

Issue Ten



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Melissa Ostrom

Winter Over

His skin feels as soft as Mindy's baby sister. He's old but lives in the playroom. "Guest room, you mean," Mom says, an embarrassed glance toward the bed. No. The room stores the toys. The toys were here first.

He points things out. "Come here, peanut. Up there. Is that a seagull?" I guess so. "A seagull in winter." His head falls back on the pillows. "White wings on a white sky." He accepts a plate with a thank you, pretends to take a bite of a plastic roll, shakes his head, hands it back. "Needs salt." The kitchenette has a sink, oven, microwave, fridge, and many plastic foods. But there is no salt. "Never mind. I keep a stash. Bring it back." He raises a shaky hand from his chest and rubs his fingers, a papery hum over the roll. Around a second fake bite: "Perfect."

He doesn't tell stories but remembers aloud. He had a dog named Trouble. I want a dog, I say. I'm not allowed. Was it soft? "Not really." He turns foggy eyes on the window. "See the woods, the dun branches? Bristly. He was like that." Done? He nods. "Dun."

One day: "What happened to your hat?" Lost. "The scarf too?" He turns to the window and sighs. "Wait till spring. You'll find them." I liked that hat. The snow took it. The snow hides everything. "It covers the wind too, but that gives us a way to see it." I have to think about this. "The wind is a white sleeve. Don't you think so? Winter is a girl wearing long, white sleeves."

Winter is just long. He makes it longer. "Shush," Mom whispers. "He's resting. Stay away." I want my room. "Soon enough now." There's a rattle in her voice when she says this. The window rattles, as well. And the house creaks. Yesterday, I stood outside, no hat, no scarf, and grew an inch with snow. Now, inside the room that isn't mine anymore, he sleeps. I take it back, all of it, Lego by Lego by Burping Baby by coloring book of unicorns by ice cream truck. In the window, snowflakes stream, big and quick. What did he say last week? "It's how winter is. Busy. Busy like you, but quiet. Out there? That's a fast-falling silence."

Melissa Ostrom teaches English at Genesee Community College and lives with her husband and children in Holley, New York. Her fiction has appeared in *The Florida Review*, *Quarter After Eight*, *The Baltimore Review*, and *Passages North*, among other journals. *The Beloved Wild* (Macmillan, March 2018) is her YA debut. Macmillan will also be publishing her second novel, tentatively entitled *The Unleaving*, in March of 2019.

Deesha Philyaw

Not Daniel

I parked in the shadows behind the hospice center, and waited. I held a box of condoms on my lap, Magnum XLs. It was like being sixteen again, except this time I bought the condoms instead of relying on the boy. This time, the boy was a man I had mistaken for someone I'd gone to junior high with when our paths first crossed two weeks before at the main entrance of the hospice center. I was coming, he was going. I thought he was Daniel McMurray so I stared longer than I should have, and he stared back. Later that evening, I'd run into him again coming out of the room across from my mother's. His mother had breast cancer, mine ovarian.

I checked my phone. 10:27. I'd timed the Walmart run for the condoms pretty well. Not-Daniel would be down in three minutes. To throw Nurse Irie, the night nurse, off the trail, we never left or returned to the floor at the same time. Her name wasn't really Irie, but I called her that behind her back because she was Jamaican. She was also mean as a snake. I had complained to the head of the center about her, suggesting that her brusque manner was better suited for the morgue. But Nurse Irie liked Not-Daniel. She didn't cop an attitude when he asked questions about his mother's care. He told me she even joked with him late one night as he walked around the floor in his skimpy running shorts: "Boi, you keep walking around here in those itty bitty tings, someone might mess around and give you a sponge bath."

Nurse Irie was not a stupid woman. Perhaps she would put two and two together and figure out that Not-Daniel and I were . . . what were we? What do you call it when your mothers are hospice neighbors and the nights are endless and sleepless and here's someone else who spent the day talking to insurance companies and creditors and banks and pastors and relatives and friends, some more well-intentioned than others? Someone else who is the dutiful son to your dutiful daughter, another family's chief shit handler, bail bondsman, maid, chauffeur, therapist, career advisor, ATM. Here's someone else who both welcomes and dreads death as it loiters in the wings, an unpredictable actor.

What do you call it when that someone else wears a wedding band but never mentions his wife by name? A wife and two kids back home in the next state over. Don't ask, don't tell.

At exactly 10:30, Not-Daniel tapped the passenger side window. For a few moments, we sat in silence the way we always did at first. Sometimes I would cry, sometimes he would too, because we could out here, beyond the reach of our mothers' Jesus, nurses

on auto-pilot, empty platitudes and garbage theology about “God’s will” disguised as comfort. And then eventually, one of us would speak.

But this night . . . how to begin? Pick up where we’d left off the night before? When yet another rambling conversation about funerals and selfish siblings suddenly became kissing, became my t-shirt off, became my nipples in Not-Daniel’s mouth.

This is how we began: Not-Daniel took the box of condoms from me and set it on the dashboard next to my phone. Then he set his phone on the dashboard. I knew his ringer volume, like mine, was on the highest setting, because the call, that call, could come at any moment. Then he took my face in his hands and looked at me. I dropped my eyes.

“No,” he said. “I need you to be . . . here. All of you. Here.”

Lifting my eyes to meet his, I felt like Sisyphus pushing that rock. In his eyes, I saw *wifekidsdyingmother*. I blinked, and blinked again, until my vision cleared.

In the back seat, Not-Daniel undressed me, undressed himself, and then buried his face between my legs. I reached over my head, clutched the door behind me and cried as I came over and over again.

By the time Not-Daniel pulled me to my knees, my legs were limp and useless. He turned me away from him, pressed his palm against the center of my back and pushed me forward. He draped his body over mine and entered me. He was rough, but not unkind.

I wondered if he was thinking what I was thinking: What if one of our mothers dies while we’re down here rutting around, as my grandmother would say?

But in the cramped space of the backseat and of our grief and our need, there was no room for guilt or fear. Only relief.

And that’s what I told Not-Daniel when we were both spent, our damp backs sticking to the leather seat.

“*Relieved?*” He frowned and then smiled. “Relieved? Then I failed to deliver the goods.”

“No, no,” I said. “You. . . delivered the goods. The goods were delivered. And received. But I do have a question. . .”

Shoot.”

“Were you worried that one of them would die while we were down here?”

“Thought never crossed my mind.”

“Really?”

“Really. Listen, I can either deliver the goods, or I can think about my mama, dying or not. I can’t do both.”

And then I laughed, even though I felt like I shouldn’t have. Even though nothing was as it should be.

Deesha Philyaw is the co-author of *Co-Parenting 101: Helping Your Kids Thrive in Two Households After Divorce*, written in collaboration with her ex-husband. Her fiction and nonfiction writing on race, parenting, sex and culture has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *McSweeney’s*, *Brevity*, *Apogee Journal*, *dead housekeeping*, and *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*; *Essence*, *Ebony*, and *Bitch* magazines; and various anthologies. Deesha is a Fellow at the Kimbilio Center for African American Fiction and a past Pushcart Prize nominee for essay writing in *Full Grown People*.

Catherine Sinow

It Was Cold

Henry Phillips had changed his name to Ludwig Zimmermann. Why? Because he was traveling around the country. Traveling around the country to give speeches.

“The Nazis held me in a camp,” he lied. “It was cold. It was dark.”

Each school paid him five thousand dollars.

Catherine Sinow is a recent graduate of Colorado College, where she majored in fiction writing. You can find her other work at catherinesinow.com.

Tayo Basquiat

The Hole

Snorky made the buy as we waited behind the Dugout Bar. Chuck had been feeling low since he'd been dumped by his girl. We'd worked a long day harvesting in the August heat. I hoped a night of drinking and swimming would do us both good. "Where you boys headed?" Snorky asked, putting the beer and whiskey in the truck bed.

"Load Road."

"You taking any girls or you homos just getting it on together?" Chuck's grip on the steering wheel tightened. I wasn't in the mood for a fight.

"Lay off, Snorky. You don't have to be a prick every day of your life." Snorky's face went dark. He slapped his hands on the roof and backed away.

"You assholes want a buyer again, you look to someone else. And you get caught with that, remember"

"Yeah, yeah, we don't know you. Sheriff never gives it a second look, Snorky, don't you worry that empty little head of yours."

"Yep, just a couple of peckerheads. Get the fuck outta here before I call the sheriff on ya myself."

"Real smart, Snorky. Who you think will be in jail longer, you or us?" Snorky started back toward the truck but Chuck had had enough and hit the gas, kicking up gravel and dust with spinning tires.

We stopped by the Dairy Queen for footlong dawgs with barbeque and the works. Angela was working and she whipped up two freebie chocolate shakes without us even asking. We wolfed down the chow while we flirted with a carload of girls from Vesleyville. They told us there'd be a party at the old boxcar, that we should come by, and we said we just might, knowing we wouldn't.

Load Road was a seldom-used gravel road that disappeared down a coulee before coming to a dead end at an abandoned farmstead a mile on the other side. The road had a bridge straddling the small stream running through the bottom of the coulee. Kids had been damming it for years, creating a swimming hole sometimes deep enough to where we could jump off the bridge and not break our necks.

We had the place to ourselves. I slammed another beer and listened to the sounds of grasshoppers, flies, birds, and frogs. I'd seen the movie *The Karate Kid* at the Lyric Theater in Park River last Friday with my girlfriend. I didn't give a shit about karate and kinda thought the kid was a douchebag, but living by the ocean and partying on the beach looked pretty swell. Our swimming hole, full of skeeters and leeches, was no ocean, not by a long shot. I had been here hundreds of times. It was starting to feel small.

Chuck was already in the water. I stripped down and waded in.

"Where do you wanna go after graduation?" I asked.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "I like it right here."

"What are you going to do here?"

"Same stuff I'm doing now. Work a shitty job, drink, fuck."

"You could do all that somewhere else," I said.

"Why would I go someplace else?"

"How 'bout for new girls?"

"I'm gonna get her back, man."

"Dude, she's done. She's probably going to marry Travis. You need to let her go."

"I can't. It's her. She's the one." We got out and lay shivering on the grass. We each took another pull from the bottle.

"I'm going to California," I said. "You should come with me."

"What the fuck's so great about California?"

"Nothing. Everything. Shit, I don't care, pick somewhere. I just want to go somewhere new for a while. How about Montana?"

"Everyone I've met from Montana is a dickhead. Cham-peen, world class dickhead."

"Takes one to know one." His mood was wearing on me. I pulled on my jeans and t-shirt, grabbed another beer. I looked at Chuck as he lay naked, eyes closed, silent. He'd be the next Snorky, buying booze for minors, going nowhere.

The mud at the edge of the hole grabbed my toes, then sucked my feet in deeper. Small minnows darted beneath shadows of water bugs.

"Why don't you stay here with me?" he said.

The sounds of night thickened, a prairie with so much to say. His question seemed unanswerable.

Tayo Basquiat is from the northern plains of North Dakota but currently resides in Laramie, WY where he is a candidate in the MFA creative writing program at the University of Wyoming. He teaches philosophy and religion classes for Bismarck State College, is an avid adventurer, and a champion of public humanities programming. His work has appeared in *On Second Thought*, *Northern Plains Ethics Journal*, and as producer for Wyoming Public Media's "Spoken Words" podcast.

Tayo Basquiat

What We're Made Of

I play with the old green toy loader Grandma keeps in the dark nook between the wall and arm of the fusty couch. Its tires rumble a little against the linoleum, my lips putter like an engine. Mom shushes me. I pick up the loader and crawl under the plastic draped wall-to-wall and ceiling-to-floor so heat stays in the sitting room where Grandma sleeps on a sofa bed, eats meals on a tv tray, and watches her soaps and religious programming morning to night. She's watching "General Hospital" right now. We've come at a bad time.

Grandma's 1913 farmhouse was built by Great Grandpa and his two sons. It has two stories, an attic and a stone wall cellar with a dirt floor. They'd left the east fjords of Iceland in 1876 and landed on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada. They spent two years there, lost seven children to smallpox and pneumonia and just being too little for the world, and then my great grandparents and their five remaining children walked the 160 miles to Dakota Territory in 1878 to try to prove up 160 acres near the Icelandic settlement of present day Mountain, North Dakota. They were given just one year to do it and they did. They started with a sod house, then a saltbox that eventually burned to the ground, and finally this house. Three generations lived here at the same time. My great grandpa died upstairs at 101 years of age, blind and bedridden for the last five, and now my grandma haunts it with her hollow cheeks and rotting teeth, a woman that's never been to a doctor or dentist, a woman who after grandpa moved her here from her birthplace six miles away, never traveled farther than the neighboring towns. She was forty-two years younger than him. He's been dead a long time.

I walk, carrying the loader, through the kitchen, the pantry, and dining room until I bump into the plastic sheets covering the other side of the sitting room. "Don't mess with that," Mom says. Grandma looks blurry through the plastic, like her face is melting. I return to the kitchen and sit by the woodstove to play. The windows have plastic tacked on the outside frames, but my nose runs from cold and I can't feel my feet. I smell old bacon grease, smoke and ash, and musty cellar air. Cracks run along the plaster walls. Big white spiders make nests and babies in corners of the ceiling. There's a closed door hiding steps to the cellar, and there's a flight of steps leading up to another closed door. One night after many beers, Mom took me on her lap and started talking. How she loved her Aunt Polly with the thick, distorted glasses, who put Mom to bed with Icelandic tales of sea horses that drown bad children, who cared for my mom and her four brothers because my grandma just "wasn't made for mothering." How her "funny" uncle had a stroke and moaned continually from his bed upstairs. I was scared then because

she was crying and slurring and squeezing me too hard. At Grandma's house I'm not to open closed doors.

Mom calls from the sitting room, "Tayo, put the toy away now and say goodbye to Grandma." I scoot across the floor on my butt back under the plastic, park the loader in the darkness by the couch and say "goodbye, Grandma." No one hugs or touches Grandma. I sit next to my mom to put on my boots and she puts her hand on my knee. "What's that?" she asks, rubbing my knee through my jeans. I don't know what she means. "How long has that been there, Tayo?" I still don't know what she means. She pulls up my pant leg and rubs a big lump on the side of my knee. After a visit to the doctor, I learn I have a tumor that will have to be removed once school is out and I'll have crutches for six weeks. I am excited about the crutches. I think they will make me look tough. I tell everyone that I got a tumor at Grandma's house. Mom doesn't correct me. Hard things have been known to happen in that house.

Tayo Basquiat is from the northern plains of North Dakota but currently resides in Laramie, WY where he is a candidate in the MFA creative writing program at the University of Wyoming. He teaches philosophy and religion classes for Bismarck State College, is an avid adventurer, and a champion of public humanities programming. His work has appeared in *On Second Thought*, *Northern Plains Ethics Journal*, and as producer for Wyoming Public Media's "Spoken Words" podcast.

Melissa Moorer

Cemetery Soup

Cemetery soup was really just wild onions from the cemetery that we made into soup when we stayed with Dad. He would take us to the cemetery to play tag or zombies, which was really just tag except he acted like a zombie. After, when we were tired of killing Dad, we would pull the dark green tops to release the wild onions from the ground. The first time it just tasted like onion water so Dad added potatoes and milk and it turned out much better. We liked the thought that the onions were growing over graves, that they might have bits or ghosts of dead people in them like a fairy tale. The scary kind.

But that time we couldn't get the onions to make soup because of the dead grackles. Thousands of them. Their bodies a black carpet pulled over what should have been green grass and the stern gray of grave markers. Their small bodies, their jewelry-like claws and beaks all made for the sky transformed into this gross fabric.

For our games, we preferred the older graves in the back with the ornate stones softened by dark mold and lichen like someone had painted it on. Mainly because very few people ever went back there so we could play tag in the cemetery without getting told to leave, but also for the cool dark quiet of it. Some of these stones marked graves for soldiers who had died in the Civil War and Dad explained about that, about slaves and how wrong the South had been even though our teachers and grandparents and even these stones were telling us something different. The trees were bigger too, older. Stretching above us like they knew things we never would.

Dad told us how the old trees had part of the dead in them because their roots reached down into the coffins. That in some places, couples were buried with two trees planted over the graves because they loved each other so much they wanted their trees to grow together and get tangled up. I thought about Mom and Dad and how they wouldn't want these tangled-up trees anymore since they were separated and getting a divorce, but I didn't want to think about that so I imagined the roots of these big trees like worms or fingers creeping through the dark dirt right then even though I knew what roots looked like and how plants moved so slowly we couldn't see them with our fast thoughts.

Hiding from the zombies behind ancient gravestones, the trees whispered above me, their leaves touching and I wondered if they could remember

being people, but how could they when plants don't have brains like us? My brother had nightmares about it for weeks, but I liked the idea of being part of a tree, a forest. So tall and hard nothing could hurt me. A tree on our old block had been hit by a pickup truck and the truck was destroyed, its driver killed, but the tree lived. He was a student and he was drunk. But he wasn't one of Dad's old students so it all seemed very far away like a story in a book even after we made Dad show us the tree and there was only a small spot where the bark had been scraped away.

The tree kind of afterlife sounded a lot better than our neighbors' strict Christian heaven or Mom's idea of death which was just nothing after, like the part of sleep you don't remember that takes up all those hours, because she was a biologist.

But now we didn't even think about the trees or the gravestones because the grackles were everywhere, their bones starting to shine silverwhite through the black velvet of feathers. The bodies were thick on the ground like some terrible snow. No grass peeked through and I wondered why nobody had cleaned them up when the cemetery was usually so clean like somebody came around every day and picked up the trash and vacuumed the entire place even the grass. The cemetery was always the neatest place we went. No candy wrappers, dog poop, cans, or cigarette butts. But now it was covered in these corpses, which should have been buried with the rest.

That day, instead of onions, we collected as many of their tiny skulls as we could carry. Piles of them in our shirts held out like some people hold babies to them. They were so light it felt like they just had to break apart in your hand, but they survived the trip and we put them on the mantel above Dad's fireplace that didn't really have a fire but an old gas heater, to dry. Dad's girlfriend Mary frowned at them, but she didn't smile at much of anything we did or said, which just made us try harder. We brought her drawings and candy we'd saved up, stupid toys we thought she'd like. Dad was always nervous when we were all together, so we would tell jokes and crazy stories like the one about the dead pickle we found in the front yard. Dad and Lee and I laughed like crazy, but Mary only smiled a little like she was trying but didn't get it. Like it was a bad or dirty joke. What I didn't find out until years later was that Mary was one of Dad's students before he left the university. So she wasn't really that old, but she seemed like an adult to us and we couldn't understand why she didn't like us when all the other adults did.

My mother decided not to go to medical school and after a lot of substitute teaching and crap jobs that didn't pay enough, she got a job at the health department as an environmentalist where she was part of the team responsible for the city's grackle problem. People complained about the grackles because they gathered in large, noisy groups and shit on cars. People complained a lot. My mother fought the poison solution to the grackle problem but thought the alternative — blasting them with a soundtrack of

grackle distress calls until they went somewhere else — was useless and just ridiculous. It was more distressing for any human who had to hear it than the grackles. She played it for us once. It sounded like a screaming bird nightmare I was having and not a tape recording.

Mom argued so long with so many important people including the city council that she was moved to restaurant inspection, which she liked much better because she could be out of the office inspecting restaurants most of the time. But they poisoned the grackles before she officially moved so she was forced to be there when they did it even though she refused to participate on principle. She went home and got stoned before the grackles started dying. No one had imagined how many thousands of grackles the poison would kill or that they'd end up in piles all over the city with no one to clean up. No one but my mother who stayed stoned for days after and made my Dad pick us up from school and take us for the weekend even though he wasn't supposed to get us for another two weeks.

So we didn't know anything about all of this until years later, but we had those tiny shell-like bones. I got sick when I was out in the country staying with Shelley whose parents had been friends with my parents and were also now divorced. My Dad drove out in the middle of the night to their farm back in the hills and my fever was already 104 and they never figured out why because no one else got sick. I don't remember much except that my friend said something horrible about me when Dad picked me up in his arms. Shelley was like that. She was the terrible bully friend my parents couldn't do anything about because she was the daughter of one their best friends and I was desperately in love with her. I remember the look on his face (anger and disgust) and the look on hers (lovesick — my dad was ridiculously handsome) and a blank space where the car ride home and being carried up to Dad's apartment should be.

I woke up in Dad's bed under the peach satin comforter my grandmother gave him. It was so peach it made your mouth water, but I was too groggy and sick to do anything but lie there and listen. I could hear Dad joking with Mary in the tiny kitchen, my brother's heavy-handed slow chopping and laughter, and the blue light of the gas heater. I remember falling in and out of sickly sleep, that feathery haze over the world. It took a while for my eyes to focus well enough to see the cedar Christmas tree covered in tiny lights and white ornaments. I couldn't believe my father had a tree. All the Christmas stuff was at my Mom's and she'd thrown out a lot of it when we moved then moved again. The room and the floor were cold and I was so weak I had to hold onto furniture, but I made my way out into the living room to see if there were any presents under the tree. There were, sloppily wrapped with the familiar tags on them (from: Daddy to: Lissa even though no one else but my brother called me that and I called him Dad now). The pearl-white ornaments on the tree were those bird skulls lit by the soft glow of the tiny white lights.

Dad found me there and looked proud and nervous even though Mary just rolled her eyes.

“What do you think?”

“It’s awesome,” I said and smiled even though that’s not what I really thought. I had no idea what I really thought. It wasn’t a real Christmas tree like my friends or my grandparents had, which would have normally made me very upset because I desperately wanted normal, but it wasn’t even trying to be. It was a tiny cedar like the kind you see on the side of the road strewn with all those tiny bird skulls, those poisoned beautiful velvet beasts and all that was left of them. It seemed simultaneously insulting and also like the best kind of funeral and grave for all of them. Dad brought me the peach comforter, which Mary’s eyes followed with a pained smile (it was real silk satin, an antique from my grandmother) and carried me to a chair. I sat fading in and out of sleep, trying to figure out what to think about that tree draped in what was left of all those poison birds, all of that sky, and my mother’s anger.

Melissa Moorer was struck by lightning when she was eight. Her work has been published in luminous journals like *Tin House*, *Electric Lit*, *Hobart*, *The Offing*, *Cosmonaut’s Avenue*, and *The Butter/The Toast*. She was assistant editor at *The Butter/The Toast* where she wrote “This Writer’s On Fire” for Roxane Gay. @knownforms if you twitter.

Ashley Stimpson

A Slow Reckoning

Today would've been the 2,190th day, but 133 mornings ago I piled my things in a laundry basket. So instead today is just the 61st day I've lived in this apartment. Not that I am counting. Simply tending the garden of my ruin.

Today is also our would-be sixth wedding anniversary and a Saturday. Of course it's a Saturday. This way I can writhe in self-annihilation for as many unoccupied hours as possible.

I wake up to a timid sun; a mama raccoon's maudlin cries reach my window from a backyard trap the landlord set to save his crawlspace. The cage shakes with her confused desperation and I stare at one of the many cracks that races through the nicotine-steeped ceiling. How immediate, how painless it would be, I think. The ever-stoned Dead Head above could sleep right through. Not a glitch in his THC dreams.

Hunger lurches me out of bed. I pause in the bathroom mirror and frown at the evidence of my hangover. The curls are falling out of my hair because I tug on them all day and mash them against pillows and toss them back like so many bottles of beer. Green, glass bottles, not warm with milk.

On my wedding day, I wore hydrangeas in my hair; they were cheapest. My curls were a burgundy then, and they were long and as full as feather pillows. Now they look like the trimmings on a woodshop floor.

I choke down days-old zucchini bread, picking out the chocolate chips, feeling like someone is tearing down a house in my chest. I imagine a crew of hairy men in hard hats, carrying wood and power tools on their shoulders, walking back and forth across the ventricles, shouting to each other while demolishing old support beams, destroying the foundation. I ask them to keep it down and the dog cocks its head.

I take the dog to the forest. I tell the blue ash and the sycamore that I fucked up and I know it and that it was an accident. I plead fervently for the people I have hurt. For their happiness, for their healing. I promise not to be reckless anymore if this prayer might be validated. I promise early nights in bed with books and as much solitude as it takes to become a worthy person. I promise to abstain from men.

The blue ash are suffering unhurried deaths from a ravenous Asian beetle and they do not hear me. The sycamores bend forward with a hot breeze as if to say *yeah right*.

The afternoon passes stubbornly. I do chores. I sweep I sweat I swear to god the marrow of my bones has been replaced by despair.

I put on a dress. Like I did on that blinding August afternoon four lifetimes ago. This one is not heavy, not overlaid with lace, not too expensive, not exactly what I said I'd never wear. No one is here to tell me I look beautiful and I know, objectively, that I do not.

I walk to the Catholic church on the next block. I sit in the third row from the back and pull the kneeler down. It slams against marble and the sound ricochets like rifle fire through the plastered tunnel of the vestibule.

I am here to turn myself in. I am so weary of this fugitive life.

I kneel until my joints ache. I stifle my sorrow until the Offertory, when tears begin pelting the satin across my chest. At first a few, and then a deluge.

I sing each song and creed and recite all the congregational responses they haven't changed yet.

The only words I've ever uttered in a church and meant were—

I do.

I'm so sorry.

I stand in line for the Eucharist and for a moment I think the priest is going to keep it from me. Because I am a sinner. But he says, "Body of Christ" and I say "Amen" and shuffle weakly to the left and look at Jesus' bloody feet and cross myself.

After mass I get drunk.

Ashley Stimpson is a freelance writer based in Baltimore. Her recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, *Chesapeake Bay Magazine*, and the *Potomac Review*.

Carl Boon

Girl in the Water

Someday these strokes won't matter,
these thin arms moving water
and water moving unto rock.
Someday the commerce
of my body—its memorized motion
and blood—will be enough.
Then this water, delinquent to me,
an enemy, will succumb as air
succumbs to bird-wing. This struggle,
too, as the shore draws near
and a waving man waits
near a forest of pine. But for now
I must wait and repeat: breathe,
push out, gather all that I can gather,
remembering: all is fluid always—
hours, the questions of strangers,
the long walk out of girlhood.

Carl Boon lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches courses in American culture and literature at 9 Eylül University. His poems have appeared in many magazines, including

Posit, *The Maine Review*, and *Diagram*. A Pushcart Prize nominee, Boon recently edited a volume on the sublime in American cultural studies.

Yuan Changming

Snowlining

At the same height of
Every rocky mountain
Above all seasonal change
You are widely cut open

As if to bite a whole patch of
Sky from heaven
With rows of rows of
Whale-like teeth

Yuan Changming started to learn English at age 19 and published monographs on translation before leaving China. With a Canadian PhD in English, Yuan currently edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan and hosts *Happy Yangsheng* in Vancouver; credits include ten Pushcart nominations, *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry*, *BestNewPoemsOnline*, *Threepenny Review* and 1,409 others across 41 countries.

Sioned Curoe

Nostalgia for an Empty Place

English burns bitter on my tongue
and for the first time in living memory
I feel homesick for a countryside
surrounded by so much fucking corn

My sister calls from California
happy birthday a month late
with the barest handful of change
I gift her only coffee
and Midwest impressions of the sea

Our Lyft driver asks me to speak
my second language
the code-switch is upheaval
a great grind of earthen plates
and iron pressing against teeth

I am not trapped here
gods know I have every chance
to pack up for some state

without flat endless fields
where I can eat weed in peace

This is what I tell myself
when winter wrenches my knees
out of joint

Sioned Curoe is a queer poet and artist living in Iowa. Their previous publications include works in *Coe Review*, *Colere*, *The Pearl*, and *Dubuque Area Writers Guild Gallery 2016: Shapes*.

Sara Moore Wagner

If You Can't Love Me

Things weep unexpected—
the nose, an eye—as soft as
a red ribbon from a pocket,
a release of pressure as painful
as crowning a child,
the face cracking like a pelvis
and then, what other things
live inside you, can be coaxed
out, wet and alive. Come
into the light so I
can make you feel
something like this,
if not for me, because of,
if not for me, because.

Sara Moore Wagner is the author of the chapbook *Hooked Through* (Five Oaks Press, 2017). Her poetry has appeared in many journals and anthologies including *Gigantic Sequins*, *Alyss*, *Reservoir*, *The Wide Shore*, *The Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, and *Arsenic Lobster*, among others, and she has been nominated for a Pushcart prize. She lives in Cincinnati with her filmmaker husband Jon and their children, Daisy, Vivienne, and Cohen, where she teaches at Xavier and Northern Kentucky University. Find her at www.saramoorewagner.com.

Noorulain Noor

Germination

A pit of apathy sprouts,
where once
indelible warmth pooled
like molasses.
Clawing into crevasses of memory,
I paint a disposition for you each day —
zinnias in the breeze, the river at sunset,
still life with mango peels,
but the heat pastilled in the past stays put.
Together,
we deface my careful compositions,
the zinnias vanish in a shock of frost,
our river is many sheets of ice, life remains still,
and so the seed grows.

Noorulain Noor is a member of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley and a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Her poetry has appeared in *Spillway*, *Sugar Mule*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Muzzle*, and other journals. Raised in Lahore, Pakistan, Noorulain now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her poetry explores themes of identity, multiculturalism, and the immigrant experience.

T.J. Smith

Hospice Memory Fugue

Turn down turn down the pale blue
sheets that feel like paper— flat—
the world outside the too-far window
horizon stretching bleak earth and pale
blue without interruption— flat line
crawl to terminus—no one coming
down from the mountain — no one
climbing over the hill—flat country
baking in the sunlight—irradiated—
no shade country of fever heat and fingers
trace lines to the vanishing point—skin
feels like paper—disaster—paper and
blue ink on a black line—no one
coming to save you—sound blip –
cottonmouth machine drone— foregone
visions and conclusions—no one coming
back from flat country—harsh line
shriek to terminus—turn down
the machinery—turn down—catastrophe—
—catastrophe—pale sheets —and blue.

T.J. Smith is a poet in New York. Originally from Jacksonville, FL, he studied German and Creative Writing at Princeton, and he's currently completing an MFA at NYU, where he's the web editor of *Washington Square Review*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gyroscope Review*, *Split Rock Review*, *Red Flag Poetry*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Snapdragon*, *Stoneboat*, and *Nassau Literary Review*.