

THE OUTLET

BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED

Dedicated to Jim Ralston



*ARTS AND LETTERS
FOURTEENTH EDITION, 2023*

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JUDGES' BIOGRAPHIES

Selection of Arts and Letters

Gary Bergel and **Sandra Baker** juried and selected the visual art works published in this 14th edition of *The Outlet: Bloom Where You Are Planted -- Arts and Letters*.

Sandra Baker, Dr. Katherine Cox, Dr. Billie Unger, Joe McGee, Ann Gentile, and **Jim Ralston** juried and selected the literary pieces published in this 14th edition of *The Outlet: Bloom Where You Are Planted -- Arts and Letters*.

Gary Bergel, a multidisciplinary exhibiting artist, is a member of the Blue Ridge Community and Technical College adjunct faculty and of the Berkeley and Jefferson County Arts Councils and co-op galleries. Gary was recently awarded the 2nd Place Juror's Award in Photography at the Washington County Museum of Fine Art Cumberland Photography competition.

Sandra Baker, Digital Media Instructor, is an active member of the Cultural Events Committee and has written fiction herself. Her passion for expression extends to photography and digital art, and she created the cover for the 10th edition of *The Outlet*.

Dr. Katherine Cox, Associate Dean of Humanities and Professor of English, has published ten poems in *The Outlet* in the past. She has written an unpublished novel in which every chapter opened with a poem.

Dr. Billie Unger, Tenured Professor and Liberal Arts Program Coordinator, was instrumental in the creation of the original *Outlet Literary Magazine* in 2009 and has been a regular contributor of photos and poems over the years.

Joe McGee, Writing Coordinator, teaches Creative Writing, English Composition, and Technical Writing. He has been teaching in higher education for over a decade, at both community colleges and at the university level. He has a Master of Arts in Writing from Rowan University and an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Joe is a working and published author, with over twenty books published or forthcoming.

Ann Gentile, Business Administration Program Coordinator, lectures in Business, English, and Education courses. She taught Creative Writing at Washington High School and Spring Mills High School for eight years. She is an avid photographer and gardener and has combined the two passions over the years to produce thousands of photographs.

Jim Ralston, Assistant Professor of English and published poet and playwright, teaches creative writing at Blue Ridge CTC. Author of the collection *Lyrics for a Low Noon*, he is working on his third full book of poetry.

ART WINNERS

First Place

Courage

by Hoi Kee Kwok

Pg. 51

Second Place

The Lady

by Jacob Cline

Pg. 39

Third Place

Abstract of Fish

by Emma Cote

Pg. 23

HONORABLE MENTIONS IN ART

New Jersey American

by Omar Williams

Pg. 59

Virginia

Antonia Capriotti

Pg. 32

Rum Punch

George Charlebois

Pg. 55

LITERATURE WINNERS

First Place

Abandoned Garden

Emma Cote

Pg. 60

Second Place

I Want to Become Her

By Heather Rausch

Pg. 12

Third Place

I Killed a Spider

By Julia Carter

Pg. 58

HONORABLE MENTIONS IN LITERATURE

\$7.99

By Heather Rausch

Pg. 8

Who's Your Nerdy

by Chris Nelling

Pg. 24

You

By Madison Harvey

Pg. 54

JAMES RALSTON'S POEMS

How You Strut in Your Spring Dress

Pg. 50

Little Steps

Pg. 52



POET

“Get it!” so I run against the crowd,
the other side, a team that wants to win.
I lean into my strength and make us proud,
from when the ball first moves to when the din
of victory and cheering and the play
subside into a memory of my past.
The team I knew, the gathering of they
who wanted every move to be as fast
as wind, a flash of speed as bold as day,
to hold and keep the ball, command the field—
that team is now a gathering of minds
who work together on the careful yield
and marrow of the works we parse, good finds
of words to wrap the soul and thickly shield
against a loss, against a hurt that healed.

The dedication of the fourteenth edition of “The Outlet” to James Ralston is a fitting tribute. The beloved poet and playwright retires from the Blue Ridge Community and Technical College in May 2023. The magazine begins with this sonnet to him and pictures of him, first in a younger time and second in his more recent years of teaching students literature. Professor Ralston’s syllabus holds the goal: “The students will become better readers, in part, by learning to see more clearly the personal relevance literature that has stood the test of time has for their own lives.” He met that goal again and again in his years as a professor here, and the college is so grateful to him for that. The first literature is Dr. Billie Unger’s tribute to Professor Ralston, playwright and director, published author, and friend. His poetry in major literary magazines and books have moved a wide audience, and we are proud to showcase but two of his poems in this edition and hope that you will follow his blog (jamesralston.com) and read his work on your own. Huge thank you to Jim!

MANY MENTIONS

by Dr. Billie A. Unger

Jim Ralston, the professor, has impacted
generations of students
in ways not easily measured
by quizzes or final exams,
assessment reports or program reviews.

Jim Ralston, the playwright/actor, has entertained
countless theater audiences
with wit and wisdom on topics as diverse
as the game of baseball, the complexities of love,
and the hilarity and tragedy of growing old.

Jim Ralston, the director, has inspired
dozens of students, faculty, community members
to step outside their comfort zones
and (back) onto (or behind) the stage despite
hectic lives and differing abilities (some obvious-others not).

Jim Ralston, the published author, has proffered (didn't dare say shared)
insights about love, loss, life...and grammar
in books and blogs, in poetry and prose
in poignant pieces in *The Sun Magazine*,
and catchy columns in *The Charleston Gazette*.

Jim Ralston, my friend, has supported
me through the loss of my parents, detours at work,
and the challenge of revisiting Rhonda.
We've solved all the world's problems (but not our own)
in our Stephen Street, Headquarters, and TC "fireside chats."

Jim Ralston, the human, has touched
many lives through his teaching, acting, writing,
sharing, caring, blogging, being.
His gifts – like his legacy –are immeasurable.

Jim Ralston
is a man who deserves
MANY mentions.

With love (red light, I know)
Billie

Congratulations on a well-deserved retirement!



PURPLE REIGN

by Billie Unger

\$7.99

by Heather Rausch

Seven dollars and ninety-nine cents,
that is how much my job was worth.
I'd sacrificed ten years of my life
to that company I once cared for.
But over stale foods, worth under eight dollars,
they decided to fire me.
My livelihood was ruined for a time,
my efforts were just worth seven ninety-nine.

It has now been years since it happened,
the wounds have faded peacefully.
I can look back on what transpired and laugh.
After all, I was fired over what would be trash.
Though as I chuckle over misfortunes gone by,
my mind wanders to the future of that place.
The next workers who step out of line,
will their job be worth just seven ninety-nine?



AFTER THE REVIVAL FEST

by Holley Ralston



BABY WITH A PANDA HAT

by Julia Carter



INNOCENCE

by Challice LaRose

I WANT TO BECOME HER

by Heather Rausch

I want to leave this worthless body.
While others say it is a blessing,
it has only ever felt like a curse.
I stare in a mirror and feel nothing but malaise.
When I see my love, however, envy consumes me.
Her body is beauty incarnate.
Her hair is the perfect shade of red;
it is like a warm fire in late autumn.
Her smile carries with it such joy and charm,
that I am in envy each time she grins.
The shape of her body isn't appealing to some,
but it is everything I wish I was and more.
My love knows of my jealousy and accepts it.
While I will never be her exactly,
she understands me and gives me comfort.
With her help, instead of becoming her,
I may one day become me.



NATURAL BEAUTY

by Katelyn Kaulfuss

My mind is never quiet by Ell Miller

My mind is never quiet.

I feel like when the world is silent is when my thoughts are the loudest,
Screaming to be heard,

And overanalyzed.

These thoughts drive my anxiety like a monkey behind the wheel of a car,
And I,
In the backseat,

Frozen.

Because what else am I to do when the silence is so, so

Deafening,

That all I can do is think

And think

And think?

I can do nothing.

I sit, my thoughts racing around a never ending track,
Unsure of where to go,
But always head forward.

I ride helplessly towards a light that seems to jump backwards,
Just as I am about to *touch it*.
Just as I am about to be engulfed in its warm embrace.

But that has yet to happen and instead I feel as if

I

Am

Drowning.

The silence is **screaming**,

And my mind is never quiet.



FUZZY KIT

by Ann Gentile

Portend

Raegan clutched desperately for her hot cocoa cup, grieving the loss of what was left of her egg breakfast sandwich as it went flying to the floor. Jamie laughed in wild relief, her red hair swinging as she glanced over her shoulder at the scene of the latest accident narrowly avoided on this godawful passage of Interstate 81 that leads into West Virginia. Jamie and Raegan often commuted together. They worked in the same department at the largest community college in West Virginia, nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. They are heading into Berkeley County, where, ironically, the tourism slogan was Live Your Adventure. They do just that every day on this commute. They both lived just across the state line in Virginia, making them good candidates for commuting buddies, but they're fast friends regardless, sharing the same irrepressible sense of humor.

"Look, Jamie, I know I said I wanted my breakfast to go today, but I didn't mean to go flying!" Raegan said.

"Well, I figured you'd rather that than the Final Destination ending that logger had planned for us!" Jamie exclaimed just before they both collapsed into relieved giggles.



Egg McEgg

Minutes later, Jamie smoothly slid her silver Volkswagen SUV into a slot in Lot C. She and Raegan could barely make out the Headquarters building through the heavy fog that so often comes down from this mountain section, it has earned a moniker: The Blue Mist. As they made their way to the building in their smart business suits, Jamie in black, Raegan in grey, the colors they usually favored, a darkly dappled pair, little did they know, the stage was set. The close call on the highway would be the least of the adventures Jamie's SUV would see that day and would quickly be forgotten.

It was Friday the 13th. They never noticed the crooked sign sinking into the ground as they walked toward the building, talking excitedly about their day to come as they disappeared into the mist.



The Blue Mist

Revelation

Raegan was having lunch with the two Jans of the office. She enjoyed this Friday afternoon ritual immensely. The two were a lot more alike than just in name. Both were elegant and resourceful, with incredibly stylish hair, each running one of the business-oriented degree programs at the college, and both instantly likable. They often provided Raegan with insightful retrospectives into their given fields. This afternoon, Jan Monet was sharing pictures of her tasteful bathroom remodel when they suddenly heard an ominous rumbling. It escalated quickly, sounding like an oncoming freight train, and ended with a loud BANG! The ground under their feet quaked twice before settling. Being on the second floor, this was extra unnerving. They ran to the front-facing window just in time to see the white fleet van Raegan and Jamie had pulled in beside that morning, disappear into the now gaping hole in Lot C.

Without a word, the decisive three exited en masse, hitting the back stairs on their right as they made their way out of the PSUT Office Suite. Reagan noticed Jan Armstrong grabbing her Mary Kay bag on the way out. As a smart-minded businesswoman, she would never leave good product behind. That was what Raegan assumed anyway, though she caught a glimpse of a black and white speckled kitten peeking out of the top of the bag, but there was no time to ask questions.



Sophisticat

Sinkhole

Jamie and Sage, having been downstairs together in Room 1101, were already on the scene. Jamie was bent double with what Reagan assumed was sorrow for her submerged SUV. As she ran to comfort her crying friend, Jamie straightened again, and Reagan saw she was crying alright, but she was laughing so hard she was also gasping, with tears streaming down her face. Reagan grabbed her in a tight hug anyway as Jamie tried to gasp out, “It ate my car!”

Reagan couldn’t begin to count the number of times she’d heard Jamie say, “It’s either laugh or cry!” as they’d worked on tough projects over the years, and it appears Jamie had chosen both for the present moment. Jamie managed to get out another line beyond her wheezing laughter, “I have been saying how much I want a new car!” This threw Reagan into a fit of laughter as well, and they leaned against each other in the parking lot laughing like hyenas, all of Jamie’s freshly graded college composition essays and Reagan’s sociology analysis papers having just received an impromptu burial in front of them. The ludicrousness of the situation could not be born.

Sage finally finished speaking with campus security and approached, saying, “Come on, you two, I declare this day officially over. I’ll drive you home.”



Sinkhole

————— See How The Adventure Ends! —————

To Read:



To Listen:



COLD WARRIOR

by Weston Kaelin

Cold Warrior
Falls to ground
Bites the snow
Returns to fury
Disparate from others
Denial of self
Shaven Face
Frostbitten features
Pride in fortitude
Persona of fear
Façade of resilience
Against the cold
Refusal of alliance
War notwithstanding
Berserker of the Blizzard
Wielding their fear.



COLD WARRIOR

by Weston Kaelin

ALWAYS MANIA

by Jeny Clark

There are times of rage,
times of endless giggles, but
Always mania.



ABSTRACT OF FISH

by Emma Cote

WHO'S YOUR NERDY?
(A LIL' HOUSE ON THE CEMETERY YARN)

by Chris Nelling

“Jimmy’s always been pretty cool,” Colton said, “but Joffee...”

“What’s wrong with Joffee?” Justin scrunched his eyebrows together. “Well, besides the fact that he reported me to the guidance counselor for being... What was it? Peculiar, I think.”

Claude startled. “You think Joffee reported ...?”

Colton laughed abruptly, interrupting Claude. “Let’s just say Joffee didn’t always fit in.”

“Yeah, too nerdy,” Andre added quickly.

Claude placed the flat of his hand beside his mouth, leaned close to Justin, and lowered his voice. “And coming from Andre, that’s really saying something.”

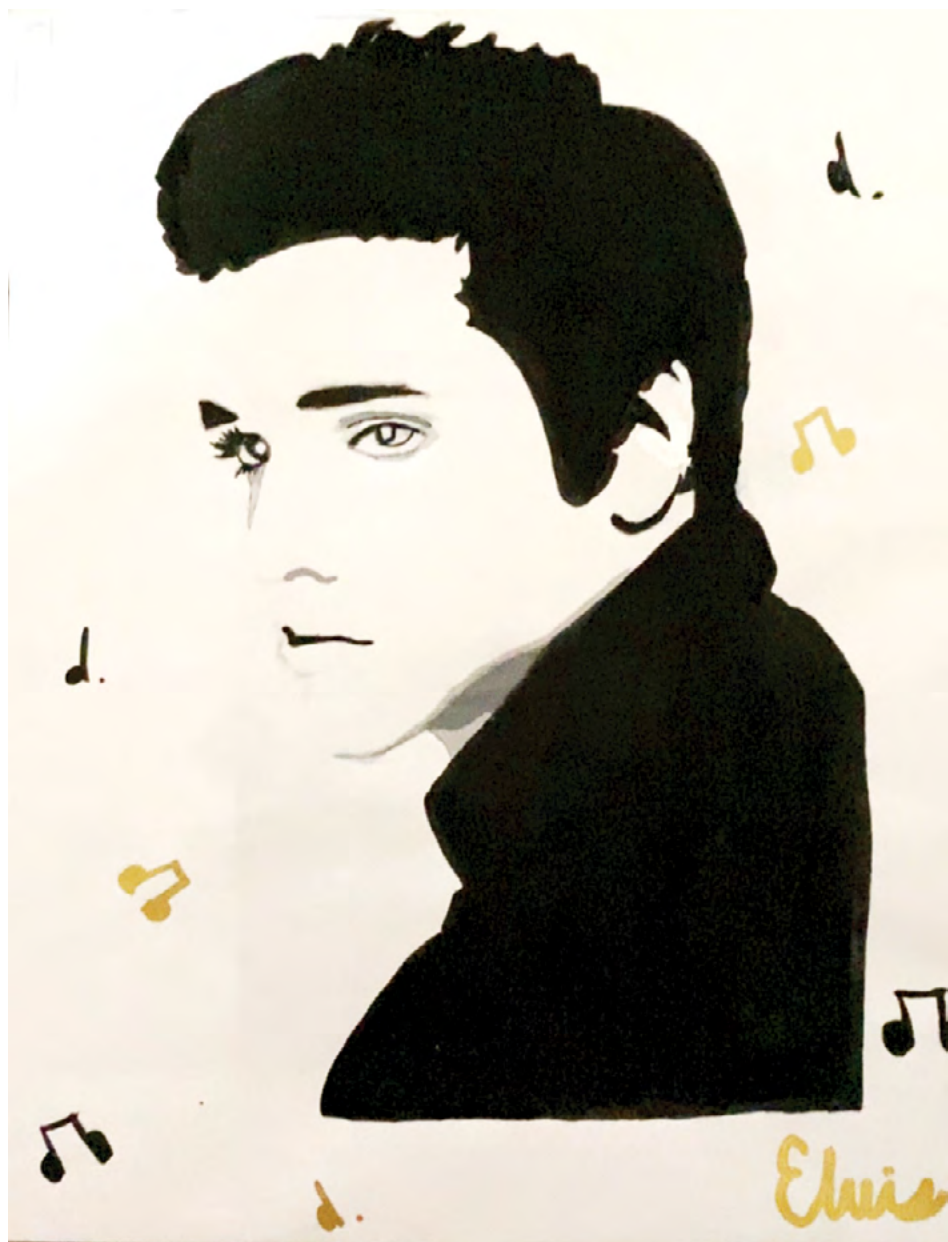
Justin rubbed his chin. “You’re right, he is kinda nerdy. I bet he’s the type of guy who, when dreaming about science projects, says things like ‘Why would they use THAT Type II restriction endonuclease? It doesn’t even have a cut site in the tetracycline selection gene.’”

The others took a step back, wide-eyed.

“What?” Justin spread his arms, palms up. “It’s a very serious matter when your transformed cells grow on BOTH ampicillin AND tetracycline...I mean, how would you tell them apart?”

Jimmy shook his head. “I don’t think you showed them how nerdy JOFFEE is there.”

“Really?” Justin crossed his arms. “I beg to differ. In fact, I’m willing to bet that most people use the less technical term ‘restriction enzyme’ when they dream about cross-species plasmid recombination!”



ELVIS PRESLEY

by Katelyn Miller



SOLACE

by Megan Anderson



EMERALD DAWN (DESTIN, FL)

by Heather Huggett

AMONGST THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS

by Lilah Namolik

Bright pink flowers in the morning sun
Will be gone when the cherries come
Chasing away winter's gloom
Is the most beautiful family heirloom
Petals falling one by one
My favorite sign that spring has begun

EROS

by Conner Romick

Love's only true flaw
is alas its greatest force:
It eludes purpose.



FLOWER IN EARLY SPRING

by Nicole Palmer

BARGAIN

by Jennifer Sunryder

I'd give up the world
and all my possessions
to hold you in my arms
and be your obsession

I'd cast away my pride
and all my doubt
to be by your side
in any amount

I'd give up all art
for that beautiful face
because it kick starts my heart
and makes my mind race

I'd give up the sun
and the moonlight too
if I could be the one
to be loved by you



AVON DAYBREAK

by Kelly Shurnitski



VIRGINIA

by Antonia Capriotti



CALIFORNIA

by Antonia Capriotti

A MUSIC HISTORY CLASS

by Catherine Kusmitch

Class begins at 2:15
later than it should be.
The teacher strikes the opening chords
of an opera by Rossini.

The class speaks out
their observations.
Dominic and his chums are gone
leaving empty stations.

Time to act out operas –
I can't remember the plot!
Joanna alone steps forth bravely.
The class's attention is caught.

"A Life for the Tsar" is duly laid out
"Les Huguenots" comes by.
John does such a fabulous job
from laughing we start to cry.

The hour allotted is up
sooner than it seemed before.
I'm glad to be done for the week,
on Monday be back for more.



DAWN BREAKING
by Catherine Kusmitch



Always Bee Yourself

BEE YOURSELF

by Dianne Rose



SUNFLOWER

by Megan Stoner

UPROOTED GARDENS

by Emma Cote

Please do not make me beg, my love,
for you know I would, if you asked.

Please do not make me let go of the speckled rocks
you once pressed into my palms,
or the kisses you once gave me in the sand that tasted of watermelon,
and salt.

I would yank up every weed in the garden of our affair,
hands covered in dirt as I search your face for approval,
for affirmation that I've uprooted what was making us sick.

Please do not ask me to say goodbye,
for I do not want to let go of your hand.

I would tear this entire estate up, if you asked,
just please do not ask this of me.

Anything else, my dear,
anything else.

For you know I would, if you asked.



THE LADY

by Jacob Cline

THE PASSION FOR MUSIC

by Jacob Cline

My story isn't simplistic as it may seem. Sometimes do you ever wonder what your calling would be in life? As our lives have changed into adulthood and we started having our own wishes and values, sometimes I would sit at my desk, put headphones on, crank up the music, and sing. Just sing. It didn't matter where I was. It didn't matter if it was in public or at home. That's how much music matters to me.

I have been doing theatre work for the past 5-6 years, and I've been noticing a major change in me along the way. I noticed that, at first, I started getting recognized more in musicals than normal plays. That seemed off to me at first, but I realized that every audition, my song pertained to religion. Whether it's a hymnal from the Church or those cool songs on the radio on SiriusXM, I figured it's best to share those songs with the casting director.

If I can recall, I was doing an audition for my very first play in high school. I never really had any experience in theatre or music at all (a little during Middle School in the band as a trumpet player). A friend who was a senior (I was a freshman at the time) in High School band invited me to audition. At first, I was hesitant since, like I said, I had no experience in any work like that. After some thought and fun pressure, I said I would audition.

At the audition, we went through some warmups and fun activities with our dialect and script reading, but then came the real part: we had to sing a cappella (no instrumentals) any song we would like if it's appropriate. We had four or five kids at the auditions at a time, so it was only me and four others including the director, and I asked if I could go last (I hate going first). The kids did their own songs whenever it's classic like 80's or a Broadway musical song.

Then, it came up to me.

The director told me to relax and take it slow. I didn't have to sing the whole song, but I felt like my song was needed all the way. The first song that popped into my mind was MercyMe's "I Can Only Imagine." I spoke in a soft voice to myself "Lord, this is for you." That was it. I took a deep breath and sang.

After I finished, the entire auditorium was quiet. Not a single word was spoken for a minute. Then, everybody started to stand and clap like crazy. Even some of the kids waiting outside for their auditions opened the door and clapped. I was thrilled even to this day when all of those recognized my newly found gift.

One night, I prayed to God asking what my purpose in life would be. I knew He wanted me to do IT work in which I'm also passionate about (my room is a techie's dream), but I also found a new passion and calling He wanted me to serve in.

That was Singing.

Of course, it all made sense! The passion, the thrill, the countless hours of music listening, playing, and recording were just a blast!

I thought I can take it up a notch and sing for my church. My pastor is very strict when it comes to people stepping up the plate to do something in church. I would say he played favoritism in the church (by the way, this is against God's rules in the church). After I proposed to him that I get an opportunity to sing with the choir with the others (we have three ladies who sing in the church, and I thought I can be a wonderful addition) and write my own songs to perform at a men's breakfast we do once a month (I stayed up the night before until 2 AM writing the song), what he responded with turned my heart upside down:

"I'm sorry. We have enough people already in the praise team. Besides, you wouldn't be a great addition anyways."

That felt like a gunshot through my chest. I couldn't sleep that night, or the night after that, and the one after that. The pain felt so real like something you grew up with, enjoyed every single second of it, was torn from my body and soul like it was crazy.

Then the spiritual battles kicked in. I couldn't get a song written out. I was so angry and upset. What made it worse is that this is the church I've been attending for over 12 years, so I basically grew up at the place. Hearing this coming from my pastor that I knew for so long made it even more maddening, and especially because he said this to my face in front of everybody at the breakfast meeting.

I was done.

The songs were over. I said, I can't do this anymore. The pain. The struggle. Everything in between was hurtful to even imagine. I couldn't get any words to write, nothing. Sure, it may not seem like a big deal, but to me, it was everything. The church was my home spiritually. I didn't want to be ashamed of where I belonged to. I started to talk to God about moving forward and what to do. I felt stuck.

Then, God opened my eyes. What I couldn't see then, I see now. I realized that it was not my time yet to sing and He told me that my church wasn't my place to start. I also realized that he's keeping my gift, my voice, for something even greater, and now I started writing songs again.

As I start to close on my story, I want to become a Contemporary Christian Singer/Artist. Some good ones to listen to would be MercyMe, Jeremy Camp, Sidewalk Prophets, and Casting Crowns. While I major in Information Technology (IT), I can do both in my life, and I don't care what they tell me whenever I can't do it or I'm not good enough. I'm not doing it for them. I'm doing it for Lord Jesus.

As what Psalms 55:22 stated in the Bible:

"Give your burdens to the LORD,

And he will take care of you.

He will not permit the godly to slip and fall."

This is my passion for music.

SUB ROSA (UNDER THE ROSE)

by Julia Carter

I've heard that the truth of life
is hidden under the rose,
surrounded by endless green.

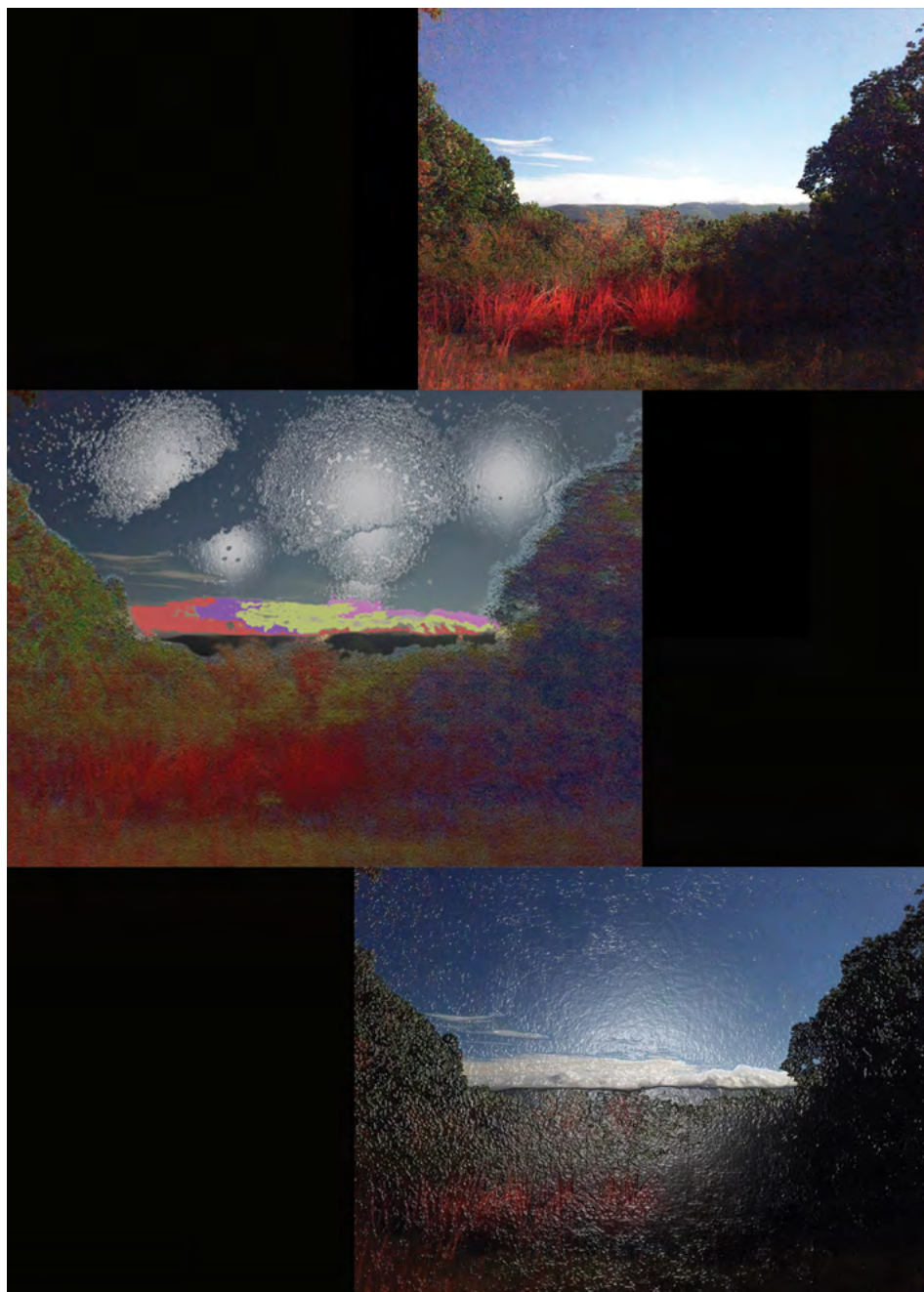
Under the rose,
where no one looks
and no one ever will?
There hides the light.

But what does that mean?
Will I ever find out?
Or will I have to live
like everybody else?
Always uncertain.
Always in doubt.



SUMMER STILLNESS – ALONG THE SHENANDOAH

by Gary Bergel



NEBOTRYPTIC

by James Bell

AUBADE

by Kathy Cox

Here, coffee steams a sea breeze
as, alone, my back bows, face sinks.
A hopeless ocean breaks over and over
fragments of shells:
communion wafers,
pink hibiscus flowers,
coiled baby desert snakes.
Those colors, warm as a girl's breast,
now frozen into sea-sculptures hard as teeth.

I am a woman watching her memories
flaunt in waves of broken love.
Curls of water against white sand
cling soft as silk or as your hair
which once ringed my hopeful fingers,
placed dark eddies in my frail hands.



SULLIVAN FALLS

by Susan Richman

UNDER THE BLUE MOON

by L. Marie Wood

Night falls, orange burning from the center to fry the moon
too soon
too soon.
All tuned is my scythe, my sickle quite nice
oiled and ready to cut
to prune.
But mind's eye can see
me
me
not ready.

As the moon turns blue, I wonder after eyes that no longer see
skin turned gray in the haze
after the flay.
Taygeta bites at Maia
dead upon the dead
strange cannibalism in the sky
so bright
too bright
blinding in its brutality
as particles, like so much flesh, fly.
Work to do
blades to lick clean of the blood they let
still I stand watching the flame turn to black
engulfing the sky in ash
blue moon turning skin blue black.

Scattered brain
scattered me.
Come ge' we?
Don't you agree?
It's scary..
Talons, bloody and dirty, all up in my tea.

Si.

Because I do.
I see and know and understand and confirm.
Sasquatch and prophets
Samson holding his hair in his tattooed hand
bloody scalp be damned.

And the cabal says, "Amen!"

I see.
They're in need.
Dying
living
the blade they seek.
Cold metal thrums in response
Hot with want
Orange me.

So, oui.

I come
para ti.

HOW YOU STRUT IN YOUR SPRING DRESS

by Jim Ralston

You wouldn't envy me my age,
of course, my future now reduced
to toothless, measured bites of life,
what's left for me of here on earth.

But neither do I envy you your youth,
each bad move you're doomed to make
within your nubile, rapid state of mind
where love so quickly turns to hate,

then back to love, but now confused,
and always less.... Oh yes, I envy you
the make-ups some, your intensity,
the frantic sex of young true love,

but not how long it takes to let it go –
to forgive it who and what it was.
And, yes again, in each new spring
I envy you your overflow,

how you strut in your spring dress
so straight, so proud, so strong,
the way spring once took hold
of me a good long time ago



COURAGE

by Hoi Kee Kwok

LITTLE STEPS

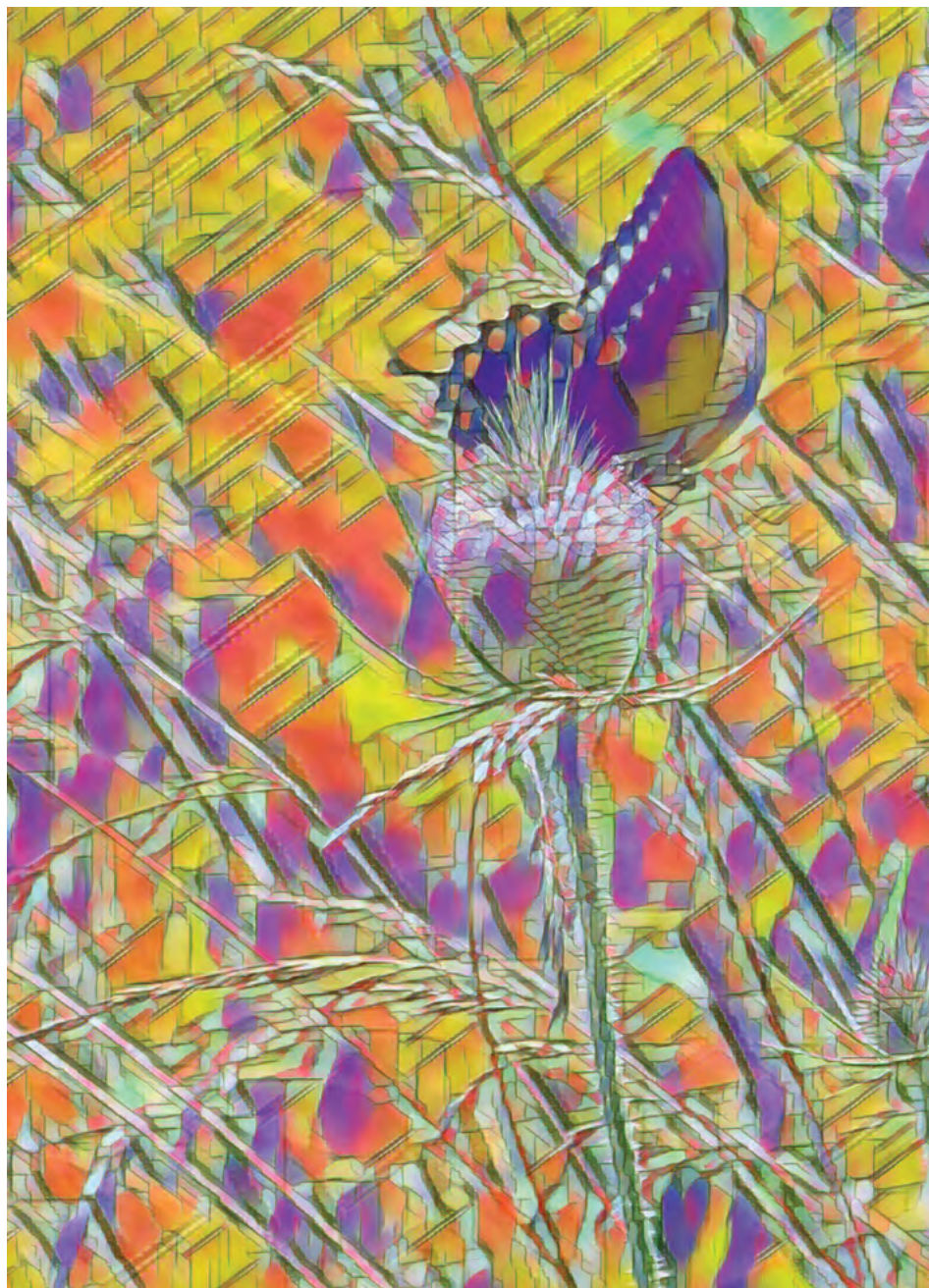
by Jim Ralston

Today I made up a God and prayed,
without even the faith of a grain
of mustard seed. And sadly,
in my childish brain I made

God as a Dad, a Father in heaven,
thanks to my Sunday School teachers
way back when, and, at home, a Mom
who made sure I attended.

So I prayed to Him up there above
as if He cares for each damned one of us,
all eight billion plus of us, especially when
the pain is such that we can't bear it alone.

And since this God that I made up
rates honesty above all else, I told Him
up front, I'm not a True Believer yet,
but I have nowhere else to go.



BUTTERFLY CHAI

by Sandra Baker

FIRST LOVE

by Madison Harvey

You could destroy my soul
Ruin my entire being
And I'll still be here for you
Because to me
That's love
And no matter what becomes of us
I will always love you
That sweet, first love
Stays in your veins
Forever

MYTHS OF YOU

Why is Icarus seen as a tragedy? He flew,
And that is much more
Than I can say
About you

YOU

Your ignorance is beautiful
How you think everything you say is right
Only your opinion matters
Because why would anyone else's
To be so sweet, kind, and well-deserving
But when someone gets to know you
They find out what's really hiding inside
A hideous being, with an unworthy soul

RUM PUNCH



ANTI NORM

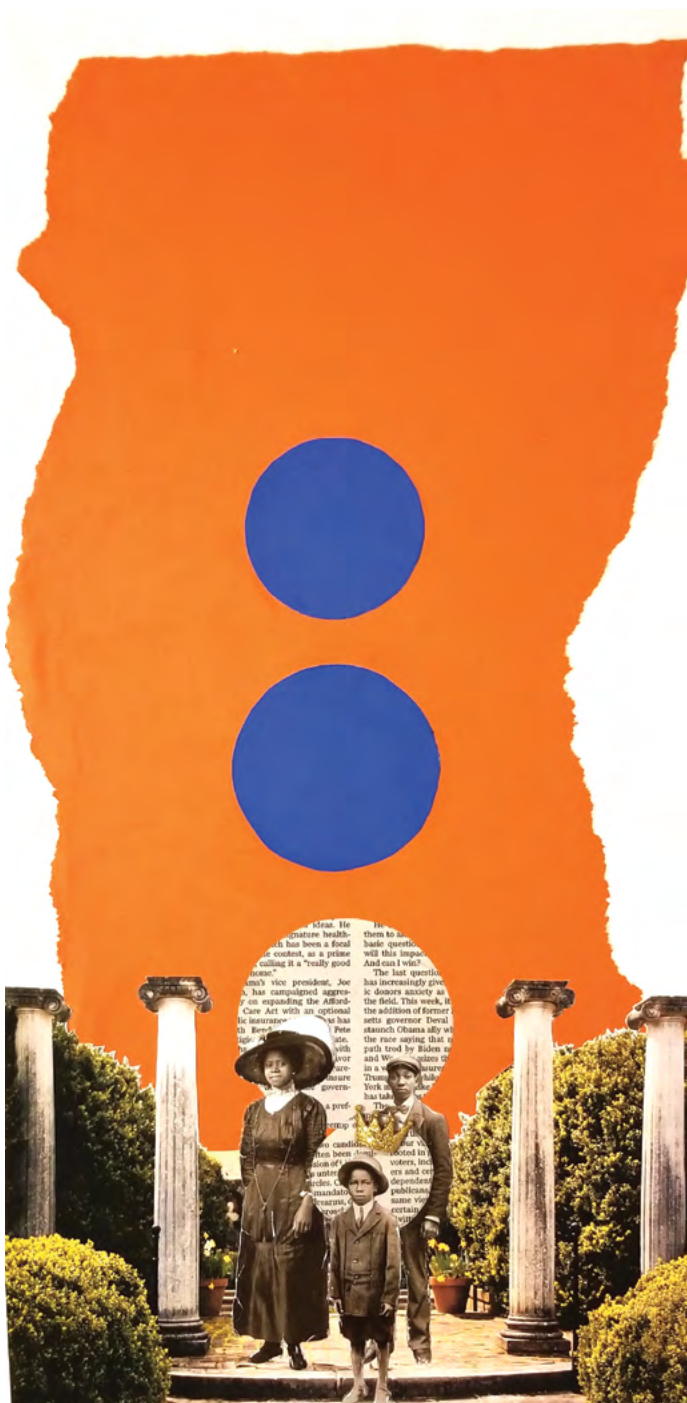
RUM PUNCH

by George Charlebois

(ATTEMPTED) POETIC RESPONSE TO AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

by Forest Platzer

Pride for our strengths must not exist,
if such belief is wielded by those possessors of our greatest flaws.
Were the people as titanic as our imagination?
Perhaps we could carry the Earth,
rather than bury it beside our predecessors.
All wrongs must be righted eventually,
who's qualified to say we could ever fix them?



BLU DOT SERIES PANEL 3

by Omar Williams

I KILLED A SPIDER

by Julia Carter

And she didn't do anything to me.
She simply sat there as if she were waiting,
and did not skitter when I picked up my shoe.
Without a second thought,
I ended her life with a smack.

Not that it was a big deal,
but it made me start to think.
First, that she seemed to look at me,
without any sign of fear.
Just like I wish I could when I am
faced with something threatening.
And second, that I should not be allowed
to kill something, just because
I am frightened.



NEW JERSEY AMERICAN

by Omar Williams

ABANDONED GARDEN

by Emma Cote

Do you ever just stop and stare at yourself a year ago,
or perhaps the one a year from now,
looking at all the flowers she's planted in her bones
and all the poetry she's written in her veins

doesn't she feel so dried up now, plants left unwatered,
pages left untouched

those books and that garden have always been abandoned, I think,
I only pretend there was once something alive,
an excuse to envy, almost selfishly,
every version of myself except the one that fills my skin

EPIDERMAL ANTHROPOLOGY

by Joe McGee

Scarred flesh, like cave drawings
carved on ancient walls, shout
forty-five years of trauma.
And some day,
when the cave is empty,
when these walls are all that remain,
crumbling inward at the ravages
of time and natural ruin –
when the inhabitant is gone –
The anthropologist will speculate
on what might have been back then;
what life he must have lived,
what tools he may have used,
what his early years were like...

A puckered and pale mark
tucked in the webbed valley
between two fingers,
the result of a smoldering cigarette
dangling between the hand of a distracted uncle.
The child, an Easter Bunny, hops,
hops, hops across the living room,
into the angry, red fire.

Long, pink, tadpole-shaped mark
on the right forearm,
where the splinter lay entombed;
buried deep –
now decayed. Only the cairn remains.
The boy wraps his arm around the beam
and jumps, arms hugged tight, as he slides
down.

The wrinkled patch of skin,
resembling the United States
(and part of Canada),
drawn tight across the top of the right hand
where the skin peeled off when pressed
between two cousins and a sheet of ice
on the downhill tumble from their sled.

Tiny circle, smaller
than a pencil eraser and nearly
invisible in the tangled leg hair
of the left shin.
The nail, propelled from the push lawnmower,
embeds itself in the teenager's shin.
His father pulls it out with pliers
and then chastises him
for leaving the mower running
when he hobbled to the door
for help.

Angry, red line
along the left ribs
where they held the young man down
and sliced through skin and muscle
with a scalpel. Without anesthesia.
Peeled it all back
and thrust the chest tube in
to drain the air from his chest
cavity and give the lung a chance
to heal and re-inflate.
The impact from the steering wheel
broke bones and organs.

Bright red lumps of tissue
stitched across his chest;
painful, nagging remnants
of the shattered windshield
that his seatbelt kept him from
propelling through.

A thin white line
across the pad
of the left ring finger,
where the knife pulled back
and the skin separated,
pushing out the yellow
fatty flesh before the stitches
closed it up.

Swollen, red bumps,
like leeches,
where they went into the man's right
shoulder and cut down bone,
repaired tendons,
fixed his rotator cuff.
Ten years of construction work
had torn through it like a hurricane.

There are more,
so many more lines
and pale pockets
of skin whose cause
is long forgotten to even the inhabitant
of this cave. Whose story
cannot be remembered.

The anthropologist
will study these lines,
these bumps,
these wrinkled masses
of pink, pale and angry
red flesh and speculate
on how close they came
to the truth
of how life carved itself
on his skin.

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