

SAGA

Literary Journal



Volume Eight

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www.creativewritinglbcc.org

2023

SAGA Literary Journal Volume Eight

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Foreword

As society has slowly re-transitioned back to familiar times before the pandemic, the SAGA editing team has been reminded of the importance of life through editing this year's literary journal. This collection of work represents the power of human emotion and the freedom to act upon it.

Thank you to this year's editorial staff and especially to our managing editor Areli Chavez. Your help and effort have been the glue for this year's journal. I also want to give thanks to all those who've contributed to SAGA's submissions and remind them that the vulnerability to share one's creativity is one of the purest forms of connection. A huge thanks to our faculty advisor Professor Jason Casem, whose willingness to guide us through this journey and grant us his patience and insight along the way to this year's beautiful publication.

We hope that Volume VIII of SAGA brings you an array of human vehemence and allows you exposure to some of the creative minds within our community. Working on SAGA this year has been a life-changing experience for me, and I wish to spread its brilliance and impact like that of drifting sand.

Denise Santana

Editor-in-Chief and President
English Majors and Minors Club, 2022-2023

Rhythm

By Heidie Saenz

She says sex sells
More than brains ever will
And she wants to be rich
More than learned
So she plays the game
Because that's all it is
A dance, practiced moves
Poetry

Her hips become meaty stanzas
Her legs, the bait that lures wet imagery
Her lips, hungry and ravenous couplets
Her breasts, the swelling of alliteration
Her stomach, throbbing ellipsis

The music plays
She moves to the sound
The transaction of bills, loud dissonance
Her body becomes her poetry
She lets us thumb through her pages
She lets us read her as she sways



by Bret Roman



By Cooper Wilhelm

Impropriety Insobriety

By Daniel Syracuse

You know beer is 90-95% water? My sister does. No thanks to her friend. Them two are chugging booze on a dark Vegas street, drunk outta their minds. Alcohol floods their systems and they nearly drown to death, like dolphins coming up for air only when necessary. Sometimes they don't. They tell me *liquor keeps us afloat amidst tribulation*. I won't toss any life preservers when waves come to wash them away.

A taxi speeds past, its tires drenching us with a curb puddle. Nice witnessing them two act as if a tsunami spurted down the Strip. They needed a good hosing off anyways. They're never fun like they are when they're drunk, so that's an upside of designated driving. Seeing them hungover is my heaven.

During the chaos, my sister dropped—no, she *threw* her bottle at the speeding car. Didn't said she was smart, did I? Thank Poseidon she didn't do that when I was driving. More than glass woulda flung outta the car and shattered against the blacktop at 65 miles an hour.

Their voices are rivers of pain to my ears, intensified by inebriation. The drums on the sides of my brain are red with blood by the time we're back in our hotel. The fish outta water wash themselves off and dry their gills as I pour out Adam's ale, praying their baths baptized them back to sanity.

Dang. I need a drink.

Turning the Tables

By Vickie Wippel

“**G**ood Sir, it works like a lap, but it’s not your lap, because, of course, it’s not attached to your person. You can, however, rest items, or even your hands, on it, quite like a lap.” *How on God’s green earth do these goops not know how a table works* thought Woody Tuffins, lips curved in a pensive frown as his eyes spanned the crowd. If the young man were joking, the crowd would have chuckled.

It was a new week and another county fair. All summer, Tuffins had saddled up his old horse, Mr. Millhouse, and carted a carriage full of woodwork, canvassing Western New York and beyond to hawk his handmade wares. Tuffins’ specialty was a small, four-person folding table, an uncomplicated design made using hands tool and a foot-powered saw. “If I stack them just right, I can load a dozen, perhaps more, in the wagon,” he explained to his ma and pa before heading out. “And I can bring back more wood.” Tuffins’ voice cracked like a dry twig as he said this.

“Oooooo-hoooo, what gibble-gabble.” Pa was many things - a quiet sorta folk, a devout Christian, and an amputee- but he wasn’t foolish enough to bless the wayward trekking of his only son. Pa rocked back in a chair he made himself (before the accident) and whittled a tobacco pipe one-handed. Like his son, woodworking was all Pa knew.

“They have forests for miles in New Jersey, ain’t that right, Ma?” Tuffins leaned on the fireplace hearth, hoping for an air of confidence. His ma stoked the cooktop fire, lips pursed; she didn’t return his gaze. If Tuffins was Pa’s pride and joy, that iron cooktop was Ma’s. In the winters, the family of three would gather around it for warmth, but winter, mercifully, was still a few months away. Of course, that didn’t keep Ma from wearing the dusty pink shawl around her shoulders, a uniform of sorts for the family matriarch. If she ever had another shawl, Tuffins wouldn’t know it.

“Why don’t you let him be, Pa,” Ma said, finally. Each word pecked out of her like a northern flicker, often seen flying in and out of the trees near and around the property line.

Ma put the fire poker down and wiped her hands on her apron—like a judge handing down his gavel—indicating her decision was made, and it was final. “I’ll fix you a week’s worth of biscuits and pork belly,” she said. After that, the younger Tuffins would be on his own.

Tuffins’ travels had brought him as far east as Lake Parsippa, sleeping in fields by night, supplementing his ma’s biscuits with the fruit trees that dotted the region. He felt mighty proud of his adventuring; nobody he knew had ever made it past Lake Erie. And, if he sold enough furniture before the birch trees lost their leaves, Tuffins and his folks would survive the winter.

Tuffins arrived the night before—*where was he—Seacaucus?* he thought to himself as he laid his pa’s old rucksack down to make camp for the night. The weary traveler rode all day through the swamps and fields standing between Clifton from the Hoboken County Fair Grounds. Though the sun still clung to the last parts of the day, to Tuffins’ flat tired body, it might as well have been middle of the night. He noticed a poster on a nearby hitching post. Though the paper was ripped and sun-faded, Tuffins could read bits in the waning light—tomorrow’s event would have “large crowds joined in amazement,” and there would be “standing room only.” Tuffins fell asleep in the soft grass, hands behind his back, for he had no pillow, hopeful.

“Laps are a sign of moral and mental lapse,” a man from the crowd hollered. He tipped his hat and chuckled in deference to his own remarks, adding, “We stand for God and stamp down Satan here in Hoboken County, Sir.” The man nodded—agreeing with himself. The standing-room only crowd also applauded in agreement—a few amens and whistles, too. Tuffins ached for one of the folded paper fans the older women flapped relentlessly as they stood. The young woodworker had seen more than he ventured to that summer, but this crowd, under this tent, red and gold striped, dusty and sun-faded, was absolutely something else—hammering him with questions like a mallet on a wooden plank. Tuffins pulled his handkerchief out to wipe his brow—same one he used to polish the furniture, leaving his forehead slicked with beeswax.

“You says it has legs, mister. Why don’t it walk?” A freckle-faced child stepped to the front of the crowd surrounding Tuffin’s furniture, twisting a straw hat in his hands. The boy’s eyes, ardent Searching.

“Why...why...” Tuffins stammered. Tent flags flapped in the warm wind. Tuffins thought he heard his own sweat dropping from his underarms. *Had he ever been so flummoxed?* “Tables are held up by legs, my young friend, but not actual legs. Actual legs are reserved for animals.” Tuffins looked for a laugh in the crowd but was only met with stares. “Forgive me, did you not know that?” Tuffins’ alarm bells raised like a hatchet above a log. *Flummadiddle*, as his pa would say.

“Forgive him, Traveler, the child knows not the devil’s ways.” Stanley Stanbridge swanked through the crowd to Tuffins’ booth. Tuffins recognized him from the poster he spied the night before. Hair slicked back, darker than any varnish, eyebrows that formed peaks like the Catskills, and a humorless smile that made Tuffins’ own lip tremble. “My name is Reverend Stanley Stanbridge, and I see you’ve come to sell your humble, very humble, wares.” He eyed the folding tables with scorn saved for pornographers, adulterers, and the like. “And, before you go further,” Reverend Stanbridge continued, “kindly allow me to explain, that these fine folks are members of the Hoboken Church of Absolute Erection and Resurrection, and you have happened upon our summer revival.”

Horsefeathers, thought Tuffins, surveying the crowd. *Ain’t this the summer livestock fair?* How foolish he had been! Why, he didn’t know where he was, or what that poster said last night.

“No, no. We do not sit in chairs, nor at tables. Nary a barstool or day bed will pass our baptized behinds.” Here, the Reverend pulled an ornate walking stick from behind his back and shimmied a bit, for effect. “Why, we even eat standing up, like every other animal, as God intended.” He smoothed his eyebrows, adding “Any other way is unnatural. Indeed, uncivilized.” The crowd murmured in agreement. “Here in Hoboken,” the reverend’s voice was reaching crescendo, “we stand up for Salvation, because...”

The entirety of the crowd responded with a deafening war cry, “ERECTION is PERFECTION! AMEN!” The women, the men, their children, were as delighted as the last one standing in a spelling bee. Tuffins noticed a few of the men carrying ornate canes mirroring the one carried by their leader—though nobody could ever copy his eyebrows.

The reverend’s voice reduced to a whisper, “Praise be.” The room fell silent—both the worshipper and Woody Tuffins absolutely—

awestruck.

Oh, applesauce, the young carpenter told himself. The crowd was closing in. Suddenly, their canes looked like javelins. Tuffins, a Christian himself (though one who sat—if a distinction must be made), needed a miracle. Right then, he thought of another carpenter to call on. He sure did wish either Jesus, or even his Pa, would show up and stop this twaddle talk. And then, *wouldn't you believe it*, the carpenter had a revelation, praise be! Tuffins faced the crowd, both hands held up like pitchforks, just like the drawings he saw of Jesus on the Mount in Ma's prayer books back home. "My dear friends," Tuffins smiled, but his boots were shaking, "why, the devil is testing you!" The crowd—indeed, time—stood still. Tuffins coughed out the quiver in his voice, then began again. "Don't you see?" Tuffins' voice, well, now it boomed. "These are not tables. Such blasphemy! Why, you do not need a table, or a console to console what ails you!" *Did Tuffins' just arch his eyebrows like the Reverend? Yes, he did!* "Ohhhhhh noooo, such gibble gabble, as my dear ol' Pa would say, rest his soul." Tuffins took his hat off and bowed for effect. He'd seen enough Sunday sermons to know this move could sway a crowd. The Reverend rested on his cane as he watched; his mouth, why it was agape! "What I present to you today, my fine folk, are not tables, ohhhh, no! Why, they are, quite simply Perches to Paradise, that lift the faithful up closer—indeed, much closer to God." Tuffins smiled angelically. The table began to shine like it were spit polished with gold.

The tent flags stopped flapping. The little boy with the straw hat scrunched his face. Tuffins continued, "Why, any old place, the milk barn, indeed your own living quarters, can become a pulpit of praise with one of my handy dandy portable perches." Tuffins ran his fingers through his moppy hair, now miraculously waxed and gleaming; he did a little shimmy dance and practically sang, "You fine folks told me yourselves that you stand for God, and right you are!" He flashed an actor's grin, "Afterall, Lord Jesus Christ was a humble, bumble carpenter, like Pa, and, gosh, like me." Another bow from the carpenter. The crowd clapped, hooted, and hollered at the comparison. "And, if you buy a perch, or two, today, you stand that much closer to Our Lord, indeed, closer to those gates of heaven-paradise!" With that, Tuffins took a giant step up onto the table—a leap of faith!

The table wobbled a little under his weight but did not collapse. Another miracle! Why, it reminded Tuffins of the time his Pa found a skinny yellow pup down by the creek, saying, "He's a gift from God, and yours to raise, Woody." Course, the pup caused all that jiggery-pockery in the chicken coop soon after and paid the ultimate price for his sins. "An eye for an eye, Woody," Pa said as he put away his shot gun. Everyone but Ma cried for that dog. Ma cried for her chickens. Why, yes, indeed, the Lord giveth and taketh away.

From the top of the table, Tuffins could survey the entire crowd. Men yanked out their pocketbooks faster than you could pull a weed. Boys gathered sticks and placed them at Tuffins' feet like an altar offering. One woman fainted. A few of the smaller children simply cheered. As a line formed around Tuffins, the Reverend called for calm. "Come now, my faithful," he shouted, waving his cane in the air, "let us not be hasty." His eyes darted, eyebrows vaulted in alarm, as he watched the crowd.

The congregants stepped on Stanley Standridge's polished shoes, muddying them, as they moved forward towards the simple wood carver. Like Jesus at the Red Sea, though lacking the benevolence, the Reverend parted the crowd, using his cane to poke and prod his way to the front. It was then that the Reverend noted the tables were glowing—enveloped in God's holy light! "Magnificent!" he remarked, breathless, before mumbling an incantation to himself. Tuffins smirked and watched the Reverend bow his head while shielding his eyes from the glare; the young carpenter wouldn't have believed such codswallop if he hadn't seen it with his own blue eyes. The Reverend surveyed the crowd, then looked back to the stack of the tables Tuffins was selling—over half were already bought and paid for and being carted off by their new faithful owners. The Reverend's words clapped down like thunder. "Tuffins, I believe I shall purchase one of your Prayer Perches." The Reverend adjusted his tie and fidgeted with his cuffs, waiting for a response.

"Reverend, I would be honored for you to have one of my perches in your holy home, and today, one of these perches can be yours for only fifty dollars." Tuffins looked at the dwindling stack of tables before looking directly at the Reverend. "You're just in time. As you know, Peter 3:8 says, 'the Lord is patient with you,' but these perches aren't going to wait." There was a snideness in Tuffins' chuckle.

The Reverend didn't reach for his pocketbook; his eyebrows fell flat in despair. "Kind, young man. I did not carry such an amount today; I am but a simple pastor." Both hands clutched on to his cane, hanging limply in front of him. The handle, like a jewel-encrusted chalice, caught Tuffins' gaze.

"Your holy Sir," Tuffins began, his gaze fixed on those jewels, "I simply cannot deny you the chance to convene with our Lord, or the privilege of this prayerful perch." Tuffins matched his hands together in prayer. "And, like our Savior himself, I will not forsake you." Tuffins shimmied to over to the Reverend saying, "So let us make a simple trade." Tuffins wrestled the cane right out of his hand. "My perch for your walking stick." He gave the cane a regal twirl with a flick of his wrist before the Reverend could object. "I must say, the Lord is calling me to make you this generous offer." The cane was heavier than Tuffins expected.

For Stanley Stanbridge, the moment of acquisition was one of divine rapture. "God is good!" He cried in sweet relief. There was a small flurry of dust as he fell to his knees, eyes closed. Then, Mr. Stanbridge, scooted on his knees to the few tables still remaining, yanking his from the remaining stack. There he remained, in what looked like an embrace, cooing to himself, "Erection is perfection, amen. Erection is perfection, amen. Erection is perfection, amen."

As for Tuffins, his teeth sparkled as he smiled, like he'd wiped himself with beeswax all over again. Ol' Pa would be calling him Gigglemug when he saw that smile, not to mention the sack of money. Ma, too, would be tickled the tables sold out. As the sun set, with the fairgrounds as empty as an early morning offering plate, the young carpenter collected his horse, his rucksack, and his shiny new walking stick, ready to head back home. He thought there was a good chance Pa could make a couple more of them sticks to sell, and Ma could gussy 'em up with seeds and stones from the yard. God had been good to Tuffins today. Praise be.

the art of parenting

By Ron Riley

I remember being locked outdoors
my mother's last words to
"keep an eye on your brothers" or
"pee behind the garage," her way of telling us
to be responsible

we roamed over bridges, under over-passes
our energy unbridled, moonlight guiding us home
where a hot bath, a stern word
and a warm meal were there to greet us

I wonder now how my single mother managed
cooking, cleaning and paying bills
the thought she needed to decompress
not registering until I became a parent

our children not allowed to roam freely
presumed dangers encroaching our home
they were chauffeured and chaperoned
not walking, a new norm
their lessons of life learned in this
managed micro climate

a new time for parent and child, we
attempted to nurture and negotiate, the
necessary skills learned on-the-job where
we were bound to screw up, no model to mimic
the hope of not breaking anything
nestled in our hearts

I watched my daughter, near exhaustion
soothing her toddler's tantrum with words
instead of warnings
"The difference with parenting today," she offered
seeing my confounded expression
"are higher expectations"

I took in for a moment this polite refrain, realizing
the world's made it more complicated, again
the old out for the new
and I said to myself "old man
you had it easy."

That Sad Old House on the Hill Outside of Town: A Guided Tour

By Samuel Pflugrath

(Content Warning: Homophobia, Child Abuse, Suicide)

Firstly, on the gray concrete steps that lead up the hill to the front of the house, there are several faded, reddish-brown stains which many attempts at cleaning have thus far failed to remove.

In the main hall, there is a small, impromptu shrine on an old wooden table up against the left-hand wall, featuring a framed photograph of a young girl, of about eleven or twelve, with several burned-out candles and wilted flowers scattered around it.

In the living room, the doorway to which is located on the right-hand wall exactly opposite the shrine, there is a very large wooden cross hung high up on the wall, so as to always be visible.

In the dining room, which connects to the living room, there are three chairs set up at the table, although one sits covered in dust.

In the first-floor bathroom, which connects to the dining room, there are several lengths of quarter-inch plastic tubing left leaning up against the sink, even though there appears to be nothing wrong with the plumbing.

In the kitchen, which also connects to the dining room, there is an old crayon drawing affixed to the refrigerator with magnets, apparently made by the little girl from the shrine and depicting herself playing with a very close friend of hers, who also happens to be a little girl.

In the family room, which connects both to the kitchen and back to the main hall, there is a great old wooden bookshelf with a great many books prominently displayed: one of them is *To Train Up a Child*, by Michael and Debi Pearl.

In the main hall closet, just underneath the staircase leading up to the second floor, there are scratch marks in the walls.

In the second-floor hallway, at the top of the stairs and connecting the three remaining rooms, framed prints of Bible verses (mostly from Leviticus and Deuteronomy, but First Corinthians is present as well) adorn the walls.

In the parents' bedroom, at the top of the stairs, the mother and father lie curled up together in bed, both their pillows damp with pointless tears: as one may have already gleaned from their choices in

both reading material and interior décor, the two of them hate a great many things—but probably more than anything else anymore, they have both come to hate themselves.

In the second-floor bathroom, which sits between the parents' and the child's bedrooms, there is a length of garden hose coiled up next to the bathtub, like an especially hateful viper.

And lastly, in the little girl's bedroom, where our story both begins and ends, everything is preserved exactly as it was on that cold October night when it happened almost ten years ago—even the window, which overlooks that flight of gray concrete steps leading up the hill to the front of the house, is still wide open.

Involuntary Disbelief

By Max Mixon

My red tie draped across the floor of my closet
A sign from god
Why the ruminations in explanations
Frantic rationalizations and loose associations

We are born in a season, in a time
You say the stars are aligned
Your deontological determinism dug deep
His fixed pupils and sloughed mesentery buried beneath

His abscess incised and drained
For a reason, either mine or yours
With magnanimity we debride him
Scleral hope staring at the wound

Gather the flock
I am not your shepard
You are not my sheep
Beneath the cosmos, meek

I see the bargaining creases you reek
The seed you planted grows his fetid flesh
You seek meanings, dreams, without retreat
Now penance, or you decorate around him with hanging chickens

Fears and tears drip from your cheeks
I am here, listening, bereaved
You seek a single simpliciter seeming in the flat field of freedom
I am chained and bound for forgiving

Salt water, soft voices, and viscous thoughts in a centrifuge
Each of our eyes attempts to vitalize

No, We did not actualize, before his time
You look back to hold his sundering soul

We are not gods, I am only
Beyond Grief, devoted to your relief.

The Complexity Of Weeds

By Heidie Saenz

I want to be
A dandelion

Self sufficient
And stubborn

As yellow as a canary
Soft, airy and white as an owls down

A seed head
Filled with thoughts

Fully bloomed
And fragile

A million wishes held within me
A symbol of hope amongst rolling doubt

To float, always towards futures
Over all boundaries set by circumstance

In hard and dangerous places
Concrete streets choking on ambivalence

In lavish rolling fields of puff-balls
To settle and take root again and again

All I'd need
Is a forgiving wind

Snow White, Red Snow

By Madeleine Wojack

My sister noticed him before I did, a small whine starting in the back of her throat and developing into a whimper. Not like the whine she made when shirking her chores, but the whine our pigs made before the blade. My mother's hands stilled in the bowl of flour, shaggy, sticky dough clinging to her fingers, rough with years of work but still gentle with the brush through my ebony hair and my sister's auburn locks.

I followed my sister's eyes to the enormous shadow moving past our window. The needle between my fingers froze, and I rose from the fireplace and set my mending down on the bench, covered in generations of quilts. Then came the first knock.

"Marina," the bear called softly, my name rasping from deep within his gullet but strangely musical upon his tongue, like an animal brushing against a violin's strings. He knocked again, rapping the tips of his claws against the wood of the door my father had built for my mother when they married, the threshold he had carried her over.

"Marina," the bear called again. "Open up. Let me in."

I looked at my mother's face, bloodless and still. My sister, three years my junior and still but a child, clutched her sleeve and darted her eyes from me to the door.

"Marina," the bear tried again. "Marina, it's so cold out here. Let me warm myself at your hearth."

"One day, he will come back," my father had said, explaining to me how the fifth son of a poor farmer had come to build a house of his own deep in the woods, how we had come to have pigs and sheep and a horse and the window made of real glass. "One day, he will come back, but you will be ready for him, my daughter."

My footsteps soft and light on the thick plush skins laid all over the floor, I padded in my moccasins through the kitchen, found the smooth handle of the butcher knife my mother used to carve the Sunday roast. My mother found my eyes and shook her head silently, taking the knife from my grasp. Slowly, quietly, she slid over the cast iron skillet she used for nearly everything—kasha varnishkes, pierogies, cabbage in all its many forms. I gripped the still-warm handle covered in the potholder my sister had crocheted for our mother three Michaelmases ago.

Cast iron is heavy, but I am strong. Winter was still young, and I had spent all summer and fall chopping the cords of firewood I had stacked around our wooden cabin. For my mother, for my sister, I am the man of the house. Under my strength, the skillet rose, framing my head in a black iron halo. I could still smell the dumplings from lunch, fried with caramelized onions from the root cellar and sour cream kept cold in the snow.

“Marina,” the bear cooed. “Marina, are you frightened? I have a gift for you, my special child.”

Landing on just the pads of my feet, I crossed the hearth, blazing, ash flying and landing in my eyelashes. I blinked away my tears quickly, my eyes sharp. As I reached with my free hand and placed it on the worn, smooth leather latch of the door my father built, I heard my mother choke a gasp. I put a finger to my lips. Her eyes pleaded with me but her mouth closed shut. My sister darted forward and put herself between me and the door, her jaw clenched, nostrils flaring with anger and fear. I smiled down at her and pushed her gently to the side.

“Marina,” the bear breathed. He could feel me against the door, feel my heartbeat, steady but alert, pressing into the woodgrain of the door.

“Marina, let me in. I need to see you,” the bear whined. I could not see him through the door but I too could feel him. A mass of muscle and thick matted fur, pine needles and dried blood and a deeper, earthier smell running beneath. I could feel his yellow eyes staring into mine through the door between us. I could feel his claws as he dragged them down the door my father built, his talons vibrating the weathered wood, splintering but not yet giving way.

“Marina,” said the bear. “Your father made promises that cannot be broken, my child. But you know very well that this door is not so strong as that.”

“One day, he will come back,” my father had said those many years ago. “One day, he will come back to retrieve his price, but you will be ready for him, my daughter. One day, you will stain the snow with his blood.”

I tightened my grip on the skillet and eased the tension off the latch. “You may break down this door,” I said, forcing my voice to be as straight and as strong as my father’s back, as broad and as clear as my memory of him, “but you may never cross this threshold!”

The bear snarled and stepped back, and I threw open the door and followed him into the snow.

Fish Tank

By Emma Boucher

Here they are—three orcas swiftly approaching, primed in attack formation as they crush the distance between us. Water is their fuel, the spark that lights a fuse within them, pushing them to swim, slice, and strike. Three natural killers, born to hunt and reign as apex predators of the ocean.

That was before Deep Blue Adventure Park. Before freedom turned to wild-caught captivity. Now, the orcas disappear beneath a buoy, diving deep where dolphins, dories, and kelp should have been dwelling. The arena hums with anticipation as the seconds drag on—*How long does it take three giants to swim across a fish tank?*

I blink, and then they explode above the surface, throwing their massive bodies forward and spraying gallons of freezing, fishy water over the first seven rows of spectators. The people scream and shriek, batting their hands as if to stop the water they knew was coming; on the outside of the glass walls, their horror is tame. They all know they are safe.

I wish the whales had thrown *all* their weight at the glass. The crack and splinter of those panes would have been infinitely more satisfying. These Orcas convince us of their obedience. Now run us all out of here. Make us *afraid* of containing such volatile power. It would have said to me, *We're not docile pets and we can still terrify you.* Like they yearn to crush their prison and flee the cage as innocents back to the liberating waves.

Because watching the orca whales, natural predators of the ocean, perform tricks like pet dogs, seeing how their world has shrunk to a drop of the world they're used to, hacks a jagged gash through my heart. I bleed out watching them whistle and call to each other, siblings in arms, and bow to the two-legged ringmasters.

We, the humans, are free to move, explore, mingle, and gorge on food like master hunters. We are sharks in the world, sailing through cities like bottom-feeders, then fighting to the top of skyscrapers in pursuit of tasty prey. . Meanwhile, these tuxedo-wearing warriors face reprising the same role again, again, and

again. Unlearning the primal skills of surviving the ocean. Another day passes, and the whales relinquish a little more, locked between the sun and the sea, glimpsing more of our world than their own.

Each orca waves a flipper at us, enchanting the real threat, and I wish more than ever humans weren't so selfish.

The Art of Self-Hatred

By Daniel Syracuse

Your adolescent acne forever makes you detest your mirrored twin,
Allocating attention to self-reflection without celebrating your feats.
“Everyone’s too busy looking at themselves,” your parents say.
No. Everyone's too busy picturing you in Dr. Pimple Popper’s next video.

Your endless exile from friend groups forever tarnishes your confidence.
Embarrassingly emigrating without finding anyone reliable.
“No one likes you,” your best friend says.
No one like you exists, and *good!* One of you is bad enough.

Your desperate desire for relationships forever robs you of taking things
slow.
Discovering disappointment without having talked enough.
“Us two just weren’t meant to be,” your ex says.
No. You two just were an *awful* couple, and you’re to blame.

Your perfectionist personality forever taints your rare genuine happiness.
Prioritizing proficiency in education without knowing your major.
“Let’s have fun for once. Live a little,” your next ex says.

No. Let them take advantage of you before they leave, like everyone else.

Tidal Ripple—Homage to Hokusai's
"The great Wave off Kanagawa"
By Thomas A.E. Hesketh

Sea

Cresting

Breaking

Roiling froth

Seal tongue licking

Surging, daughters of

Moon beams, sand weaver

Depthless-deepest-darkest,

Azure, jade, aquamarine, midnight blue

Indigo, cerulean, Olive, kelp, seal black, gray whale,

Sharkskin, crab shell, oysters, flood, l'eau, tidepool, Wasser, currents

Tears, narcissus 'pool, flotsam, salt water, aqua, Bermuda triangle, springwater



by Lucy Boucher



By Cooper Wilhelm

Fresh ASICS

By Robert Almaraz

Owen stood on the scale and watched the numbers calculate his body weight. The small crowded wrestling room was full of everyone in their underwear waiting to be weighed in. All talking about tonight's meet against Belmont high. Owen's mind made him the center of attention. The entire room collected into a grotesque, eldritch, hive mind, telepathically mocking and gawking at Owen's fat body, his farmer's tan, and his "too long to wrestle well" hair. Anxiety built up in him as he felt the hot breath of the eldritch beast while the numbers calculated his weight.

"Two hundred and twenty pounds. Looks like you lost five pounds." Coach Lee announced, to Owen's relief. Five pounds was a weight loss he was not expecting. "Looks like the frosh/soph team at Belmont don't have a heavyweight tonight, so we get an easy victory in your division. Congrats." He said that last word with a tinge of sarcasm.

"That doesn't really feel like a victory," Owen said as he stepped off the scale. High school wrestling teams rarely had kids in his division, so empty victories were common for him. The times he actually wrestled someone, he would always lose.

"Well, maybe if you get into a lower division or actually win the matches you wrestled, you would actually know the feeling." Coach Lee said in an overly condescending tone, as he wrote on his clipboard. He motioned for the next set of wrestlers to weigh in.

Owen headed back to their small locker room and quickly suited up into his wrestling gear. He slipped on his singlet and his normal workout clothes over it. The singlet they gave him shrunk in the wash the other night so it clung too tightly to him. He got out of the locker room to find a bathroom that wasn't anywhere near the wrestling team. Away from the buzzing of teenage boys and their wandering eyes.

Owen found solace in the math building's bathroom. No one was around except the janitor and teachers who were grading the day's most recent quizzes. The bathroom was empty except for a pair of pale muscular legs kneeling in front of the toilet like it was a porcelain altar. A pair of ASICS adorned the feet of these pale legs that read ANDREWS on the rubber bottoms. They belonged to Josh Andrews. The Varsity teams 160-pound wrestler. Josh was the best and yet the

quietest member of the team.

“You alright?” Owen asked. A loud gagging noise echoed throughout the bathroom, followed up by the coherent sound of vomit hitting the toilet water. “You sick or something, Andrews?” Owen asked. Owen realized that this was the first conversation he has ever attempted with Andrews.

“I’m fucking fine!” Josh grunted. The Toilet flushed as Josh’s ASICS pivoted. The stall door opened with force and crashed into the other plastic stalls.

Josh looked like every good wrestler, his hair shaved close to the skin so it would never interfere with any match he had. His face was skinny, with sharp cheekbones that would dig into other wrestlers with face-to-face contact during matches. The cartilage in his ears was completely smashed, filled with blood to form his cauliflower ears. His skin was as pale as a corpse and was a nutritionist’s worst nightmare.

Josh wiped vomit from his chin with the back of his hand. Owen noticed that there was still vomit left on the tips of his index and middle fingers.

Not sure what to make of this predicament. Owen repeated, “Are you sick or something?”

“You don’t hear well?” Josh barked back. “I’m fine! Keep this up and I’ll miss weigh-ins and miss my damn match.” He stepped to the sink and washed his hands.

“Just wanted to make sure you’re okay. If you’re not doing well. You shouldn’t wrestle tonight.” Owen had nearly forgotten why he was in the math building bathroom.

“And lose for my division? I don’t fucking think so!” Josh stepped up to Owen, his hands still wet, as he nudged into Owen’s face. “You may be used to getting pinned and losing every damn match. But I’m not!” The smell of vomit escaped his mouth with each word. “Keep your goddamn mouth shut about what you saw in here if you know what is good for you.” He got right into Owen’s face.

“Shit. Alright. I will.” Owen backed towards the urinal with his hands up in retreat. “Fuck me for being nice, right?”

Josh stormed out of the bathroom as the door shot back and forth from his exit. Owen tried not to think too hard about what happened while he peed into the urinal. But couldn’t help but wonder what Josh was going through.

Owen made his way to the big gym of Lakeview to join the rest of the Frosh/Soph team. The bleachers were slightly empty, which gave

him hope that not many people would see his false victory. The gym was all set up for the match tonight. Rubber lined foam wrestling mats were rolled out and smelled of chlorine disinfectant. Lines of folding chairs were placed for each team on each side of the printed ring in the middle of the wrestling mat. The gym was filled with the rest of the two teams warming up for matches. All the wrestlers were focused on winning their matches as they stretched and grunted with each workout.

Coach Lee was standing with his clipboard watching the warm-ups. He was in decent shape and could have easily joined them, but instead he watched and judged each one.

Owen felt Lee was always the hardest on him during practice, especially this year. He would watch him struggle with each warm up exercise during practice and would have the team restart each one when Owen wasn't quick enough. This caused a bit of a riff between Owen and his teammates in and out of practice. Making wrestling a lonely sport for Owen.

Owen was still thinking about Josh and decided to approach him about what he saw.

"Hey, coach. Can I ask you something?" Owen said as Coach Lee watched the drills.

"What?" He said quickly while not looking at him directly. "Did Josh seem Okay to you?" Owen asked.

"Yeah, he seemed like Josh. Why?" Coach still didn't look at him and wrote something down on his clipboard like he always did.

"He was just um..." Owen stopped himself while trying to figure out how to describe what he saw.

"He was what, Owen? HE was what?" Coach abruptly turned his body to him, annoyed by this conversation and with his same judgemental look.

"Nothing. It was nothing, sorry." Owen said and started to slip back into his singlet to join the warm-ups. "I'll get to warming up."

"Maybe you should worry about yourself, Owen. Worry about how to get better when you actually have an opponent to wrestle. Maybe watch Josh wrestle. You can learn a thing or two about winning matches." Coach blew into his whistle. "Alright, run a quick lap around the gym, everyone, and take your seats."

The matches were going to begin soon, and Owen decided to keep his mouth shut. Regretting that, he even opened it in the first place.

Owen watched the last wrestler on the Frosh/Soph team get pinned. The crowd had grown slightly larger during the matches. He recognized no one in the crowd, so he felt some relief from the dread of having to stand in front of everyone in his singlet. His parents never came to his matches. He always felt embarrassed wrestling in front of them with how much he lost, so he told them to not even bother showing up.

He placed his plastic headgear over his ears, almost looking like a real wrestler for just a moment. The soft rubber mat sank under his feet as he stood up from the folding chair. There was complete silence as both teams watched him enter the middle of the ring. The crowd watched him intently, getting ready to see the next bout. His singlet felt tighter around every fold of his body as he stood there. He could feel the audience stare at each fold in a similar fashion to the hive mind in the wrestling room. The eldritch monster they collectively formed could see every single fiber of fabric strain against his body. The referee raised his hand, and the crowd cheered as it meant one more victory for Lakeview.

Owen ran back to his things and slipped back into his workout clothes as the mats cleared for the Junior Varsity teams. One of the moms from the team was cooking food that was sold at the concession stand in the lobby of the gym. She was cooking hot dogs that were wrapped in strips of bacon. The line wasn't too long, and he needed comfort food. He looked around at all the people, wondering if any of them were talking about him in his singlet. No one focused on him at all, but he was sure the hive mind they had all formed was able to telepathically communicate through fat jokes about his husky body.

He stopped thinking about it at the front of the line as he got his hot dog for free, for being on the team. The hot dog was covered in grilled onions, slices of red, green, and yellow bell peppers. He placed nice smooth lines of ketchup and mayonnaise that laid perfectly across the hot dog's body. He took that first bite of intense flavor and completely forgot about everyone in the room. Each bite of the hot dog was savored, and he was tempted to hop back in line to get another.

As he took a break from eating, he saw from afar Josh and his dad. They were having an intense conversation, focusing only on each other face to face. They stood in front of the trophy case. There were plenty of shiny gold mementos for every sport. Wrestling had the least amount. The school filled the void by putting pictures of the

team up. Owen got closer to the two of them and pretended to look at all the school trophies so he could easily eavesdrop.

“I saw that guy you’re wrestling tonight. His name’s Torres, according to the kids I talked to on their team.” Josh’s father said. His father was a big burly guy, way bigger than Josh and even bigger than Owen. A complete beef ball covered in hair everywhere but the top of his head. “He’s good at the double leg. So you need to protect those popsicle stick legs of yours. Got it?” Josh just nodded his head, not looking his father in the eye. “Good. You don’t need an injury this year that’ll keep you out of CIF like last year. Don’t need another shoulder situation. You win this match tonight you’re closer to taking what should have been yours.” Owen tried to remain inconspicuous and looked away from the two of them. He tried to look like he was staring at the team photo in the case. Owen stood in the back of the photo in his singlet. He was thankful Coach Lee’s gigantic, balding head covered his stomach in the picture.

Josh looked over at the trophy case behind them. The lack of trophies from the last season taunted him. He placed his baseball glove sized hands onto Josh’s shoulders and pulled him real close. “You’re gonna win this damn thing like you always do.” Josh nodded his head intensely and his dad clapped his hands against his shoulders. The claps echoed throughout the gym lobby. He placed his hand behind his head and leaned in close to Josh’s space so their foreheads would touch. “I know you got this, son. I just know it.” Josh didn’t reciprocate any of his father’s emotions. He just kept on nodding. His father stepped back and pushed the doors open of the gym, that flew hard from his gentle push.

Owen went up to Josh after his father left. He could see big red marks from his father’s hands on his shoulders. “He’s a little intense, huh?” Owen said, taking a bite of his hot dog.

“Fuck off.” Josh knocked the hotdog out of Owen’s hand and it flipped through the air on the way down to the floor. Condiments went splat all over the place. Josh walked past him toward the gym and stomped on the hot dog.

“Hope you lose tonight, asshole!” Owen said quietly to himself. The hot dog was ruined. He couldn’t tell if he should have been more concerned about Josh’s well being or if he should go back in line and get another. It didn’t take too long for him to come to a conclusion. The line was short.

Owen sat among the crowd in the bleachers to watch the rest of the night's wrestling matches. Lakeview was doing well most of the night until the varsity team matches started. Every match was a close call, and the wins and losses were even across the board. Coach Lee was trying to hide his frustrations as everyone in the gym watched him pace and curse under his breath.

Owen kept his focus on Josh. He watched the way he grimaced at his next opponent, trying to be as intimidating as he could be. Owen had wondered if he had any energy for this match. He didn't see him eat anything after his weight in. Owen surely had, as he had replaced his hot dog with a brand new one, with more toppings than the one from before.

Owen shifted his focus over to Torres. He was handsome and in incredible shape. His brown skin glowed with how well he took care of it. Anyone looking at him couldn't tell he was a wrestler, especially with how soft and well groomed he looked. There wasn't the same amount of abuse to his body. Owen was envious of this amount of care that he took and wondered if Josh had noticed these things like he had.

Torres sat on the ground stretching out his legs, making sure he was limber for his match. There was a calmness to his warm-ups. *Does he even care about winning this match?* Owen thought to himself.

Torre's coach went up to him as he stretched and gave some sort of pep talk. There was a warmth to his approach to the other teammates Owen had noticed after every match, win or lose. Something that was missing from any of Coach Lee's interactions. The two laughed about something, a joke that was only told between the two of them and only for the two of them to hear. There was a loving pat on his shoulder once they were done.

Coach Lee must have been watching him and went over to Josh as well. Lee was directly into Josh's ear as he bounced around on his heels to keep his blood flowing. Coach Lee whispered things into his ear that no one else could hear. There was no warm pep talk or a joke between the two. Owen knew it couldn't be anything good because Josh's scowl grew more fierce as he watched Torres from across the mat. At that moment, the match before them had ended. It was another loss for Lakeview. Which meant Josh had to win his match to even up the score. The referee had called for Josh and Torres to start the next match. Lee was still in Josh's ear and slapped his back hard

to amp him up as their conversation ended.

The crowd started chanting for Lakeview, including the frosh/soph and junior varsity team, as the two walked into the ring. Owen didn't join the chant, but kept his eyes on Josh. The two boys' eyes met as Josh looked out into the crowd. He still had an angry scowl on his face, but Owen noticed a hint of anxiety, a feeling he was too familiar with. *Are you gonna choke Andrews?* Owen thought to himself.

The two met in the middle of the ring and the referee asked for the two to shake hands. Torres put his hand out first with his calm, concentrated expression while Josh was still sporting his scowl. With a quick hand shake the referee blew the whistle and the match had started. Members of the team sitting in the crowd started chanting, "Andrews, Andrews, Andrews!" The rest of the crowd joined in and the chants grew loud in the building. People started stomping their feet, causing the plastic bleachers to shake and rattle in rhythm. Members of Belmont's crowd had their own comeback chant for Torres. Owen tried not to join, but felt awkward that he hadn't joined and clapped his hands instead. The sound of Josh vomiting was still ringing in his head.

The two wrestlers circled around each other, waiting patiently for the other to make a move so they could counter it. Torres had a huge smile on his face from the amount of noise the crowd was making and locked arms up with Josh to make the first move. They circled around each other, trying to go for the first move. Torres tried to do a head and arm takedown, but Josh expertly blocked it before he could get a solid grasp on him.

Josh wrapped his arms around him and went for a German suplex. Torres jammed his thumbs in between Josh's interlocked hands to break the hold, causing the two to be back in a neutral position. Owen remembered what Coach Lee said and tried to learn from Josh's mistake, but couldn't pinpoint what he did wrong. Torres was just as skilled as Josh. Maybe more so.

The crowd cheered again for the boys and Josh's father got up from the bleachers to get closer to where Josh was wrestling. "Come on, Josh!" He yelled, almost louder than the rest of the audience. "Don't let this kid embarrass you! You're better than him!" Josh looked over at his dad for a few seconds as Torres went in for a double leg takedown. He quickly bucked his legs out to stop himself from going down. Owen wanted to get up and tell Josh's dad to shut the fuck up. The moment played out in his head and everything went wr-

-ong. He kept his mouth shut and just focused back on the match as the back and forth continued in the ring.

The first round came to a close, and the two were pretty even. Both boys went back to their sides in that small moment of brevity between rounds. Coach Lee looked like he was talking at Josh more than he talked to him. Belmont's coach talked with Torres about possible next moves and pointed to a clipboard to show him what he could do in the next round.

The two headed back into the ring at the ref's command. They started in a neutral position since the round ended with the both of them standing. The two waited for the ref to blow his whistle as the crowd erupted again. They were louder than the first round. Both of their last names echoed throughout the high ceilings of the gym. It reminded Owen of the hive mind, except it was no longer telepathic conversations, just even rhythmic chants. He couldn't tell which was more frightening. Josh looked out into the crowd and his gaze met with Owen's again. Owen wanted to wave at him or give him a sort of reassurance, but they just awkwardly stared at each other. Josh's scowl wasn't there anymore. His expression was replaced with an anxiety that Owen was too familiar with. *Why the fuck is everyone cheering so loudly?* Owen thought to himself as he stared at Josh. *It's just another fucking meet, not even finals or CIF. It's not as important as everyone is making it out to be. Don't be scared.* Owen hoped somehow that telepathy was real, and that Josh could hear everything he was saying. He knew he couldn't, but hoped he could feel it.

The whistle blew, and the second round started. Josh dialed back into the match and went for a blast double leg takedown. It was reckless, and Torres blocked it, but Josh kept the pressure up. He drove his shoulder up into Torres' waist and lifted him up into the air over his head. Josh was about to bring him down, but a loud snapping noise rang throughout the gym. Everyone in the crowd stopped cheering as Josh lost his balance and his right ankle twisted as the weight of Torres became too much for his leg. Torres slipped from his grasp and before he could move, he fell flat on his head while looking forward, possibly snapping his neck. His body went limp and fell onto the mat.

Everyone collectively went silent. Josh screamed, "Mother fucker!" His right Asic dangled as he lifted his leg. He kept on repeating the word fuck as tears streamed down his face. Coach Lee and his father rushed towards him. "Get the fuck away from me!" He shouted at the two of them like a wounded predator. They both backed off with their eyes focused on Josh's ankle.

Belmont's coach rushed to check on Torres. There was a worried look on his face as he placed two fingers on his neck to make sure he was still alive. A heavy sigh of relief came from his mouth as he found his pulse and tears streamed down his face.

Owen watched Josh scream in agony. That moment of him almost telling Coach Lee what he saw kept running through his head. The moment being different where he would actually tell him something was wrong. *Would Coach Lee even take it seriously? Would he even care?* Owen thought to himself. He thought about why he was still on the team. Why was there so much pressure on them all if there weren't any real stakes? Other than the competition of high school sports.

The crowd was still quiet as they all watched the downed wrestlers, but Owen knew they were all thinking the same thing, loudly. Belmont's coach was still by Torres' side. The rest of his team huddled around Torres, almost to shield him from the audience.

Coach Lee was on his phone, calling for an ambulance. He wasn't at Josh's side. He couldn't even bear to look at him. His father stayed at a distance after being shouted at, almost as if he was ashamed of his son's failure. The rest of the team stayed in their chairs, focused on how the night was ruined, and their biggest chance at a great season was gone. They all kept their distance, but they still watched with morbid curiosity. Josh kept his eyes closed tight as he screamed in pain.

Owen got up from the bleachers, sick of not doing anything at all. He walked down the steel steps and headed down to the mat. The rubber sunk again with each of his steps. He got one knee next to Josh and placed his hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and looked at Owen with a scowl.

"Don't focus on all of them. Help is on the way." Owen said quietly, so only the two of them could hear. Josh opened his eyes, his breath still heavy from the pain. "You did your best, and that's all that matters." He rubbed Josh's shoulder. Josh started crying again as his Asic shoe still dangled.

Why I Didn't Die

By Kirk Wilson

Some call it mojo.
Others call it juju.
Maybe it's fate and that I'm not supposed to die.
God knows I've tried.
Never on purpose,
At least, I don't think so,
Even when we were arguing over faulty directions while speeding
through Mexico
Just outside of Monterey
And were kidnapped by the police as they drove us around to different
ATMs,
They are demanding our PINs.
They took all our cash and then drove us to an abandoned jail, forcing
me to stand next to an oil drum full of foul, black water - the same
setup to see if there is a leak in your tire.
"This is it." I thought to myself. This is how you die.
I see my head shoved down violently into the water,
Like in the movies with bubbles and screams and eyes wide open
The eye of the camera catches every moment of the intense struggle.
You were taken inside the jail - too far away for me to hear or see
what transpired.
The thought that they wouldn't kill us because we were gringos had
long since faded.

Or when I shot up some PCP, thinking it was coke and spent the rest
of the night up in a tree.
Or hitchhiking and getting picked up by psycho-killers - like the guy
in Denver who took me to an abandoned home to the basement and
said he'd be right back. Looking for cash, I find five wallets in a drawer -
all with different IDs and run from the house only to get arrested
by the Denver PD for hitchhiking. That was nearly sixty years ago,
and I still wonder if there's a warrant for my arrest for not showing up
in court.

I'm still around.
Not too good to die.
Too old and tired to care about the past.

That no longer haunts me or my memories

I stopped asking why.

Beloved Eleanor

By Samuel Pflugrath

(Manuscript found among the personal effects of one "Edwin Albin Poer"—missing since 1849)

I still was but a boy when first I met my only love:
An angel, bright and brilliant, cast from heaven high above;
Like Ganymede, she claimed me—in her manor by the shore,
I'd spend each waking moment making love to Eleanor.

Her hair, like heathen idols, shimmered with a golden sheen—
Her countenance shone white, just like the shadow puppet's screen;
I'd kneel before her nightly, on her cold and stony floor,
To see myself reflected in the eyes of Eleanor.

But she fell ill one autumn, and with winter's frosts did pass—
I placed her in a casket, made from clearest crystal glass;
Among her kin I laid her, in their vault forever more,
And every night, I'd sleep beside my lover Eleanor.

Alas! came men of finance who would ne'er allow me grieve—
Who claimed I held no title to her house, and so must leave!
They cast me o'er the threshold of the one I'll e'er adore—
I'd never cried before that night they stole my Eleanor.

In sorrow thus I'd wander through the cities late each night,
My shadow black and solid 'neath the streetlamps' sickly light;
And yet, one thought possessed me—drove me on, as none before:
Perhaps she's somewhere out there, still: Immortal Eleanor.

So many times, I've thought, at last! that I'd recaptured her,
But common filth is all that such deceivers ever were;
They've always begged my mercy, yet I've strangled every whore
Who sought to desecrate my memory of Eleanor.

Of course, the laws of men do not look kindly on my plight,
And so into the wilderness they've forced me to take flight:
Police still now pursue me, while the gallows stand in store,
Because I dared commit the crime of loving Eleanor.

No matter where I go on earth, their hateful gaze I feel—
They claim that I'm a madman, in their hypocritic zeal;
Though rational as they are, all my answers they ignore,
For they must envy me the love of Goddess Eleanor.

I'll ne'er be kept away from she for whom I'll ever yearn,
So to that vault of stone where still she sleeps, I'll soon return:
I'll seal myself within it; and, behind that walled-in door,
At last I'll spend eternity beside my Eleanor.

Beloved Eleanor! My only Eleanor!
And never shall there ever be another Eleanor.

The Boy

By Max Mixon

Everyone was dead
Except a boy in the world
Everywhere he was everyone

Piano Lessons

By Vickie Wippel

Fingers tickle keys. Fingers tickle me. A piano teacher, bearded and blood shot. A piano bench, a shopworn family heirloom. Hardly big enough for two. Every Good Boy Does Fine. *Every good girl stays quiet.* Fingers move their way up scrawny legs, playing scales to an inner thigh. Mother, thumbing through *Newsweek*, hums along to stilted music coming from down the hall.

He doles out a stick of Doublemint gum like a communion wafer at the end of 45 minutes—sins are forgiven and sheet music pulled to prepare for the following week.

*Oh, when the saints go marchin' in,
Oh, when the saints go marchin' in!*

Mother taps her toes.

The End.



by Cooper Wilhelm



by Penny Lott



