. My skin is cracked glass and my blood that is also hers seeps out of the breaks. I cry on her birthday. It is just a day.

Eve Greenlow (she/they) is a black and queer writer who was born and raised in the golden state of California. Her Scorpio nature gave her a love of writing, horror movies, and true crime. Her work has appeared in *Trash to Treasure Lit*, *tiny frights*, and *The Paper Crow*. She is currently earning her MFA in Creative Writing from City College of New York.

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Francine Witte

Everything I learned from Buddy Taylor is a lie

I learned that bacon is the best perfume. When I cook it, all sputter and pop, it wakes Buddy out of a buzzsaw sleep and he sneaks up behind me at the stove, arms going around my middle like a couple of kitchen snakes, him going *sssss* in my ear. I learned to stop wasting money on fancy perfume from the fancy store that I can't afford because I quit my job to love Buddy 24/7. I learned that loving a man full-time doesn't pay enough to buy anything. I have learned to repurpose my blanket into a big swaddling wrap for the adult baby I have become. The sweet fleece of it like the words Buddy forgets to say in all of those non-bacon times.

I learned that everything can be a liar if you let it. The refrigerator hums like it doesn't know anything, like it doesn't hear Buddy whispering into his lying cell phone while I am taking a shower. The sputter and pop of lavender suds. The lie of the soothe it gives me. I learned how silk a man can make his voice. How he can turn his voice into a fancy perfume and I will forget how tired and broke and hungry I am from loving him 24/7. How I have had to repurpose my brain into a cup that, instead of my thoughts, will hold all of his lies. Plink, there's one. Plink, plink, there's two.

I learned that after-love can be better than not-love. How the air can clear in the kitchen and how bad bacon is for the heart. I learned to be able to smell lavender again, all pretty and gentle, without the sputter and pop on its way up through my nose and into my brain. How I am me 24/7. How I know that Buddy wants to call me more often now that he's not always here. I know how he's standing hush in someone else's kitchen when he calls.

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Francine Witte

I learned his voice is all soft fleece and silk. Snaky right through the phone lines. How it can still reach itself out and grab me. How one day I will finally not answer. That is something I still have to learn.

Francine Witte's stories are forthcoming in *Best Small Fictions 2022*, and *Flash Fiction America* (W.W. Norton.) Her recent books are *Dressed All Wrong for This* (Blue Light Press,) *The Way of the Wind* (AdHoc fiction,) *The Cake, The Smoke, The Moon* (ELJ Editions,) and *Just Outside the Tunnel of Love* (Blue Light Press.) She is flash fiction editor for *Flash Boulevard* and *The South Florida Poetry Journal*. She lives in NYC.

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Maybe We Can Go to That Place Down the Street

and order the shrimp and feta appetizer
and a rosemary lemonade.
After, we can walk to the park and smell trees
as we linger in slow conversation and shift
our steps close together to bump hips
and see if the woman we met
when my parents were visiting and you shared
a fruit pastry with my mom
is doing her rounds again, with her little dog
holding space for each push of the walker.

I've been horrible lately—too tired and quick
to toss the Tupperware of diced onions to the counter
when I can't get it open on the first or second pull.
You keep saying "let me" and I don't want
your help. Not always or yesterday or the day before.
I can't tell you why.
I worry I will wear you down as I sit in the window ledge
and watch the plant grow crooked
with new bulbs springing from all angles.
Maybe we aren't meant to be able to pause.

Every day grows longer and shorter and longer
again to make us laugh during unbearable moments
and forget to thaw the meat we meant to cook for dinner
and pack more garbage into the Chipotle bag
we keep meaning to bring to the dumpster out back.
Nothing is ever as clean as I want it
so I ball up each ripped notebook page
because I worry I'll never place the words
as right as they could be
or be able to name a feeling with accuracy.

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Sam Frost

I need to just breathe for a moment
and do nothing but wonder
if the ice cream shop down the road has restocked
the chocolate banana bread flavor
or if the parking garage construction is finished
or if anyone has figured out the formula for happiness
and written it down. Can we find it? Can we
check each other's teeth for stray flecks of pepper
and come up with our own version of truth?
All I'm ever trying to say is I'd do it all for you.

Sam Frost is a writer who spends too much time and money drinking kombucha and is always craving fast food breakfast. You can find more work from her at *Ghost City Review*, *Kissing Dynamite Poetry*, *Vagabond City Lit*, and elsewhere.

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Kerry Trautman

Towering Inferno

After watching *The Towering Inferno* on Betamax in sixth grade
I planned escape routes from my house and every house I visited.

Having lived only in ranch homes, any house with more
than a floor or two panicked me, wondering what churned

above or below, like when you Google-search migraine and
are certain it's cancer in your amygdala. Fred Astaire would

never have panicked if he was in his tailcoat tux and tap
shoes like nature intended, safe behind a swing band,

sheltered by the black and white of lack of flame. Red
exit signs beckoned me from grocery store corner doors and

movie theater screen ends where teenagers snuck
in. I dreamed smoke-choked corridors and what it would take

to thrust yourself out a ten-story window like shirtwaist factory
women plowed out by walls of flame. Older now I plan

for midnight smoke and how to get my kids out, window to
lower porch roof to dropping down to the euonymus bush.

But which bedroom door to open first? There are choices
to make when it comes to doors and windows.

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Kerry Trautman

Alarm will sound. Paul Newman didn't mean for
any of this to happen. But sometimes sparks ignite and flare

and chemical-react whole strings of lives into strings
of choices. We never mean for anything to happen.

Kerry Trautman's work has appeared previously in MND, as well as in various other journals and anthologies. Her books are *Things That Come in Boxes* (King Craft Press 2012), *To Have Hoped* (Finishing Line Press 2015), *Artifacts* (NightBallet Press 2017), *To be Nonchalantly Alive* (Kelsay Books 2020), and *Marilyn: Self-Portrait, Oil on Canvas* (Gutter Snob Books 2022). Her next book is forthcoming from Roadside Press.

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JP Relph

206 Bones

FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY REPORT

Case No. 616.0820

25th September 2016

Examination Results

Skeletal remains believed to be those of Genevieve Milton were submitted to the laboratory on 30th August 2020 for a complete biological profile.

Remains are consistent in anatomical representation, taphonomic features, and biological indicators originating from one (1) individual. The full skeleton is present.

Sex

Female. Morphoscopic analysis of the *os pubis* following Phenice (1979) criteria indicates the remains are most likely those of a female. A number of lesions indicative of parturition.

She was never a girly girl – preferring the mud and mischief of boys – except when she was dancing. She'd conceal her scabbed knees with Lycra and wrestle her wild hair into a bun sprigged with leaves and pilfered rose petals.

She had one perfect daughter. A tawny-eyed sprite of a child who collected bugs in jars and only danced in private. A gangly teenager who snarled like a wolf or broke like a rabbit. A gracious woman who massaged lemon oil into old knuckles and loved to watch her mother jive.

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JP Relph

Ancestry

European (White). Craniometric analysis using Fordisc indicates the measurements of the remains most closely resemble those of a White ancestry.

Her mother was a rose-skinned Englishwoman who married a Norseman. As a child, she was cold cream pale with freckles like spring pollen that fell on the bridge of her nose when she was climbing trees. Time and sun-longing had toasted her skin to almond. She shared her mother's clement smile and her father's filthy laugh.

Age

60-69 years. Morphoscopic analysis of the *pubic symphysis*, specifically the *symphyseal surface* and presence of *osteophytic lipping*, indicates an age 60-69 years.

She was a grandmother who eschewed baking and knitting, took her grandson wild swimming and horse riding. They'd find unnamed paths across the fells and eat fish finger sandwiches in the mizzle, then he'd teach her street dance moves to the music of sheep.

She'd started dating a retired GP with an elderflower plantation. Feeling like a girl again when they swirled a Viennese Waltz through vanilla-frothing fields and drank flora-beady wine. She believed love was ageless and to be relished at every opportunity.

Stature

5'1" – 5'5". Metric analysis of the maximum length of right femur (435mm) using Fordisc for White females.

Her first husband called her a "totty wee thing" – he was a Weegie with a big heart, whiskey-tenderised. Her second, an American who'd enwrap her entirely in his dark denim, would meet a young florist and she'd stop getting "just because" roses.

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JP Relph

Still, she only had one great love – a boy with butterscotch skin and a kiss that lifted her from her patent Mary-Janes. He died bringing her fresh doughnuts while she remained tangled in their sweat. How she'd missed curling around his back on the bike, wind screaming through her hair, her hands finding all sorts in his jean pockets.

Individual Skeletal Variation

Evidence of spinal proliferative lesions indicates a pathological condition such as osteoarthritis. Occupational stress fractures noted in the bones of the ankle and foot.

She'd danced first, walked later. Her mother said she'd been dazzled by the spinning princess in a jewellery box. She'd taken tango lessons with a tiny Argentinian who moved like fire. Learned to line-dance in Texas and sweated through blistering samba in Rio.

She always returned to the barre and the satin caress on her ankles. Pirouetting until her back knotted and cowed her and her pointe shoes had to be packed away in tissue paper, like precious chrysalises

Trauma

No evidence of antemortem or perimortem trauma noted.

Her father died when she still needed him. Her mother ghosted through several years, finally passing on a night full of frost in an overheated hospital. She'd driven home to a feverish baby, hands slippery with her mother's lotion, already feeling a loss of self that invaded her thawing bones.

Identification Comparison

This bio-profile is consistent with that of Genevieve Milton, reported to be a female of European ancestry, 62 years of age, with a height of 5'2". Antemortem dental and medical radiology records may assist in confirming this analysis.

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JP Relph

Everyone called her Vee. She drove too fast and often missed breakfast. She wore skinny jeans and a vintage motorcycle jacket. Her humour was scalpel sharp as her favourite heels. Her hair, once the deep-red of Tibetan cherry bark, bloomed silver as birch after fifty. Her eyes were the pale blue of a snowbound sky and forever of a child: inquisitive, mischievous and certain of adventure.

Lydia Hall, PhD, ChFA, MCSFS

Forensic Anthropologist (Cert-FA1)

JP Relph is a working-class Cumbrian whose attempts at flash fiction are mostly hindered by four cats and aided by copious tea. She also volunteers in a charity shop where they let her dress mannequins and have first dibs on haunted objects. A forensic science degree and passion for microbes, insects and botany often influence her words. Recently found in *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Noctivagant Press* and *On the High*.

Upright position for take-off

Why do you suppose it is that airplane passengers are referred to as souls?

Souls on board.

When I'm on board and strapped in, it's all I can think about, looking to the oval of sky and tarmac next to me and panicking. If you're scared of flying then it's totally ordinary, I think, to use the time between boarding and departing, amidst the stowing of luggage and the tops of heads and the tinny clicking of seatbelts, to think about death, and to worry about dying; about what *that* may actually *be* like. And so it does perhaps seem reasonable that the soul comes into it – certainly more so than it might in say a traffic jam, or when changing platforms.

It's a nice way to regard a person I think, *as a soul*, as opposed to anything quite so brittle and temporary as a body, but it does seem like an unusual phrase – like something too considered – for such a technical field as aviation. It's tender and thoughtful, and appears to show regard for who each individual may be; indeed, in the event of a tragedy, *souls* helps to render the dead as a number of unique losses, rather than a brutal catalogue of remains.

It's vague and yet personal – universal, and applicable to all.

We're all souls on board.

Even the areligious are, for the most part, open to the idea of a soul, and that it may occupy another realm after death – if not in heaven or space, then at least in time or memory.

That this isn't the end, and hasn't ever been, is an attractive proposition, particularly for the non-flyer.

My mum used to tell me that what it was, my unease, was motion sickness, and so before every family holiday she'd buy me a chocolate muffin from the café in the departure lounge, and thumb the small, white puck of a Sea Legs tablet into the middle of it. Then, what I'd do for her was eat the muffin extremely carefully, biting and chewing slowly through every

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Alex McBride

mouthful of sponge until I found it. Isolating it from the foamy, Bogtrotter cocoa pulp and crushing it very deliberately between my teeth, I'd smear it across the surface of my tongue and press it into the roof of my mouth, squealing.

“Ew, it tastes chalky! I can taste it, it tastes chalky!”

One year, we booked to go on a last-minute package deal to Portugal, and were no more than an hour into the return journey when one of the engines under the wing caught fire, belching a thick black smog into the blue sky. The seatbelt signs lit up, and as the rotor outside rattled loudly, shaking the entire plane before shuddering to a halt, the pilot's voice came through the overhead speaker to announce that one of the engines had failed.

“I suppose they teach them to notice the little signs,” my dad said bitterly.

—

Now in my thirties, the last time I flew was with my girlfriend, and after settling into my seat and plucking the safety card from its netted wallet, I could tell she was watching me; I got that burning sensation that also feels cold.

“It hasn't changed since last time,” she muttered. “What to do in the event of certain death.”

It's hard to take such a casual regard for procedure from somebody who salutes magpies, and so that's what I told her as I wiped my damp palms on my thighs.

“One for sorrow,” she replied with foreboding.

Soon after, the plane pointing down the runway, she looped her fingers through mine and held my hot hand until we were in the sky and the trolley began its rounds.

She always buys these questionable olives with crackers and hummus, served in a slim little box with a picture of a coastal town on the cardboard sleeve, with a bright blue sky and pastel houses stacked by a still sea, and some kind of white structure with ionic columns to indicate that these few olives and airtight container of chickpea paste constitute authentic Greek mezze.

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Alex McBride

I give life to this town, this place that might be called Kalamata or Halkidiki, or Pitted. I imagine the lemons at the Sunday market; the old women leaning on the windowsills of their small houses; the blue ice cream freezers with the menu cards with faded prices stickered over, tracking the changing price of ice cream over the years. I see the roads and pavements flecked with sand from the beach at the bottom of the hill, quiet and still, until one day a commercial airliner daggers out of the sky, engines screaming, becoming so much bigger than you'd ever realise a plane to be before smashing into the shallows and washing up on the shore.

The townsfolk appear gradually and then all at once, still clutching their shopping bags in horror. In the sand, a man finds the charred remains of a plastic menu that offers a mixed mezze selection for £8.50, and he passes the smudged laminate to the person next to him. They pass it to the person next to them and they pass it around the group, and as the oil burns on top of the sea and the tide turns the smouldering fuselage into the surf, they begin to walk away, thinking that the poor souls got what they deserved.

Alex McBride is a writer of short, unserious stories that rarely see the light of day.

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Morgan Roth

in the season

in the season of fruit and touch and fever i find the bones of a headless mouse curled under an emptied pot it is yellowed with age and warped like a comma i press my finger to its paw and push it upward so it is lifted like praise and like milk-teeth in a young mouth it snaps the air is cloying with honeysuckle and we green ery shrouding this early reburial into its ribs i tuck a weak bulb purpling with life too weak to fully stand alone and warmed already by the newborn sun of a heavy-breathing year the sun is a kind of blue given to a sort of broken promise only a child can truly experience the kind that sours under the tongue and hangs like a spectre in the air the kind i can't help but associate with my dad my dad who only gave up smoking when he found out he was having a son after six years of cooking my brain maybe that's why things stick to the wax paper edges of my skull like a sealed cup in my skull the season of growth manifests behind the eyes and in the sinus like a brewing storm i wish i could press my fingers deep into the sockets of my eyes and dig like a dog into the dirt there i always promised that when it got bad again i would re-plant in the only way i knew how but it returns each year when the snow melts in a fit of irony like the world's worst joke – like burying bare bones of a pest i'd fear alive, like waiting only for a son to shake your vices and promise to heal, like opening a wound and cutting away the fatty tissues and expecting anything but the wet root of an out of season flower.

Morgan Roth is a current MA student at Northern Kentucky University and has had recent poetry published in *Pidgeonholes Magazine*. When not tangling with the English language in poem and essay form, Morgan likes to read collections and dream in watercolor landscapes. They live in the liminal spaces of Kentucky carved by Cincinnati's fingers with their two cats, Jack and Jude, who workshop comedic acrobat routines while Morgan's back is turned.

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Hungover & Horny

I've never fucked in a car, but I want to
pull over and feel something against the road
plastered with nothing but half-dead grass.

Each green sign is a hallow taunt.
The road is a rat's tail, swerving.
I am unnerved by most things, lately, but this.

I want to strip myself free of the folds of my flesh.
Somewhere, in a hotel, there is sex. The kind
neighbors hear, the rhythmic pounding

of a borrowed headboard against white walls.
The feel of nails against mass-produced linen.
I'm beginning to see sex and poetry as the same

thing embedded into different words.
How many ways can we expose ourselves?
I love a question with no real answer

and a bit of poison tucked under the skin.
I don't really drink anymore, but when I do
twist myself into a glass or two of something

lukewarm in the cradle of my hand
it's hard not to reconsider all my mistakes.
To sit with eyes glazed over the table

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Sam Frost

as someone traces the edge of their cup
with the tip of their dirt-stained fingernail
and wonder about the power of what if –

how it holds our tongues like infection.

Sam Frost is a writer who spends too much time and money drinking kombucha and is always craving fast food breakfast. You can find more work from her at *Ghost City Review*, *Kissing Dynamite Poetry*, *Vagabond City Lit*, and elsewhere.

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The Ministry of Names

It was 2051 when we ran out.

The shortages and the severity of the problem were identified in the mid-thirties and on Reddit first, it seems. However, the speed at which it would disrupt and deteriorate our society—and at so many levels—was underestimated by scientists and politicians.

No one likes to be a scaremonger, but now it's too late.

When we fall down to allotments and rations, that's when you know only war can fix the problem. Don't think that I like talking this way.

They've got so many they're just handing them out in China! Maybe their alphabet is different. I don't know the first thing about China. Chinese. And it's only one per person, is what I heard. Now here in America, if you turn on the news, you'll see the lines wrapped and wrapped and wrapped around the Ministry for miles. When the Minister deigns to step out on the balcony to read the lottery, you can hear the rats scuttle in the sewers below the streets; the cars all park. The factories stop churning. Airplanes land. The politicians decided it takes an exceptional talent to raise one up, and they created whole committees to investigate the merit of each application, claiming they're too precious to go to waste.

They passed a law so that only the young can have one here, which seems fair since it's us who got us into this mess. I wouldn't say that out loud, mind you, because most of my friends would mutiny. I say give them to the kids. It's the natural order of things.

It's all political.

My college roommates Joe and Erica called me and asked if I could help because they couldn't do it, and I checked the dark web—God help me. Couldn't find one.

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Travis Flatt

You should have seen what happened to my neighbor and his wife when they tried it in secret on their own. "Underground," we used to call it. But the Ministry took it away from them—right in the middle of a birthday party, for God's sake. They thought they'd be safe in the living room amongst friends.

But you can't argue with the Ministry of Names when they say they're all dried up. I've delved, and I've seen the numbers: it's a little over sixty million. My theory is that it's the close-mindedness of your average American and their desire for something short and catchy which limits you to three or four words. This means there are only so many combinations. Anyone who stopped and thought could have realized.

2051, and all the band names are gone.

Travis Flatt (he/him) is a teacher and actor living in Cookeville, Tennessee. He earned his English Lit MA from U.T. Knoxville. His work appears in *Roi Faineant*, *Dollar Store Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Misery Tourism*, and other publications.

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Brian Stephen Ellis

Imagination

My dad moved the family back to the town he grew up in, which years later he would tell me was a big mistake, he was looking to recapture something he had lost, which turned out to not be possible, he told me this when I was fourteen and crying on the floor of my closet and dad came and tried to sit on the floor of the closet with me, even though he was way too big. But back when I was six or seven we moved to this town and ended up across the street from a family with a dad that my dad had gone to high school with, which excited me at first so I made friends with the boy from across the street who was my age, I was a little older and allowed to cross the street before he was, and I did some digging around over there and found out that his dad didn't really like my dad, that they had kinda been enemies in high school which made sense the moment I learned it.

They were rich, they had a house with multiple floors and it was way too clean to be nice and you had to take off your sneakers when you came inside, and I think the mom and dad over there looked down on me because my parents did allow me to cross the street, to me it was a sign of trust my parents had in me, but to them it was a sign of recklessness. This kid and me were pretty different, I didn't really like him, but we lived across the street from one another so what the fuck else was I gonna fucking do? This kid had a shit-ton of G.I. Joes. I didn't really like G.I. Joes, they were too masculine, I didn't like anything to do with War or America, for the same reason, I didn't like masculine stuff, but I watched the TV show, the G.I. Joe TV show, of course I did, I watched all of them, *Transformers*, *ThunderCats*, *G.I. Joe*, I let them wash over me and I memorized all the character names and stories, and playing in this kid's room with him and all of his expensive ass playsets, I was trying to find some common ground with this kid who was much more of a boy's boy than me, so I started to try to tell him the character's names and stuff, the names of the

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Brian Stephen Ellis

G.I. Joes we were playing with, and this kid cuts me off. That's when he tells me that his parents don't let him watch TV, they say TV rots your brain, and they don't even let him learn the names of the action figures because they say it will limit his imagination, so he doesn't want to hear it from me, doesn't want me to tell him any of the fucking names or nothing. And this whole thing is wicked fucking screwy to me, because it says the names of the guys on the package, and plus where does this kid get off? So, we keep playing but I'm sweating because this information is like pressing out of me, this kid keeps calling Snake Eyes "Ninja Man" or something shitty like that and it's killing me, and I open my mouth to correct him, and the kid has had it with me. He tells me to fucking shut it, and if I keep using the character's names, I can just fucking go. Anyway, I'm a poet now and he works for the Royal Bank of Scotland.

Brian Stephen Ellis is the author of four collections of poetry, with a fifth, *Against Common Sense*, to be released from *Limit Zero Press* in 2023. His first collection of prose, *Pretty Much the Last Hardcore Kid in This Town*, will be released from *Alien Buddha Press*, also in 2023. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

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Sharon Denmark

I Keep

In a basket of braided grass gone golden
huddle faded conch shells. I hear them rattling
at night because they miss the sea.

In a basket made of glass nestle
small pinecones gathered from a hemlock grove
twenty years ago. This isn't about
which one is easier to carry.

Just plucked, one woven basket of plump figs,
swarmed with wasps, vibrating with them, wings
and mandibles quivering. They've come home
and they know sweetness
as well as anyone.

Sharon Denmark is an artist and writer from the southern part of Virginia. Most recently, her poetry has appeared in *FERAL: A Journal of Poetry and Art* and *ONE ART: a journal of poetry*. Her visual work can be seen at 460arts.com. She spends her day job sorting through life's leftovers.

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Edward Clifford

in the garden is where my head rests

the woman I lean on in the sun tells me to:
Waste time on chit chat

I tell her my deepest fear: to be so rattled
by an iris that my body unfolds

(apoptosis: tiny deaths of the cell
as a biological condition of living,
often confused with growth,
often confused with the frond of a fern)

out of goodness we keep ourselves leashed to the flower bed,
a tiny act of buoyancy,
in the cavity of the open yard, governed and tame
before the frost

Edward Clifford is a writer and editor from Massachusetts. His work can be found in *Press Pause Press*, *Rabid Oak*, and elsewhere.

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Song of the Night

Light rain outside, and clouds within. Still groggy
from your reading: Homer's *Iliad*.
You asked for it. Your wife's on her computer,
dog is zonked. A load of laundry's going,
dishes in the sink. You've tried to be
a better husband, brother, lover, friend –
but what's that mean in middle age? And what's
been lost, reclaimed, or even gained? The payroll's
done, the penne's bubbling in the pot,
and Mahler's Seventh, Klemperer conducting,
soothes you through your earbuds. And? You wrote
a poem today. Materials and time:
still mastering the rudiments. What else?
You haven't died. The new roof will outlive you.

Thomas Zimmerman (he/him) teaches English, directs the Writing Center, and edits *The Big Windows Review* at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His poems have appeared recently in *hand picked poetry*, *Interstellar Literary Review*, and *Sage Cigarettes*. His latest book is the chapbook *The House of Cerberus* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022).

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