Ley Lines Literary Review 2025

Table of Contents

Ley Lines / Claudia Michel | 3

Orpheum No. 1 / Ann Russell | 5

Three Miles Down / Joe Healy | 12

Cambodia / Deborah Morris | 13

Sisyphean / A. D. Capili | 20

Through the Zero Lens / Susan Bailey Lesser | 22

The Last Days of Black-and-White / Michael Brockly |26

Metamorphosis / Michael Brockly | 27

I Fly to You / Poppy Storm |28

Heart/Murmur / Archer Lundy | 34

First Pictures / Archer Lundy |35

The Telling / Rebecca King | 36

Ley Lines / by Claudia Michel

As I hike on a rocky path in the deep woods of northwestern North Carolina, I'm overtaken by sadness. I have heard tales of magnetic ley lines, or energy grids, running under the earth in this location, strong enough to send healing vibrations throughout the body. "They can line up your chakras," the woman behind the museum desk in Black Mountain told me. Although this assertion hasn't been scientifically proven, what may be significant is that these electromagnetic energy paths seem to connect ancient sites all over the earth. I don't know if it's the magnetic pull of a ley line that I'm feeling, but as I walk this path on what was once Cherokee land, I'm surprised by grief.

I am a cultural orphan, a mutt, a conglomerate of various DNA mixed together randomly. I don't have land I can call my ancient home or people I can trace to one place. I try on rites and rituals of other cultural groups: burning the incense of sage, copal, and palo santo when I meditate, dyeing wool with indigo and

wild marigold and weaving sacred designs, not my own, on a loom that was created by Navajos. And unlike most indigenous people, I don't have an origin story in which I can see myself.

I do, of course, have ancestors from Europe who migrated to the United States, where they scattered. They either forgot their stories or kept them to themselves. There were no rituals passed down to their children. My Irish grandmother was raised a Catholic, and yet I never knew this until after her death. She and my grandfather migrated from a farming town in Michigan to the desert of Arizona in the 1940s to seek solace from his crippling asthma. My other grandfather is rumored to have been in the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, his son having glimpsed the white robe and hood hanging in a closet. His wife, my grandmother, converted to a fundamentalist Christian denomination at a tent meeting in the 1930s.

That fundamentalist religion became my family's dominant culture, and it was one that did not recognize a sacred connection to the land. We were taught that this earth is not our home, and we should not become attached to it. We sang hymns that reminded us that we are strangers here and that heaven is our true home. Although the origin myth of this sect began with the creation of the earth and its beauty, the story has it that those early people were cast from the perfect garden and doomed to long for it ever after.

At a junction in the trail, I follow a sign pointing downward toward Meditation Rock. The narrow, shaded path is sprinkled with laurel blossoms, and I hear the distinctive call of an eastern towhee. As I emerge from the trees, I come to a river, water swirling around a large boulder at the edge. Carefully, I make my way across a mossy log and climb the smooth granite to settle on the overhang of the rock.

The river glistens in sunlight, and there's the familiar scent of decomposition from wet leaves, wood, and soil. I've never been here before, but I'm no stranger to this wild yet welcoming place. Perhaps the healing vibrations of the ley lines are at work, creating this energy that tugs at some long-buried knowledge, or maybe I'm simply being reminded that I have a sacred connection to all such places—for as I turn toward the oncoming water, I can feel the breath of the wind from the rapids on my face, telling me I belong.

Orpheum No. 1 / by Ann Russell

My father acquired a used five-string banjo, an Orpheum No.1, sometime shortly after 1948, when he arrived in Albuquerque to attend the University of New Mexico on the GI Bill. His younger sister, my Aunt Phoebe, was dating an anthropology graduate student, a banjo player from Memphis. They took my father to music parties where the anthro students played old-timey tunes on guitar, banjo, and fiddle. My father was entranced; perhaps he noticed the female attention paid to the banjo picker. He picked up the Orpheum No. 1 and learned to play clawhammer style. My parents met at one of the anthropology crowd's music parties and were married a few months later.

In a 1954 photograph, he plays the banjo sitting on our couch in Albuquerque. My mother sits beside him in her white blouse and blue jeans, holding me, an alert baby with eyes fixed on the banjo.

Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1954

From Albuquerque we moved to Okinawa in 1958, passing through the San Francisco Bay Area. I was four years old when we came back a year later and moved into a brown shingle house on Spruce Street in Berkeley. My father played the banjo in the evenings—old-timey songs like "Cripple Creek," "Old Joe Clark," and "The Cumberland Mountain Deer Chase." He started the song slowly, warming up, and my siblings and I began to trot through the house, biggest to smallest, first Libby, then me, then Davy, and finally two-year-old Peter, sometimes on all fours. My father's hand built up speed until the tempo was lickety-split, and we were at a dead run down the hallway, through the kitchen and dining room and back to the living room. He stopped playing all at once with a grand final strum; Libby stopped running abruptly; we crashed into each other and collapsed, sweaty and laughing.

When I was twelve, my father bought me an old Washburn guitar, and I learned to play by listening to Joan Baez records. My Aunt Sally and her friend Beth came over to play folk music; Sally played the autoharp, Beth played the guitar, my father played the banjo, and we all sang. Later, Sally gave me an autoharp and taught me to pick out tunes on it.

In the early sixties, our family joined the Berkeley Friend's Meeting, and our social life began to revolve around the Meeting. We went to weekly anti-draft vigils at the Oakland Induction Center and anti-war marches in San Francisco. We spent weekends and summer vacations at work parties building John Woolman School, a new Quaker high school on a ranch near Nevada City. We took in two confused young men who'd gone AWOL from the Army. One played my guitar all day with a pick, leaving gouges below the sound hole. My mother sewed drapes for the living room as she watched news coverage of Kennedy's assassination on our small black-and-white television. She edited the Meeting newsletter, volunteered with the Berkeley Parent Nursery School and the Women for Peace, and drank Gallo jug wine with the AWOLs. My father joined hundreds of civil rights activists on the third Selma march in 1965.

Then in the late sixties, my father became dissatisfied with his life as a land surveyor, respected Quaker, and father of four. He tried his hand at writing for a while, struggling to type out three pages a day after work. He urged us kids to live creative and meaningful lives and not to force ourselves into establishment

molds. One spring day in 1969 when I was fourteen, my parents lined us up on the orange-flowered couch in the living room and told us that Daddy was leaving to move in with Jane, his lover. In that moment, I felt a chill in the pit of my stomach. *Will I still be able to go to John Woolman School?*

Looking back, I cringe to think how selfish I was, how ignorant of my mother's and everyone else's pain and confusion.

My father was sporadic with the child support payments. My mother had to find a full-time job quickly, after not working full time for a decade or more. She yelled at us every day when she got home from her new job to find dishes unwashed, Creedence Clearwater blaring from the record player, groceries bought yesterday already gone, inhaled by four growing children and their friends.

Once, in tears, she ran down the fifty-two steps from our house, driving away too fast in our blue and white Dodge station wagon and didn't return for hours. Libby, the oldest, moved away to live with our grandmother. Ten-year-old Peter began to cut school regularly to avoid the bullies and the teacher with thick glasses who asked questions that he couldn't answer; finally, he dropped out. Eventually, I figured out that if I did the dishes, started dinner, and had one of the *Brandenburg Concertos* on the record player when my mom walked in the door after work, she would relax as visibly as a taut string released from tension, and there would be no yelling.

I knew that I had to leave. Luckily for me, I was able to attend the John Woolman School, and after I graduated in 1972, I got a ride to Missouri to work on my boyfriend's farm. We had been together ever since the middle of my junior year, and I had a romantic view of the farming life back then. But after a year there, I got restless and decided to go to college at the University of Arizona. I never lived in my childhood home again.

In 1975, my father and Jane moved from Berkeley to a small house in Mendocino, without an indoor toilet but within reach of the fog and the bark of sea lions. He did boundary and topographic surveys for UC Berkeley, making the four-hour drive down from Mendocino for field work, and dove into black-and-white photography. He was well known for the accuracy and craftsmanship of his maps and the artistry of

his photographs. In 1982, he ran for town council of Mendocino and campaigned by playing “Cripple Creek” and “Old Joe Clark” on the banjo, sitting behind a table in front of the post office.

When in my late teens and early twenties, I'd make the occasional trek by Greyhound bus to see him, and my father would make me a cup of tea and ask about my day. We'd play music together, me on the guitar and he on the banjo. At his house I felt a calm peace in stark contrast to the yelling at home with my mother. It wasn’t until decades later that I recognized the high price that my mother paid for his peace, left on her own with four children.

Over the years, my father gradually stopped playing the Orpheum No. 1. It hung on a dowel pounded into a bookshelf between nested abalone shells, a glass box with a hummingbird skull, field guides, Russian novels, murder mysteries, and accounts of the Scott and Shackleton expeditions to the South Pole. Rust nurtured by salty fog froze the tiny gears within the tuning pegs, the hoof glue attaching the fretboard to the neck weakened, and the neck began to bow from the unrelenting string tension. A mouse with maternal instincts discovered the case, tucked upstairs behind a desk, and made her nest in the lining.

Only three times did my father express some regret or sadness over having moved away from our family. Once on the train from Davis to San Francisco, he read aloud, in a strange rough voice, some graffiti on a concrete abutment under an overpass in Richmond: “I love and miss my sons.”

A few years later, when Davy accidentally shot his dog, my father came out in the rain to help him dig a grave amidst the redwood trees and huckleberry bushes. “Some things you just have to live with,” he told Davy. And then one spring when he was in his late seventies, my father and I went for a walk in Russian Gulch, past tall redwoods, thick ferns and pale blue forget-me-nots. We fell silent after chatting for a while before he said, “When I used to read books, I always identified with the good guys. I was sure I would always know the right thing to do, and do it, just like the good guys in the books did. But now I know I’m not a good guy at all. I’ve done badly by you kids.” I put my arm over his bony shoulder. “You are forgiven,” I said, and we never spoke of it again.

He died suddenly a few years later, struck by a pickup truck on Highway 1 while bicycling home from Quaker Meeting. Jane, more pragmatic than sentimental, began giving away his stuff. She took down all the

photographs of us four kids, leaving only those of her sons. No one in our family played banjo now, and I was afraid that she would give Dad's banjo to someone who did play. I asked her if I could take it home.

When I took the Orpheum No. 1 to my first banjo lesson, my teacher was not impressed with it. While I saw only the beautiful old instrument I remembered from our Spruce Street days, as a musician he noticed the signs of age and neglect that made it unplayable. I looked again, seeing it as if for the first time. Its neck was badly bowed, and its fretboard had started to come loose from the neck. I took the Orpheum No. 1 to a luthier's shop, three blocks down, to see if it could be repaired.

Stepping through the doorway, I inhaled the fragrance of cut fir, ebony, rosewood, ash, maple, and mahogany. The music room in front of me was crowded with guitar and ukulele forms, instrument cases, a lumpy couch, shelves laden with books and materials of lutherie: thin sheets of spruce and mahogany, jars of ebony and rosewood powder, a small bag of mammoth tusk excavated from the Alaskan tundra. A guitar made from bicycle parts hung on the wall.

I followed the sound of a power saw through a narrow hallway past signed CD cases and stopped at the doorway of the shop. The luthier took the Orpheum No. 1 out of its case, laid it carefully on his bench, and admired it. A red and blue metal label, "Rettburg & Lange Company, New York" and a serial number inside the pot told us that this banjo was built around 1917-1918, thirty years before my father came upon it.

The luthier told me how he'd go about repairing the neck and fretboard, and pointed out missing pieces in the abalone inlay. He showed me where the steel tone ring originally sat just beneath the skin head, to brighten and amplify the sound of the strings. In a rush of inspiration, I asked if I could help with the repairs and, to my delight, he agreed to provide materials and show me what to do and how to use the tools.

I started that very afternoon to replace the diamond-shaped abalone inlay missing from the fingerboard. Out of a cigar box filled with pieces of abalone and mother of pearl, I chose a piece slightly bigger than the missing diamond and shaped it using a hand grinder. I pried out the original hoof glue remaining in the hole and mixed black ebony powder into epoxy with a toothpick so the repair would be almost invisible. I poked the glue into the hole, then placed the diamond, and wiped off the excess glue. I repaired two more decorations in the fretboard inlay where pieces of abalone had fallen out, filing down bits of shell into tiny

filigree shamrocks no bigger than the tip of my finger. When I discovered a cardboard shim under the original thin piece of abalone, I imagined a worker in that New York banjo factory during the Great War, daring to take up smoking in the absence of her soldier husband, fishing a matchbook out of her pocket to fashion the shim. Twice, a small piece of abalone I was shaping flicked out of my clumsy fingers and was lost in the sawdust and wood shavings on the floor, and I had to start over.

Over the next few weeks, I worked on the banjo every day. The luthier showed me how to take the neck off the pot and remove the bridge and the creamy white nut that holds the strings up off the fingerboard. Under his tutelage, I carefully heated the fretboard, wrapping it in a mini-electric blanket to loosen the hoof glue, and gently pushed a thin blade between the neck and fretboard until it was free. I sanded the surfaces to remove the fragments of old glue and clamped the ends and the middle of the neck to the worktable to counter the pressure of strings left taut for decades.

After a couple of days, when the neck was straight again, I glued the fretboard back on. The steel frets themselves extended beyond the fretboard's edge; I filed them flush again, then sanded the fretboard smooth, moving from 220- to 800-grit sandpaper, the last passes little more than caresses before I rubbed it with fretboard oil.

The original tuning pegs had become rusted from years spent in the Mendocino salt air and would barely turn—one didn't turn at all. I took them all off and lubricated them, working the ivory buttons back and forth with my fingers. I took the frozen tuner apart, exposing a tiny broken gear, and replaced this tuner with a newer one. Refastening the neck, I pushed the nut back in place and began the slow process of making small adjustments in the nut and bridge saddle to produce clear, true notes, without buzzing or unwanted tones.

Usually, several other people were working on instruments at the same time, yet there was no radio playing, no music other than the sound of sandpaper blocks pushed back and forth, an occasional whir from the drill press or hand-grinder, or the whine of a saw. Mostly we worked quietly, deliberately, reverently, each of us focused on our tasks and on our thoughts. As I filed and sanded and mended the

banjo, I imagined that wherever he was, my father knew of the work I was doing, and I saw his pleased face in my mind, conscious of my love for him.

Finally, I finished the repairs, put new gut strings on, and tuned it up again.

Recently, I drove the four hours from my home in Davis to visit my brothers on the north coast. My youngest brother, Peter, made me a cup of tea, and I showed him my work on the banjo. It's been over a half century since we romped through the Spruce Street house while Dad played this banjo, and Peter's hands are now thickly muscled and worn from his work as a carpenter and house painter. We sat together in the kitchen, and I played "Old Joe Clark," a song he hadn't heard for years. As I played, he slipped out of the kitchen to the living room to listen by the living room fire to an old song come alive again.

Three Miles Down / by Joe Healy

The Titanic lies nearly three miles down;
We travel in our submarine.
The depth gauge moves slowly.

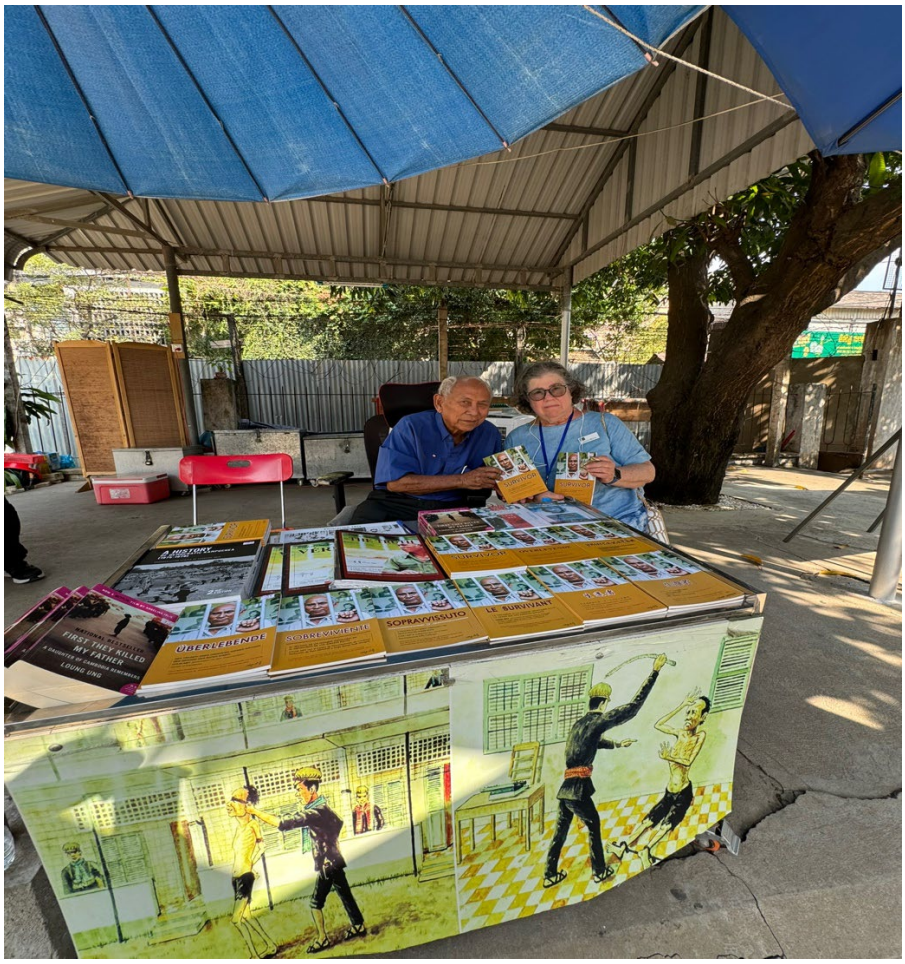
The ship is covered in mud.
Our pilot hits the mud with a robot arm
and the ship's stern is exposed.

The bridge was destroyed
when she descended
under the Atlantic.

The salvage team found phials of perfume
perfectly preserved, and the scent filled our cabins.
Released to the world after ninety years.

A plaque from Queenstown
was placed on the wreckage,
with an Irish prayer from the people of Cobh.

For all to see. For all at sea.
At peace. Forever.
We hold the key.



Cambodia / by Deborah Morris

We arrive in Siem Reap, Cambodia, after a seventeen-hour flight. I'm traveling with my sister-in-law and older brother on a National Geographic sponsored tour of Cambodia and Vietnam. It's February 2023, and this equatorial region is alarmingly hot and bright as we transfer from our private van to settle into the Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor.

We're traveling with a well-educated and prosperous group, mostly Americans, accompanied by an archeologist, naturalist, photography instructor, and physician, along with knowledgeable local tour guides who will change every few days as we change locations and focus. Our accommodations and meals are

luxurious. We want for nothing, and our days are carefully programmed to make the most of our limited time in a history and culture-rich environment.

The juxtaposition of ancient and modern life is fascinating and jarring as the war-ravaged history of this small and poor country can be seen in historical temples shifting from Hinduism to Buddhism, and even the name of the city, derived from Siam, the old name of what is now Thailand, one of Cambodia's historical enemies.

The men playing sweet music in a pavilion at Angkor Wat are scarred or missing limbs, maimed by landmines, and we are warned to stay safely on the paths through what remains of the jungle. The guides describe childhoods of fishing in the river and catching crickets, not for fun but to supplement their families' meager rations in the years of the civil war and after the terror of the Khmer Rouge. Chann, the guide who has shared some details of his chaotic childhood, asks if we know what KFC stands for in his land. "Khmer fried crickets," he chuckles.

The Khmer, the people of Cambodia, are welcoming, kind, and helpful. There's a sense of peace, almost meditative, as we travel through the countryside, visit the ancient temples, learn from our guides, and speak English with elementary and secondary school students in an agricultural village. I've wondered about the reception we'd get in Vietnam, but I'm stunned by the kindness and openness of the people we meet here.

The United States dropped half a million tons of bombs in Cambodia during the Vietnam war, on this small poor country that was not involved in the war, to slow the movement of people and supplies on the Ho Chi Minh trail. At least 150,000 civilians were killed, and the massive death and destruction were partly to blame for the civil chaos that came after. Most of the travelers with me lived through that era and knew about the war through the tv news coverage of the time. I was a teen and remember the upheaval caused in our country by the Vietnam war but have only recently come to understand a little about the devastating effect of my country's policies on Cambodia as I read to prepare myself for the trip.

After a few days of visiting temples and museums in Siem Reap, we board a small ship to cruise down the Mekong River, stopping for excursions, each with a unique form of transportation, from vans to the motorized rickshaws, called tuk-tuks, to ox carts. There are rice fields and lotus ponds, a tiny family-run rice noodle operation, a man harvesting palm sap to ferment, a school run by a nonprofit to supplement the limited offerings of the underfunded public school system–only a few hours a day in either the morning or the afternoon.

Everywhere we go we are welcomed. We get pieces of stories of lost families, forced relocations, corrupt government officials, constrained freedom of speech, lack of money and opportunity, all told in a matter-of-fact way. This is how it was, and this is how it is. There is always hope that it will get better.

We stop before a small concrete-block home where a tired looking young woman is making a pot from an ancient design, perfectly round, perfectly functional, entirely by hand, as her toddler son plays with the red clay that permeates her clothes and fingers, and her seven-year-old daughter is getting IV fluids, lying on a platform in the courtyard. There's an abandoned potter's wheel in the corner, donated by an NGO, clearly not of use to this skilled young woman. She makes round-bottomed clay cooking pots, as she learned from her mother, just like pots we saw in a thousand-year-old archeological dig fired in the open and sold to a wholesaler for about two dollars each.

Are we exploiting or helping? I wonder as we stand in a circle, paging at her skill, smiling at the children, concerned about the obviously sick little girl. A bit of both, I think, as I press money into the woman's hands for a few clay figures that she makes sure the guide tells us were not made by her. Then we're back in the van and back to our elegant Victorian-themed cruise ship.

Early the next morning, we dock on the river at Phnom Penh, the capital. We leave the boat to find a fleet of what look like adult-sized two-wheeled strollers, each propelled by a man on a bicycle—a reversed tricycle with a seat in front called a cyclo. A tall skinny man in his thirties waves me to his vehicle and helps me into the seat. I'm facing the front and cannot see him but watch as my travel companions enter their conveyances. It feels strange to be an adult riding under human power. Again, I feel a flutter of unease, knowing that my tourist dollars are feeding his family but worried about the exploitation of the poor for entertainment. In threes and fours, the cyclos enter the traffic on the wide dock-side avenue.

Fortunately for us, many of the motorized vehicles on the road are motorbikes and motorcycles, but there are a substantial number of cars and dense traffic on these city streets laid out in the usual grid. We ride between buildings that get taller as we enter the city center. There are no traffic lights, no stop signs, and no one directing traffic at intersections. Every corner is a free-for-all. Somehow it works, perhaps because the Khmer are such a gentle and cooperative people, and we get a chaotic and breathtaking tour of the city, ending at the Royal Palace, ornate golden-roofed buildings set in manicured parkland.

The lavish palace is followed by a wonderful museum and then lunch at an elegant French restaurant. Replete, we load into our waiting buses, then ride out of the city center along shady tree-lined urban residential streets, well-maintained three-and four-story houses that exemplify the influence of the former French occupation.

The bus drivers park in front of a mid-century building, and we climb out and enter the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Strychnine Hill, a former secondary school that was converted to the notorious Security Prison 21 at the onset of the rule of the Khmer Rouge, one of more than a hundred and fifty of such prisons around the country.

We walk into the school's central courtyard, where I imagine teens once kicked soccer balls. Our guide leads us into a ground floor cell with an iron cot and manacles chained to the floor. These rooms were for the more important prisoners. Upstairs, the rooms are broken into tiny four-by-eight-foot cinder block compartments, each with cot and chains, barely large enough to move around in. The railings around the upstairs walkways are topped with barbed wire to prevent prisoners from jumping.

In this pleasant neighborhood, between 1974 and 1979, more than twenty thousand mostly Cambodian prisoners were processed, chained in cells converted from classrooms, interrogated, tortured, and killed. The Khmer Rouge targeted the educated and the skilled—journalists, teachers, politicians, intellectuals, lawyers, doctors, artists—the keepers of the culture. Meticulous records were compiled, along with photographs of the victims and handwritten or typed accounts of their "confessions."

Parts of the museum are maintained as they were found after the terror abated. Many of the rooms are filled with photographs on the walls and on wooden partitions, life-sized torsos of the numbered prisoners, men, women, children. Their faces are frightened, resigned, impassive, defiant—these people who'd been pulled out of normal and productive lives at the whim of men with plans to remake a society to match their vision of a Marxist agrarian utopia.

As I slowly move through the classrooms, cells, torture chambers, and gaze into hopeless sepia-colored eyes, my breath is short, and I feel tightness in my chest. How can this happen? How could this have happened?

Yet I know that it happens over and over. People find reasons to torture and kill their neighbors. Some difference justifies the cruelty and the murder. Seemingly orderly societies descend into murderous madness—often highly organized and meticulously documented madness.

In our other excursions we'd wandered in small shifting groups, chatting, sharing observations, stopping now and then to take pictures; here we disperse in silence. I go back down to the courtyard and sit on a bench, just breathing in the still, hot air, watching the faces of other tourists as they too seek quiet corners and sip from water bottles, holding back tears.

Before disembarking from our buses, the guide had mentioned that we might find one or two of the few survivors of this prison, and as I sit, I now focus on an old man sitting under an awning at a table with a few books. I get up, wander over, and notice his face on the cover of the books. An article taped to the table informs me that this man survived by making his mechanical skills useful to his captors, and so they kept him alive to repair their machines. The article also states that he has lived with great guilt but has more recently come to a state of serenity. I sense great strength in his frailty. I buy a book, though I'm pretty sure I won't read it. He beams at me and asks his translator to take photos of the two of us with his phone and mine.

A third of the population of Cambodia perished during the reign of the Khmer Rouge. They weren't of a different race or religion; they were Khmer. Most were sent to camps to labor on the land, lacking the skills and tools needed, dying by the millions of hunger, abuse, and wholesale execution. The survivors have worked to rebuild their lives and families and society. Those who perpetrated the horrors mostly escaped justice. Some achieved high governmental positions, though most of the leaders are dead now. Time passes, but human history proceeds down its terrible path.

I am a convert to Judaism. In 1976, when I was pregnant with my first child, I remember telling my then husband's grandmother about my decision to convert. She was a brilliant, cultured, and savvy woman who'd left Czechoslovakia with her teenaged children in 1939 after the Nazis invaded Poland, leaving behind a husband who was convinced that they were safe because of his wealth and position. She looked at me in horror. "Why would you want to do that? They kill us!"

The Holocaust seemed a distant but indelible lesson. The massacres in Rwanda and Srebrenica hadn't happened yet. I was unaware of the tragedy unfolding in Cambodia. Young, naïve, I didn't think anything like that could happen again.

Months later, in my peaceful country home, I reflect on what I've seen and start writing. As I've heard people on the news rail against immigrants, leaders calling their opponents animals and vermin, and

watched horrors unfold in conflicts across the globe, I feel old, world-weary and know that it can happen again.

Yet during quiet hours of the day, I think about the optimism of the Cambodians who suffered great losses but work hard and look forward to a better future, the Cambodians who open their struggling country and hearts to visitors—even visitors from the country that caused much of their suffering—and that allows me to glimpse hope for a future in which humanity can rise above our need to create an enemy to hate and destroy.

Sisyphean / by A. D. Capili

Your task was to enjoy your vacation,
get away from the flood of news
of august coalition-forming and Olympic sports.
So you joined the daybreak throng of tourists
flying sleepily from Brussels to Araxos.
Then in the taxi speeding down
narrow
concrete
roads,
you spied on both sides the ground turned
blindingly bright by the sun, relentlessly
weathering the white domed tents
punctured and empty now, standing away
from the yuccas, oleanders, and olive trees.

You climbed the road
winding along the western shoulder of Erymanthos—its peaks
a creased cream face rising above patches of pines,
birches, and spruce,
all fixed against an expanse of cloudless pale blue.
The air thinned and cooled
—there were no fires here—and your ears
believed they were back on the plane,
yet heard the constant clanging of goat bells

and the barking of the village dogs
daring to herd passing cars.

You rolled and lugged your luggage over
a flight of rough ascending steps,
deposited them into her ancestral home,
where black and white photos of men, stern looking
in skirts, unaware of future conflagrations,
hung along the darkened walls.

You finally sank into a creaking bed,
turned your roaming 4G on:
your phone buzzed furiously,
drowning out the wasps hovering at the windows
and the chirp and gurgle of swallows swirling
above the fruitless
cherry trees.

Through the Zero Lens / by Susan Bailey Lesser

June 6, July 15, July 22, August 13—There are a lot of birthdays piling up on the calendar. So far, the birthdays are winning. The greeting cards reading Have a Wonderful Day" in gold-tinged text outnumber the gray and purple In Sympathy" messages found in the bottom of the card rack at the grocery store. Some of those birthdays are more notable than others, and it has to do with the Zero—the sphere that shows up at the end of the line of single digits in children's books and is often elongated a bit at top and bottom. This is the well-known roundish figure appended to one of the other nine digits every ten years, signifying that at this birthday you will not be adding one simple year, but you are dealing with an entire decade of your lifetime. At this birthday, both digits together, recording the amount of time you have existed, will change.

Zero, the placeholder, is as imposing and revealing as Sherlock Holmes's magnifying glass. I peer through its center to size up the stages of my life. Through this window it is possible to look forward, to see what may come next. I hope for good health, a long-anticipated trip to Greece, time and energy to learn

Spanish, and maybe another grandchild. Or I can peer through from the other side to examine the life I have lived up to this point—thirty-two years working in special education, raising children who are happy and independent, missing my mother although she died fourteen years ago. This shimmering oval can also serve as a silvered mirror as well. I look into it and see myself reflected back this very moment, the moment we call Now." I continue to love what I have always loved—friends and family, Rachmaninov and Stevie Wonder, pot roast and gravy. I could go on, but you get the idea. There is more of me now than I ever expected to see, and much of the bulk has given up trying to defy gravity. The contents of the formerly empty shelf in the medicine cabinet are also expanding, and I now have a favorite pharmacy. No matter which way I turn it, that shimmering Zero will call upon me to take stock, examine, remember, and, one might hope, to be thankful.

I have had several skirmishes with the Zero, the first, when I was nine. I was riding in back seat of the family DeSoto. In those long-ago days, before seatbelts, the back seat was considered the safest location in the car. Now that I was nine, I could no longer stand on my head in the back seat with my calves resting on the wide shelf of the rear window. It was easier to have a conversation if I wasn't upside-down. My mother told me that Julie, my friend from ballet class at Miss Green's Dance Studio, was having a tenth birthday party on September 23. I was invited. The whole world knew that when you turned ten, you could go to Williams Shoe Store, across from the Woolworth's, and buy toe shoes, complete with pink satin ribbons and little rabbit fur sort of pockets to slip over your toes to protect them. I still had a long way to go before the mid-July birthday that would mark my passage to the dazzling world of double-digits—and toe shoes. I collapsed in a puddle of tears and outrage. My mother was not sympathetic as I blubbered away about how Julie got to be ten way before me. And how I would never be ten—never, never, never. I was wrong.

When I arrived at the age of forty, I noticed all my friends and family began to use the term middle-age" to describe this time of life. I countered that since I had remained essentially blithe and oblivious until I was at least twenty-five, I considered I was still a teenager, even though I had given up miniskirts and chewing gum and had little interest in disco dancing. It turns out, denial is a common reaction to the arrival of the Zero.

But when the Zero arrives after a six or seven, or maybe even an eight, there is no more pretending. The view through the round and shiny circle extends farther to the back than to the front. Conversations among friends are more often about retirement options and Medicare than trips to Tuscany's vineyards or waterskiing.

At our house, we are getting there. The number preceding the Zero is notably higher.

Walking through our garden last week, we admired the exuberant rhododendron, encouraged the impatient lilies to wait just a little longer before blooming, and agreed to make a salad of the silky lettuce in the vegetable garden that night. We sat on the red bench nestled under the enormous yew tree at the end of the peony row. His glass holding red wine, mine holding white, both of unspecified vintage. I remarked, That redbud hasn't much left of itself. I think we should take it down and plant another—or maybe a flowering almond would be good."

"Are we going to start planting trees at this age?" My husband was thinking out loud.

It was a good question. When do you discover you are too old to plant trees? Do you just age out—like when you realize so much time has gone by you will never be a prima ballerina dancing the role of Giselle or an astrophysicist smiling from the podium as you receive your Nobel prize? Or does it happen all at once—in the same way you decided to get rid of the orange and brown dishes you have always hated and packed them off to The Thrifty Shopper one Wednesday morning? Or is it like when you realize you no longer have time to fool around with the small cloves of garlic huddled at the center of the bundle and reach for a friendly plump head of garlic that just arrived yesterday?

As we headed back toward the house, Bill took my hand, and we turned to look at the ailing redbud.

"I think a flowering almond would be good," he said, as it became plain to both of us that it is impossible ever to be too old to plant a tree. Trees use their own calendar and do not need to conform to our notions of longevity. We are just passing through. I enjoy knowing the trees I plant will outlive me.

So, we will be installing the flowering almond near where the redbud once lived. And we will plant a pink-flowering dogwood by the rock wall near the raspberries.

As we went in the kitchen for dinner, I said, But I don't want to plant teeny-tiny trees anymore. Let's get a flowering almond that already looks like a tree. And the dogwood too."

"Good idea," Bill concurred.

So that is my concession to my next birthday Zero—I will plant bigger trees in the first place because I do know I can't wait forever to get to know them. But I will be looking forward, through the Zero lens at my newly planted trees.

The Last Days of Black-and-White / by Michael Brockly

Once men wore white shirts with button-down collars. Undershirts woven from cumulus clouds. Women wanted to be either mothers in pale light sweaters or black-wimpled nuns. Everyone owned a pair of black shoes. We drove automobiles painted from reservoirs of night and ink. At birthday parties, we served angel food cake on immaculate linen napkins. Children played board games with black-and-white dice. Practiced the times table. *National Geographic* employed sketch artists who excelled with charcoals. In those days there were laws regarding the color of hats heroes and villains could buy. We were so smug in our black trousers. A nation of spelling bee also-rans, unprepared for the peacocks that perched one foggy night on the shoulders of circus elephants. We were wary of the saffron flowers that flourished in the meadow the circus abandoned. In the river valleys, folks protested the appearance of pastel balloons. Balked at the indigo possibilities. Rumor has it a ringmaster was tarred and feathered for flaunting a scarlet cape. Yet a few of us met in storm cellars to plot the emergence of rainbows. We joined a pandemonium of turquoise. Followed up with magenta riots in the flyover country. We couldn't wait to plant a tangerine and pomegranate flag atop a rover on Mars.

Metamorphosis / by Michael Brockly

—after Yinka Shonibare and Debbie Ma

We emerge from our homes on *el Día de Muertos* to greet each other with spinning globes rather than with our anachronistic heads. Our skins turned into fabrics bearing paintings of sanctuaries. Or drone photographs of the ring roads encircling our capitals. Our new heads swirl above our torsos with *überglücklich* elan. Reveling in the possibilities borne on the vistas we behold. We begin walking together, admiring the jasmines and winter daphnes blossoming from our eyebrows. And draw close enough to each other to inhale the evolving fragrances. Our frail metabolisms renewed by the red and yellow gestures extended by the wind. Some of us pose for mask makers. The rest explore the possibilities inherent with our novice attempts to fly. We have become the music of the world. The pollinators of the murals and statues in which we dwell. When our new heads rotate on their resolute axes, our dreams stop at bee colonies in the Himalayas or among a reindeer herd in Greenland. When the roan horses appear, we take turns racing the coursers across an earth we notice for the first time. We place gratitude on our *ofrendas,* so eager are we to live the lives we have become.

I Fly to You / by Poppy Storm

The kitchen is chilly, but I have hot coffee. No lights are on, and my husband is still asleep. Through the window I see dawn emerging from its nightly disappearing act. It has yet to fully take charge of the world. This massive but simple project beginning again. And again, I sit watching it.

Three dark birds fly north across the barely lightening sky. Quiet perfection playing out for its own sake. I am ever so slightly a part of it, ever so slightly a part of myself.

But I am in love. In spite of it all, I am in love. I live to love. What else is there really? I work, I try to stay alive, and I love. And I watch birds fly across the sky...again and again in this long life that sometimes feels like home. I also wonder about things. I wonder if we can fix this world. Truth be told, I'm kind of tired of wondering if we can fix the world, especially as I watch it take blow after blow. The endless tape. Scene after scene. Year after year.

I look at the sky and blow these dark airborne impressions to a dry landscape with barren soil. I allow them to fall like dandelion puffs, each with a tiny seed hoping for a safe landing. I do not ensure their safety, and I ask them to not take root.

I hear the soft thud of my husband's feet dropping to the wood floor in the bedroom across the hall. I hear rustling and feel a sliver of light on my face as the bedroom door slowly swings open. I have a man, and he's about to walk into this dark space with his bright spirit.

I hear a sudden click, and the kitchen is flooded with light from the pendant above. I look over, and Jacob is standing in the doorway with no shirt, wearing red plaid pajama bottoms. He is tall with thick salt and pepper hair. I ponder how handsome he is. *What is he doing here?* I snicker to myself. Then I give him a welcoming smile as I have every morning for ten years.

"Good morning, my love, how are the dark thoughts today?" he asks.

"They're fine. I'm fine," I reply, feeling a sense of normalcy settle in. The morning sky through the window has turned into a reflection of me and my husband standing in the kitchen around an island. The flat gray rectangle with its ravens and ideas of a new day has blinked off.

"Would you like an omelet? We have gruyere and bacon," I say, grounding myself in the prospect of this imminent activity.

Jacob sits down on the chair next to me. With a simple nod and a smile, he confirms his desire for my omelet version of a quiche Lorraine. I immediately spring into action. A coherent moment is upon me. A task, a duty, a known goal, a path to get there. I open the fridge and take out all the cold components of my creation. Three eggs, heavy cream, gruyere cheese, butter, and bacon.

As I start making the omelet, Jacob gets up and makes himself a cup of coffee. He almost exclusively drinks Ethiopian coffee. He especially likes the ones that are naturally dried, where the coffee cherries are laid out in the sun to bake before hulling. He says he's a crop originalist. He only wants coffee from Ethiopia. He only wants chocolate grown in the New World. His food aesthetic binds him, connects him to himself, to the world, to his sense of place in it. Who am I to judge? Perhaps I should only want apples and roses from the Central Asian steppe? Our subtle definition of self is constructed across so many panels and planes of influence.

Jacob leans against the wall, watching me cook as he takes his first sip of coffee. He likes it black so he can taste the residue of dried coffee cherry. I continue with the omelet and pour a good slug of heavy cream into the eggs. Before mixing, I add a pinch of salt and grind in some pepper. I then take out a plump nutmeg seed and carefully grate it, watching the tiny shavings twist and curl as they delicately fall into the eggs. I give it all a firm series of whisks and set it aside to get the cheese ready.

I quickly sizzle the butter, sprinkle in some fresh thyme, pour in the eggs to cook a bit, and then pile on the gruyere along with crumbles of cold bacon from the day before. A minute or so to melt and puff, then I fold and serve the nicely browned omelet to Jacob on a small black plate. It's beautiful. It's perfect. It's something we can still have. But it feels like an aromatic anachronism. And for a second my heart feels slightly disabled, flickering like a light at the beginning of a long storm. I feel calm, but the wind could soon pick up and sweep through my low-grade confusion and indecision.

"What are you going to do today?" Jacob asks as he digs into the omelet with carefree zeal.

"Well, it's Saturday. So many options. I'm on the precipice of so many futures. So many lives to live in one simple day." Despite my playful irony, I accept that it is all true to some degree. I love that it's true. I hate that it's true.

"It's already November, so I suppose we should plant the garlic and the bulbs," I say and then pause. "But I have to work on my book."

For over a year I've been writing a book about this city I have lived in for nearly fifty years. In some ways, it's about how the city is transforming, what it has become over many decades, and how it can renew. But I suppose it's more about a peculiar type of transformation. A seemingly aimless transition. No glimmer of intention, just a consistent, low-intensity metamorphosis.

City, I have been watching you for so long. Trying to understand you. Trying to believe in you. Who are you? Where are you going? Are you aware? Are you alive? Can I shake your hand and introduce myself? Can I delve into your deepest desires, your destiny? Are you under attack...or are you just molting?

Honestly, I barely work anymore. I used to work in the clean energy space. I worked on strategies for how to ensure all buildings are "clean," meaning how to ensure they function and thrive on renewable energy instead of fossil fuels. This was a fairly ambitious undertaking. Multiple industries and interests interacting and collectively influencing one of our essential economic sectors—namely, the development, operation, and maintenance of millions of boxes full of conditioned and brightly lit air, within which we do everything. Now, I just work on my book. I'm not building anything. I'm not transforming anything. I'm just trying to understand what is going on and share my thoughts.

"My book is more of a poem, a love letter to the city," I say in response to shifting winds. "But it's like the poem has never started and will never end. Where does the city leave off, and where do I begin?"

This city has often held my heart. Like in January of my first winter here when I stood at the top of Jackson Street, looking out at the mountains, craggy and snow-capped against a pale blue, almost white sky. The sun blazed without heat and cast cold shadows on the brick apartments and commercial buildings below. They had been built up along the newly created shore of the bay in the early 1900s. To me, they were ancient time travelers, shape shifting and trying to survive in a new world. I look for that new world now. I look for the city I have tried to love. Has it finally realized it's potential? What is it waiting for? What are we all waiting for?

"I want to go to the vault," I say, abruptly standing up from the kitchen chair.

"You always want to go to the vault, but you never do."

"I'm ready now. I need to go today. I need to contribute."

His eyes tell me it won't make a difference. "Just work on your book, or your poem. Or the garlic, we could do that. I can build the beds."

"I'm tired. I think I just need to take a nap."

"Sweetie, it's 10:30 in the morning," Jacob says, making eye contact with me as I start moving toward the bedroom.

"I know. But I need to lie down. I'm fine. I'll be fine," I say apologetically but rather loudly since I'm already across the hall and entering our bedroom.

I lay down on the bed. The soft down of the pillow gently cradles my head.

My dark sky begins to lighten.

I am the bird flying through the gray.

I know where to go.

I know who I am.

I am everything.

I am nothing.

Everything in its place.

Just being...

I feel the bed under me. I've slept for ten minutes. The sheets are soft, but my mind has hardened. I am alone. A single bird in the sky.

I hear Jacob softly open the bedroom door. I lay still and my eyes are closed. Without a word, he opens my robe. I am naked. I am marble. I am flesh and blood. I am silent.

I welcome the pressure of his atmosphere enveloping and entering my body. Two gray planes of sky intersecting, translucent air merging and then turning a bright white. I sink into the bed; my atoms resettle and my eyes open. I am in love. I live to love. I feel Jacob's body rise from mine. He holds his torso up above me, gives me one delicate kiss and leaves the room.

I want to get up, but I don't. I lie waiting for something to change. My body feels windswept, and my mind feels like it's breathing. I can see cracks of light coming through the sides of the shades. I sigh deeply and think, *I have to go. I have to go outside. I have to go to the vault.*

My gold is in the vault at the bank. It's not much, but the government says they need everything for the new strategy. We didn't hit our targets, we didn't convert all the sectors to clean energy fast enough, and the temperatures kept rising. Year after year edging upwards.

So far, we've maintained some semblance of the old order, but the city has slowly changed and frayed. From what I see, the change hasn't been driven by the increasing temperatures so much as by our collective disengagement. If the city sings and shimmers but nobody is listening and nobody is watching, does it really exist? Our minds make the city and the city makes us, a powerful interplay, now abandoned. But the world still must be saved, and we're still trying to save it.

Once we realized that our policies, programs, and miscellaneous incentives weren't up to the task, we piloted all manner of geoengineering using mostly minerals, mirrors, and other powders and potions intended to diffuse the intensity of the sun's rays. But it all either didn't work or was too toxic. Now they have a new strategy, and it shows promise.

We shall atomize gold into nanoparticles and blow them into the atmosphere. Gold has many positive attributes. It exhibits reflective perfection while being highly anti-inflammatory. Surprisingly, it appears to be curative rather than toxic. As we breathe in the particles that cycle up and down throughout the atmosphere, they find their way to the weak places and emerging fissures in our bodies, our minds, and our nervous systems. They somehow make us a little more whole. But to stabilize our climate it will take all the gold in the world, all the gold from every country, from every central bank, from every fort and reserve, and from every safety deposit box...like the ones in the vault at my bank.

I get dressed, put on my helmet, and wrangle my bicycle out the backdoor. Jacob doesn't try to stop me or ask to go. I ride on the boulevard that stretches along the lake. I ride past the dry lawns and brittle rhododendrons and take a right onto the road to the old ferry dock. My bank is on the left next to a shabby Starbucks.

I get off my bike and walk into the small angular building. I'm surprised I'm here, that I finally came to the vault. I notice there's a separate teller line for giving gold. Banks certainly know how to execute a plan at scale.

There's no one in line, probably because it's 11:30 on a Saturday morning. I walk up to the counter and the teller asks how much gold I'm willing to give. I say I intend to give it all. She nods approvingly at the totality of my contribution. I look at her like I'm buying a ticket to another planet, to another future. I may never see her or anyone again. I'm in a play, in a solemn moment of make-believe departure. A farewell.

I ask the teller how the exchange is actually processed. She says it's done electronically, and then the gold is physically transferred to the Contribution Hub. She can see the disappointment in my eyes as I glance down at the form she's just given me to sign.

"Would you mind if I go in to see my gold before we complete the transfer?"

The teller says, "Yes, that's fine, but do you have the key to your box?"

"Yes, yes, I have it. It's always on my keychain. Thank you so much; I really appreciate it," I say, feeling unsure of why I need to see or touch my gold.

The teller calls to the manager to take me to the vault. I would think there would be a security guard, but this is a small neighborhood branch, so apparently a garden variety bank manager is enough to keep things under control.

The manager opens the vault and waves his hand for me to enter. As I'm walking through the multi-layered steel and brass door, I ask if he would mind closing the vault just for a moment so I can have some privacy. He shrugs, says ok, and then closes the door behind me.

I unlock my box and take out a medium-sized black felt bag of gold. I open it and pour out the contents into the shallow deposit box. I have one pound of gold that I purchased over time in one ounce gold coins.

I slowly shifted my entire savings to gold. Sixteen glowing disks made of precious metal. Every atom of gold in these disks was made by exploding stars or colliding particles somewhere out in the universe and brought to earth by meteorites.

The vault is quiet and peaceful, no sound, no wi-fi waves, no people. I feel alone. I feel like I'm leaving, but I am ready. The vault is like a singular unit hurtling through space. A capsule flying through the cosmic dust. I look at the hundreds of little brass boxes lining the walls around me, most are likely filled with gold coins, jewelry, and small rectangular bars. I think of the black sky outside full of stars and swirls of nebula and antimatter.

I'm in the capsule, cutting through the panels and planes of the universe, breaking away, bringing back the gold, trying to be a part of it all, trying to leave it all. I don't know exactly what I'm doing, but I'm trying to do something. I sit on the floor of the vault, holding my thick heavy coins. My eyes start to burn and fill with tears. I am everything. I am nothing. But I fly to you. Back to the stars. To the future I want to love.

Heart/murmur / by Archer Lundy

Last night I rolled over,
the moon at my back.

Closed my heart to her song,
my heart with its chambers,

just another organ. The atrium
pools with blood, valves flutter.

This morning I looked into the heart
of a cello. It resembled the

upstairs of my husband's family
home, many-chambered, empty.

First pictures / by Archer Lundy

I scour the first pictures of my birth
mother, desperate to recognize
myself in her, her in me. I am well-
adjusted, a product of nurture
over nature. Last night I took the family

albums down. I have two of the same
grainy black-and-white snap-
shots of me at four taken on a day
in July. I am in a child's pool, posing

for the camera, on my stomach, head
turned towards my father, still
for the instant it takes to capture
the memory. I smell rubber, fishy
in the heat, water straight from the sprinkler

spilling over the sides of the pool, its bottom
slimy with cardboard package talc
and bits of lawn mower grass. I smile
for my father. This is his treat, a blow-up

pool in a suburban back yard. I want
to please, you can see it in my eyes, but
can't wait for the comfort of my favourite towel,
to change back into dry shorts, t-shirt, socks

NOTE: Libby Bucklin, the protagonist of Rebecca King's novel-in-progress, tentatively entitled Buried, *is an eighteen-year-old who has recently graduated from high school and is preparing to head off to college. When her life is turned upside down, she's forced to decide what's best and safest for her and her younger sister, Jude. Set in a small town in Maine, the story explores the weight of grief, familial obligation, and the effects of mental illness and female incarceration, as well as the threat of climate change to beloved places and communities. "The Telling" is the first chapter.*

The Telling / by Rebecca King

Libby glanced up to see a patrol car stop in front of the café. A state trooper in a dark gray and blue uniform got out, put on his hat, and carefully adjusted the angle of it.

"What have you done now?" Sarah asked and laughed. She and Libby were finishing the closing side work.

Libby didn't answer. She kept her eyes on the officer and watched him through the window. As he walked across the parking lot towards the entrance of the café, his movements were slow, deliberate, and there was something about the way he paused and adjusted his hat again before opening the door and walking in that made the little hairs on the base of her neck stand up.

"I'm sorry, we close at three," Sarah said.

The officer removed his hat and looked first at Sarah then Libby. He was tall, solid, and his black hair was cut close with a little gray at the temples. He looked familiar, but Libby didn't think she'd ever waited on him before.

"I'm looking for Annie and Stu Collins," he said, his voice low and even.

"They're in the back." Libby hesitated for a split second. "Here, this way." Then she led him through the kitchen, past the dishwashing area, and to the office where Annie and Stu were running the totals from the day.

"What's that about?" Sarah asked when Libby returned.

"I'm not sure." Libby stood next to Sarah, who had started filling the salt and pepper shakers.

"Stu better hope it's not another speeding ticket," Sarah said.

"No kidding." Libby funneled salt into a shaker.

"Remember the last time?" Sarah asked.

"Oh, my God. I thought Annie was going to kill him," Libby said.

"Would be a wicked speeding violation for a state trooper to show up. And did you see how big he was? He had to duck coming through the door. Pretty hot for an old guy though," Sarah added, raising her eyebrows up and down.

"Ew, gross," but Libby laughed. "Speaking of old," she said, "are you still going to the island Saturday night?"

"Ugh, I don't know. I'm so over it."

"Chadwick the third?" Libby said sarcastically with a terrible British accent.

"Tourists. Bar Harbor. Maybe *Chad*," Sarah said, over-enunciating the name. "But definitely tourists. They need to stop vacationing and just vacate."

"Libs, I need you to come to the office."

Libby turned to see Stu standing beside the ice maker and knocked the funnel out of the shaker, spilling salt all over the counter.

"Shit! You scared the crap out of me!" Libby said.

"Libs, we need to talk with you," Stu said.

"Just a sec. We're almost finished," she said, sweeping the tiny crystals into a pile with one hand.

"I've got this," Sarah said.

"Okay." Libby brushed her hands onto her jeans, but salt stuck to her palms and fingers.

When she walked into the office, Annie was sitting behind the desk, and the officer was in one of the two chairs on the other side. He was still holding his hat in his hand, running his fingers around the brim but stood as soon as Libby walked in. The way his body unfolded reminded Libby of the inflatable stick figure that was always billowing in the wind in front of Wilson's Tire.

"I'm Officer Jack Gilkin." He extended his right hand towards her while looking her straight in the eye. His eyes were the same gray-blue as his uniform, Libby noted as she shook his hand.

"I'm Libby Bucklin," she said.

Everyone seemed to be looming over her, and Libby dropped her gaze to the green, low-weave carpet flecked with gold.

"Why don't we sit," Officer Gilkin said, and he and Annie sat, but Stu remained standing by the window.

As Libby lowered herself into the chair, she did a quick memory scan. There was the weed, but that was over a month ago, around the Fourth of July, and sometimes she had a few beers at Sarah's apartment after work, but it wasn't like she'd ever gotten that drunk or that high. Besides, no one knew except Sarah, and it wasn't like she'd say anything. Annie and Stu were aware of more than they let on, but they didn't tell her dad everything, and they certainly wouldn't call the cops.

"What's going on?" Libby asked, looking at Annie, who seemed frozen in her chair. When Annie didn't say anything, it quickly dawned on Libby. "This is about Teresa, isn't it." She saw the look of surprise on Annie's face.

"Oh," Annie said. "No. It's not about your mom. Oh, God." She glanced at Stu and back at Libby. "Honey, there's been..." Her voice broke. She came around the desk and knelt. Then she took Libby's hands in hers and rubbed them with her thumbs as if trying to remove a deep stain. "It's your dad," she finally said.

Libby turned towards Stu, but he was staring straight out the window. Still, she saw how he had his arms crossed over his chest as if he were trying to hold something in and how the color was drained from his face.

"What's going on?" Libby asked again. It felt like the room was getting smaller.

"Oh, honey," Annie said. She was trying not to cry. "Your dad. He's been in an accident. He didn't..." But she couldn't finish the sentence, and tears started rolling down her face.

"What are you talking about?" Libby asked. She looked from Annie to Stu and then to the officer. "What is she talking about?" Her voice rose in panic.

Annie and Stu were silent. Then Officer Gilkin said, "A log truck lost control on Church Street this afternoon." He paused for a moment. "Your father was killed." He paused again. "I'm very sorry."

Libby didn't understand. She knew she was in Annie's office, sitting in the chair, but she felt like she was sinking slowly, deeper and deeper, into the kind of darkness that is pitch-black and pushes against every molecule of your being.

She couldn't hear anything. She could only feel pressure against her chest, her heart. All she could see from what seemed like a great distance away was the gap between the top of the state trooper's shiny, black boots and the bottom of his gray pants where a pale, hairy strip of his leg spilled out.

And she almost laughed because it seemed so grotesque, but it was also terrifying that someone as big and strong as him could be exposed like that. And she couldn't breathe.

It felt like her heart ripped through her ribcage and was pushing through the membranes of her skin, and there was no longer oxygen in the room. She struggled past Annie to the kitchen and slammed out the back door where she fell against the building and gasped for air. She thought she might be sick.

"What's going on?" Sarah was suddenly beside her. "Jesus, what's going on?" Sarah asked again.

And then Annie was there, but Libby put both arms out to block them from coming any closer.

"Libs," Annie said.

"No! It's not true." But even as she said the words, Libby felt the center of her chest cave in. Felt a terrible emptiness as the air pushed out of her lungs. She began to shake with deep, broken sobs and spasms of retching.

Annie pulled her in and held her tightly, and Libby cried for a long time. After she stopped, Annie still didn't let her go, and Libby breathed in the faint scent of cinnamon and lemon in Annie's hair, the sweetness enough to bring her back and make it okay to let go. Then she followed Annie inside.

Sarah had slipped into the café and was leaning against the counter, waiting for them, and Stu appeared from the kitchen.

"How you doing, Bug?" he asked as he side hugged Libby, but he didn't need her to answer.

They moved to the 4-top in the corner, and Sarah brought them cups of steaming coffee along with a silver pitcher of heavy cream.

"What else can I get you?" she asked quietly. Her long braids were pulled back into a thick ponytail and the rows of tiny, gold hoops in her ears glinted when she moved.

"Thank you, Sarah. This is good," Annie said. "Sit with us."

Sarah reached out and put a hand on Libby's arm. "I think I'll head home. Are you sure I can't bring you anything else?"

"No, but thank you." Annie said. "I'll call you later."

"I'm right down the road if you need anything," Sarah squeezed Libby gently before turning away.

After hearing the soft thud of the back door closing, Libby caught a flash of Sarah through the window. Traffic was stopped, and she darted between two cars before walking in the direction of her apartment and disappearing from view.

For a few seconds, Libby watched a guy in a black Toyota pickup that had flakes of rust around the wheel wells. He was wildly air-drumming the beat to a song Libby could hear pounding through the base of his speakers. *How could anyone be listening to music right now?* She turned away from the window.

Annie and Stu sat in chairs on either side of her, both silent in their own worlds of loss. Libby took a sip of coffee and glanced at the empty chair across from her.

"Oh my God," she said with a start. "Where's Jude?"

"It's ok, it's ok," Annie said. "She's with Norma and Frank."

"Does she know?" Libby asked.

"Not yet." Annie wiped at her eyes with a corner of her apron and then reached for Libby's hand. I'll go to the house, get some things, and pick up Juju on the way back. We'll tell her together."

Libby sat very still. She could hear the humming of the ice machine, but beyond any of the sounds she heard, beyond even the absence of sound, there was something unyielding that pushed against her. She sat motionless, willing it to go away, but when it didn't, she looked at Annie and said, "No, I need to tell her. She needs to hear this from me."

~ ~ ~

"Where we going?" Jude asked.

"I thought we'd go out to camp for a bit." Libby was afraid Jude would ask why, ask where their dad was, but all she said was, "Okay," and settled back in her seat.

Libby took side roads to escape the downtown tourist traffic, but she went the long way around in order to avoid Church Street. The thought of driving past the scene of the accident made her mouth water, like it did before throwing up.

She rolled down her window, and the burst of air on her skin made her feel better. Jude unrolled hers too, extended her arm, and let the wind catch it in waves.

Every vehicle Libby met seemed like it was drifting over the center-line, so she drove slowly and hugged the shoulder.

As they got closer to Old Hatchery Road, Libby began to think she was making a big mistake. She should have let Annie pick up Jude; they should have told her together. Wanting to tell Jude herself seemed like a dumb idea now and telling her at camp even dumber. She'd thought it made sense because it was familiar, safe, but now she worried it would be a place forever associated with the death of their dad.

Libby considered turning around and going back to the café, but didn't know how she would explain that.

"Hey, what if we go to The Point?" The idea seemed to come to her out of nowhere.

"Can we stop and get an ice cream on the way?" Jude asked.

Libby didn't want to. She already felt a little nauseated, but she needed things to be as normal for Jude as long as possible. "Okay," she said and drove past the turn-off to camp.

At the Old Point Store, Jude ordered a Black Fly Swirl on a sugar cone, and when Libby said she didn't want one, Jude said, "No, you have to." So, Libby ordered a single scoop of maple walnut—her dad's favorite—and then Jude held both cones as Libby drove the short distance to where there was a small park and picnic area.

The Point was always crowded during the day, and Libby hung out there occasionally with her friends from school and those from away who were around during the summer. Now, there was a family grilling, and some kids were still playing in the water near the small beach area. Libby and Jude walked towards them then found the narrow path that led to a hidden, rocky outcropping.

Libby's ice cream was melting, but there was a hard lump in her throat that she couldn't seem to swallow, so she tossed the cone into the woods when Jude wasn't looking.

When they reached the opening, although she could hear voices in the distance, Libby was relieved to see they had the place to themselves. The granite extended out from shore above the surface of the shallow water, and each rock looked like the back of a large, mythical turtle. Libby stepped from one to another until she got to the biggest that spanned over twenty feet across.

This area of the lake was more marshy, and when she sat down, Libby felt shielded by the surrounding reeds and lily pads. For a while she listened to the shrill chirps and chatter of the frogs and katydids and watched Jude, who was absentmindedly licking at her cone and stepping from stone to stone, squatting down here and there when she saw a school of fish or something else of interest.

Eventually, Jude made her way to Libby and sat beside her.

"Look, over there," she whispered and pointed.

A pair of loons was swimming with two baby chicks, and as Libby watched them, she felt tears welling up. She turned her head away from Jude and pressed her tongue against the tip of her mouth to keep from crying.

The loons had disappeared under the water, and Jude had finished her ice cream when Libby said, "Juju, there's something I have to tell you."

It felt right to tell her somewhere safe that was connected to their dad, just not as directly as camp. But it was more than that. Libby knew this is where they both needed to be—on the body of water he'd loved so much, watching the sun set on the last day he was alive.

"Yeah?" Jude looked up at Libby.

Libby studied her, as if to capture a still image of the way she looked now, ten years old, before. Beneath the Red Sox ball cap, Jude's hazel eyes were ringed with layers of gold and green, and the freckles dotting her scooped, sunlit nose and cheeks were more pronounced from her being outside. There was chocolate ice cream smeared in the corners of her mouth and a smudge of dirt above the indent on her left cheek that deepened into a dimple when she smiled.

Libby put a protective arm around her. "Juju, Dad was in an accident," she said and looked out across the lake where reflected ribbons of orange and lavender rippled from one end to the other.

"He's okay, though, right?" Jude said, and Libby could feel Jude's body tense.

"No," she said very quietly. "He died, Juju."

Libby wanted the lake to swallow the words, make them disappear, but instead, they seemed to amplify and carry across the water.

Jude didn't say anything, didn't move, and it felt to Libby like they were the only two people in the world, abandoned on a spall of granite that was only getting smaller in an expanding darkness.

Contributors

Michael Brockley is a retired school psychologist who lives in Muncie, Indiana. His prose poems have appeared in *Gyroscope Review*, *The Prose Poem*, and *Trailer Park Quarterly*. His prose poems are also forthcoming in *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, *Alien Buddha*, and *Of Rust and Glass*.

A.D. Capili hails from the Philippines. He came to Belgium to pursue graduate studies in philosophy and literature, and he currently teaches at a European School in Brussels. His poems have appeared in *Little Fish, Pena*, *Amaranth*, and *DoubleSpeak*; some of his fiction and nonfiction pieces can be found in *The Lupa Newsletter*, *The Brussels Review*, and *The Quiet Reader*.

Joe Healy lives in Ireland and is a member of Limerick Writers Centre, Listowel Writers Group, and the Lime Square Poets online poetry group. He has been published in *Crannóg*, *Revival Press*, *Bare Hands*, *The Clare Champion, thefirstcut,* and *Mystic Nebula* online poetry journals. His first poetry collection, *Soft as Rainbow,* was published in 2013, and his poetry was featured in *Not The time to Be Silent Collected Works* in 2021. Healy was a prize winner at the Ballydonoghue Bardic Festival Short Story Competition in 2022.

Rebecca King is the Director of Academic Support at Methodist University in Fayetteville, North Carolina. She is a graduate of the Stonecoast MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine, and her work has been published in several journals. Originally from Ellsworth, Maine, Rebecca now resides on a small hay farm in Lillington, NC, with her husband. Together, they care for Rebecca's brother, who has a long-term traumatic brain injury, along with a lively pack of dogs, horses, and one determined chicken.

Before **Susan Bailey Lesser** retired, she worked as a Speech-Language Pathologist, diagnosing and treating severe language impairments. She and her husband live in Ithaca NY. Nearby family offer opportunities to practice being a grandmother. She often writes about how we change, or don't change, and what shapes us.

Archer Lundy (aka Anne Archer) is a musician and poet who lives on unceded Algonquin Territory near Sharbot Lake, Ontario. She is the author of three books of poetry: *Ich Hiesse Clara* (Alien Buddha Press, 2021), *From the Frontenacs* (Woodpecker Lane Press, 2022), and *Emmaline/Evangeline* (Woodpecker Lane Press, 2023). Her poems appear in various Canadian and international journals including *The Eunoia Review*, *Juked*, *Pinhole*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *In the Mood Magazine*, and *Yolk*. Her poetry manuscript, *Prompted*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books.

Claudia Michel is a retired nurse-educator, who grew up in Arizona but now lives in the more forgiving climate of the Pacific Northwest. She is following her creative inspiration by weaving with textiles and with words. Writing is a way to discover her relationship to this sacred earth and its diverse people

Deborah Morris is a retired physician and professor who lives in Coats, North Carolina, with her dogs and pet pigs. She has published creative nonfiction and memoir in *About Place Journal, Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*, *The Examined Life Journal*, and *GreenPrints Magazine*, among others. In addition to writing, she is interested in cooking, gardening, sewing, and assorted passing whimsies.

Ann D. Russell is a retired marine scientist living in Davis, California. She published her first piece in American Girl when she was nineteen years old, about her job as a groom at a thoroughbred racetrack. She bought herself a motorcycle with the proceeds. After publishing many scientific articles, she now writes memoir and creative nonfiction essays about our relationships with each other and with the natural world.

Poppy Storm lives in Seattle with her Chihuahua, Ignacio Pop. She likes thinking about energy, change, and strategic angles. Poppy is currently writing a speculative memoir and working as a policy analyst.