

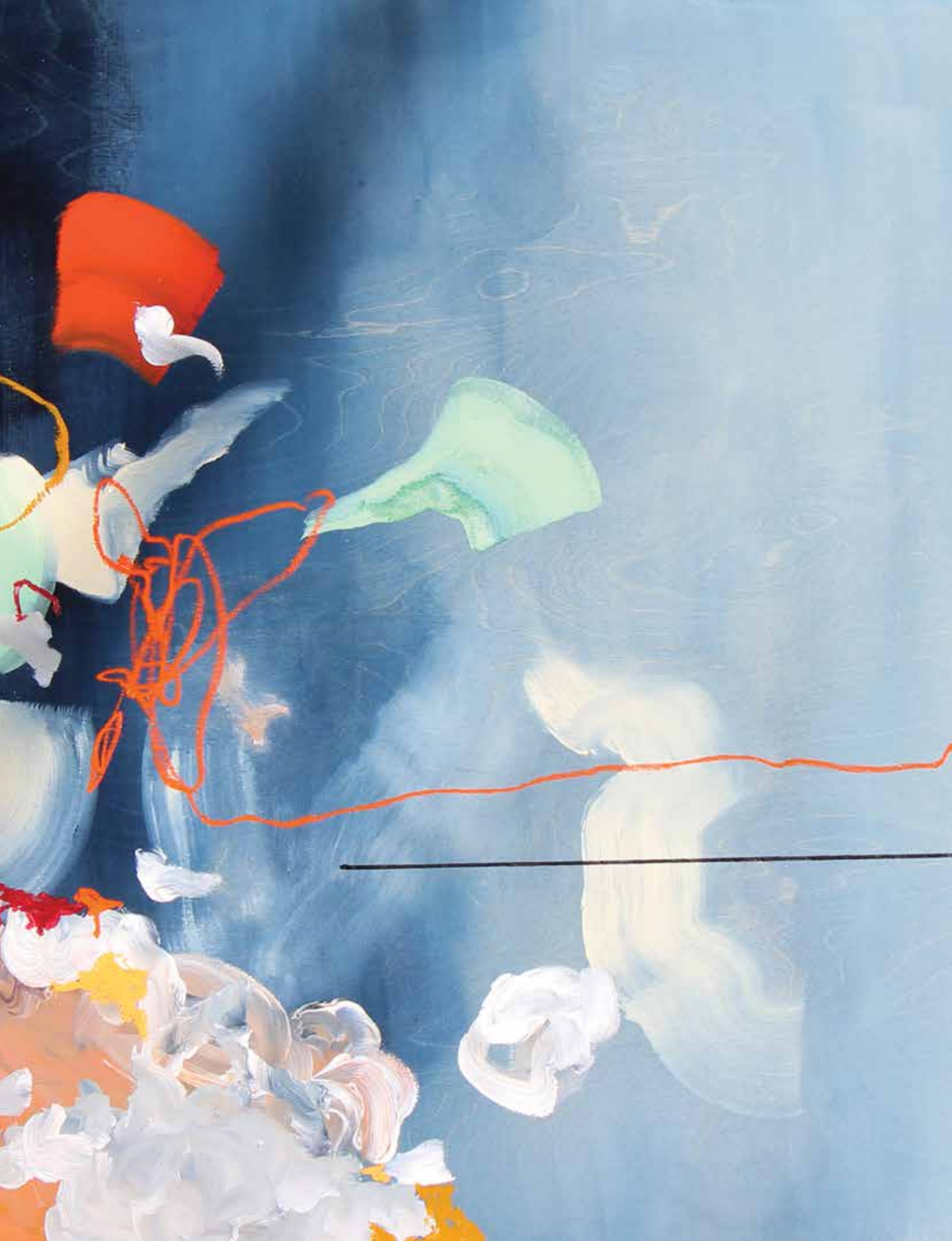
under the **gum tree**

TRUE STORIES. REAL ART. NO SHAME. SPRING 2021.









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## about

*Under the Gum Tree* is an independent literary arts micro-magazine. Because we strive for authentic connections through vulnerability, we exclusively publish creative nonfiction and visual art. We publish quarterly and accept submissions year-round. Digital back issues may be purchased at [underthegumtree.com](http://underthegumtree.com) and print back issues may be purchased at [magcloud.com](http://magcloud.com). Visit our website for complete submission guidelines.

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# dragonfly *spirit*

On a little pond down the road from my house, a tall Great Blue Heron spends his days fishing, and Mallards and Mergansers hide their chicks from the resident Bald Eagle in the tall reeds at the water's edge. Flocks of migrating cedar waxwings with a stripe of yellow at their tail gobble up winter berries in the brush.

These days, I've been spending a lot of time birdwatching, and working with a client in the ecology field. He's been teaching me about cycles in water, about transitioning it from unhealthy to healthy, a process of cycling excess nutrients into a beneficial, balanced, ecosystem. It's amazing science.

One of the signs that water is healthy is the prevalence of dragonflies. It might be cliché, but I have always loved them: squirming larva born in water who emerge to metamorphose. Folklore



has it that when a person needs to find a new perspective, they should call on the dragonfly spirit.

I've been experiencing transitions of my own, of late. What does it mean to cycle into a new phase of womanhood, post-menopause? Beyond the physical changes, the wattle, the wild hairs, the waistline (what waistline?), maybe it means that for the rest of my life, which might still be nearly as long as my memory of the past, I will be, somehow, who I have always been meant to be.

What does it mean to move into a different kind of mothering, empty nesting? When a laboring pregnant woman enters transition, her cervix rapidly expands, the baby is coming. The mother who accepts this, who surrenders, suffers the least. This seems also true as my young adult son enters life with his mama at the periphery. I am still Mama, but cycling into a differently balanced ecosystem.

What does it mean to have a changing sense of my role as daughter, wife, collaborator, friend? Perhaps it involves moving beyond self-imposed limitations. I wonder. So I've called on the dragonfly spirit. The dragonfly's transformation is stunning in its beauty, yes, but also in its starkness—the absoluteness of it.

How close the words "transition" and "transformation" are!

Every story in this issue struck a chord with me, illustrating moments of transition, and transformation. In particular: Joanne DeMieri-Kennedy finding solace in a swooping hawk; Melanie Malinowski channeling her inner fourteen-year-old at a Tom Petty concert—I'm wondering with her when she writes, "When did I become fifty fucking one!" Katarina Wong's reflections of her mother's grit and resilience; and Jennifer Ochstein's fear of being at her mother's deathbed, walking away, and finding solace in nature's gentle forces.

Like water, the dragonfly spirit would have me believe, with careful stewardship, I have in me the natural power to be as beautiful and clear as I want to be. I hope this is true, and wish the same for you: fresh perspective, and great clarity of purpose.

Keep writing, revising, and telling your stories.



*Robin Martin*

Robin Martin  
Managing Editor









# homeschooled by *hawks*

---

joanne demieri kennedy

All my symptoms pointed to early spring hay fever: runny nose, headache, bloodshot eyes. “Keep taking your allergy meds,” my doctor advised during our virtual iPad visit, “but we can’t rule out the virus.”

**T**HE virus? I wasn't expecting that.  
How was that even possible? Did I pick it up on the subway, at ShopRite, my yoga class? All plausible.

"Don't Google it," a friend advised on the phone, "you'll think you have it." But I already thought that without Googling.

I slammed my laptop shut and

barricaded my door, terrified of morphing into a Marvel anti-hero: *Coming Soon! New Jersey Super-Spreader-Woman. She's Out Therrreeee!*

There was also my fear of being alone and sick. Before spiraling into anxiety-laden hell, I kept reminding myself that late March winds, spreading tree pollen



everywhere, constantly played havoc with my equilibrium. Not to mention the sneezing and cold-like symptoms. The new contagion had none of these labels. It was a case of bad allergies. Period.

I decided to use my stay-at-home furlough to clean out my closets, cook the ridiculous amount of kale purchased the week before, and read the Larsson trilogy. What could be better than reading about hot Swedes battling psychopaths and killers during a raging pandemic?

Two days later, I couldn't get out of bed. No cleaning anything, no cooking (besides Styrofoam cups of noodles), and goodbye *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. I just slept. The allergy argument went bye-bye. I had a low-grade temp, chills, and loss of appetite. My second virtual chat with the doctor confirmed that without a fever over 99.6, or a hacking cough, there was no qualifying for a swab-up-the-nose test. I blurted out, "Really, Doc? That's crazy."

He dropped the C-bomb again. "Sounds like you might have a mild case of COVID."

*Sounds like you might . . .* welcome to COVID limbo.

•••

Thanks to heaps of Advil and kombucha, I dragged myself out of bed into the kitchen for something to eat after a week in oblivion. It was as if a mysterious fog, which had usurped my body, floated above me like round smoke rings. My limbs and brain joined forces again to make simple tasks possible. Warmer weather also

helped, and like everyone else, my only chance of getting some fresh air was to open every window in my apartment.

That's when it started—the high-pitched whistling, coming and going in waves. *Teh-wee, teh-weeeee*. Manifestations of the virus kept changing daily, the latest being a loss of taste and smell; so why not audible hallucinations? I looked around again, wondering if I pressed the remote control inadvertently and turned on the television.

And then there it was. I wasn't losing it. Perched on the windowsill of my living room sat a mother of a brown bird with white streaks on its breast, *teh-weeing* on its own. A pigeon? A vulture?

This was no pigeon. They used to nest on my fire escape in Queens—grey, pudgy nuisances who crapped everywhere. I'd once seen a vulture on the Taconic Parkway, gargantuan and ugly. An eagle? Would something as grand as an eagle want to hang out on a Jersey window ledge?

To call on me during my time in isolation was a gift from the gods. I almost cried. It was my only social contact after days of talking to myself, watching *Tiger King* (not a good idea), and planning make-believe vacations.

The whistling was no longer annoying. It permeated the silent infirmary of my living room.

My birdsong.

Something as large as this squatter *never* got this near. Robins, cardinals, and

starlings crossed my daily loop through the park, but never one like this. I longed to snap a photo; a souvenir to show my future grandchildren when they'd ask to recount stories about the Great 2020 Pandemic.

I didn't budge, but my stillness couldn't fool my visitor. It jerked its head towards me, giving me sight of its hooked beak and yellow speckled eye. An eye too big for its body. It crossed my mind—what if it attacked me? Tore through the flimsy screen and did a Hitchcock *The Birds* number on me? I stepped back and rolled my *New York Times* into a weapon.

Startled by the crinkling of paper, it splayed its wings, three times the size of its body, and took off, circling outside my window.

"I'm sorry," I cried out, my voice cracking with emotion, hoping that it would return and camp out again. But it continued to dive and soar while I watched from my prison.

What bird was this? So ballsy. So free.

I had to tell someone about this divine intervention. My friend, Robert, who lives in upstate New York, was the obvious choice. He's a naturalist, not to be mistaken for a nudist. People always confuse the two.

I texted him.

"A brownish bird sat on my windowsill, large wings, white streaks on tail, making curious noises..."

"Sounds like a hawk. Is it flying on its own? There should be another one joining in..."

He was right.

Another hawk soon entered left stage. Together they dipped in a perfect line. Their pas de deux so graceful, so melodic, Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 played in my head.

"How did you know that?" I shot out another message.

*"It's mating season for broad-winged hawks. Jersey has a quite a few, beautiful sight before they mate; they fly close to one another—you're in for a treat..."*

I placed my cell phone on my desk while the two love birds performed Nureyev pirouettes across the cloudless sky. Their tails and wings marked with distinct white, black and brown bands when outspread; the way Spanish hand-fans open into a kaleidoscope of color on a summer's day. A classic hook-up unfolded as the they *teh-wee-ed* plans for the future...their first twig-n-stick home?... a couple of baby hawks?

A lightness swept over me, nothing to do with my fever or achy body. It was pure joy.

• • •

Two weeks into my confinement, I noticed more raptors cruising the big blue. The spectacle had become a welcome respite from the awful daily death tolls and case numbers given by Governors Cuomo and Murphy on the television. Did seeing more birds have anything to do with the lack of jet planes landing at our area's three major airports? Or that most people took the stay-at-home order to heart, leaving their cars idle, or that buses were

fewer and businesses were closed? A TV reporter commented that during COVID-19, birds, not overwhelmed by constant noise interference, communicated more with each other. She had footage to prove it.

I analyzed my growing obsession as a calling. A born-again birder christened within the walls of her eight-hundred-square-foot sanctuary.

• • •

By the third week, I spent breaks from work Googling information, typing in *hawks, New Jersey, lifestyle*, and coming up with sites like *Audubon, The Cornell Lab of Ornithology*, and my favorite blog, *Birdchick*. Homeschooled without the pressure.

Their mating season begins in March. Right around the time my friend came visiting to cruise potential partners from my window's ledge. Broad-tailed hawks practice *courtship feeding* by delivering food to each other before they commit. A mouse here, a chipmunk there. Gourmet flirting. Watching pairs sky dance day after day was pure rom-com material. I no longer needed Netflix. I had them.

In early fall, these Jersey natives leave the Northeast for warmer Central and South America to return the following spring. Romantic *and* smart. I wondered if the same couples, since many mate for life, would come back—much like my uncle and aunt who leave for Fort Myers during winter months to escape New York's snow and ice.

On the Audubon site, I learned that

one of the oldest hawk lookout points in the US is two miles from where I live, which somehow led me to another site, [native-languages.org](http://native-languages.org). Cheyenne folklore teaches that hawk sightings signify protection from imminent danger.

They call it Hawk Mythology.

I called it karma.

• • •

Four weeks gone.

Being sheltered all this time has me somewhat gaga. Maybe I've gone overboard with my bird-watching. Papers and books lay strewn on the floor, on my dining table; dishes cram the kitchen countertop; my voicemail is full. I never got to the closets. No doubt I'll be donating tons of clothes since it doesn't look like I'll have a job or a life in the near future. *Food & Wine's* kale balls will have to wait until whenever.

The obsolete—illegal even—mercury thermometer slides under my tongue. I hold it in place by pressing my lips together, making sure not to bite into it. Mercury poisoning during a pandemic is something to avoid. My feeling shitty has more to do with physical inactivity than illness. Orders of fresh veggies, milk, and bread arrive at my door, contactless. There's the urge to go into the corridor masked, gloved, keeping ten feet away, not six, to say hello to my Instacart person. To thank them for their service. Chit-chat.

I don't. I can't.

Sometimes I need to check my phone to see what day it is, especially

weekends. Saturday spills into Sunday. It's a continuous blur of sameness.

Friends leave messages to see how I'm doing, worried that I'm on my own and not well. "We'll get through it, I know we will," is what I text them. Explaining my certainty would only concern them.

97.6.

I shake the thermometer until the silver line disappears. I'll order a fancy digital one that beeps at some point. In the meantime, I have to meet the three-day "no fever without fever reducing meds" CDC

guideline before leaving my quarantined state.

My first outing will not be to the supermarket, my running track or to restock my dwindling supply of chardonnay.

I've mapped out the two-mile hike.

Mating season lasts until June, so there's still time before nesting begins, before they disappear beneath the canopy of trees and wait for summer's hatch. By September they'll be gone.

It's the one sure thing I know. For now. 🍷



**Joanne DeMieri-Kennedy** is a writer living in Montclair, New Jersey. You can find her work in *The Write Launch*, Books by *Hippocampus* ("Dine") and other publications. She has also spent time as a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade elf, voice-over scriptwriter for German and American documentary filmmakers, and student exchange program manager for French and American students. She is currently working on a novel set in the Inner Hebrides and a short story collection.







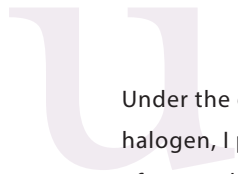


# *li(f)e*

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serrina zou

I am mute in Spanish, the same way I am illiterate in Mandarin. Underneath my tongue, irony is a clickbait cliché, a language native to the same cruelty that brought me here; I could never roll my r's the way Maestra Mayra does, the soft syllables clinging to teeth, smooth as rain.



Under the glare of my bedroom's crackling halogen, I pretend the piles of rice in front of me could morph into clouds, fluffy pearls of the night sky that could carry me far, far away. The vegetables, stir-fried and sticky with sweetness clump together like seaweed in the middle of an infinite ocean that I once could have drowned in, perhaps in the last life.

In between bites of *arroz con verduras*, I scroll through the numbing rainbow of Netflix selections. I select the first telenovela I see, set the subtitles to Spanish so I can pick up on a few phrases interspersed among the mock-serious drama and perfect makeup.

On the screen, a wide-eyed bride and an amnesiac groom fresh from a car accident writhe against the backdrop of white linen and fizzy champagne. It's episode one and they are already beginning happily ever after, except eventually the villain will charge from across the banquet hall and hurl acid/swing machete/shoot revolver at the blissful couple.

Eventually, some two hundred episodes later, the groom will rescue the bride from a deserted jungle island / kill

the villain / have his sandy overtanned face slapped / make a passionate speech / impregnate the bride / rush the bleeding sidekick to the hospital, in no particular order. Yet somehow, happily-ever-after always finds its way back to their once upon a time, docile and quaint like a fairy tale.

The cliché drapes heavy like crucifixion.

I want to escape it like the plague, like this pandemic. I want to tear the crass commercialism from the screen, a mirthless animation of a pixelated galaxy. In my throat, a scream clawing its way to the surface, all the r's rumbling like untamed beasts; in my mind, I roar: "DON'T YOU KNOW THAT'S NOT HOW LIFE WORKS?" Instead, I shut my silver Macbook Air, willing the telenovela to halt.

I count to ten in Spanish.

*Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez*

I imagine Maestra Mayra asking, "¿Cómo Estás? ¿Estas bien?"

"No. No estoy bien. Estoy tan sola."

I could say, biting the insides of my strawberry watered cheeks.

I brace myself for impact, relieved

for once that I cannot curse. In haste, two books that once straddled the delicate barrier of wobbling and still spill over the edge of my desk, their pages fluttering like wings despite the static weight of the thick May air.

A book of Pablo Neruda's poems.

A copy of *Esperanza Renace*.

Neruda's poems land harshly and still on page eleven, the lovingly creased pages folding against themselves like origami. Aside from the English translations I used to devour for literature and literature itself, their Spanish twin is untouched and holy. I catch *cielo* in the middle of these stanzas in the same way children hunt for fireflies at nightfall, hungering. Among the overgrown blades of grass behind a canvas painted charcoal, *cielo* was light. A poem all its own. A promise.

When I translate *cielo* I pin myself at the crossroads. *Cielo* is sky, but it's heaven too. Neruda poured his heart into *cielo*, drained every inch of his breath and offered it to the diaspora out of what I think could be love. *Cielo* took his breath away, swallowing his tears to satiate a thirst from eons of drought with the same selfishness as a lover. From my window, Neruda's surrender might as well have been martyrdom.

Azure and serene, *cielo* as the sky was lethal. *Cielo* as the sky claimed its victims with viral nanoparticles dispersed to its four winds; *Cielo* was both house and host of the virus that has killed so many thousands. But *cielo* as heaven is the final

resting place for all the creatures that will ever be. At the beginning of the universe, before even the earth could atomize from creation, *cielo* must have been God's kingdom, a secret excavated graveyard inlaid with broken dreams.

I kept two copies of *Esperanza Renace*.

I owned one copy, tucked carefully in its corner of my bookshelf, with pages that long stiffened, the oblique crispness yielding into papyrus yellow from eight years of age. That was *Esperanza Rising*, the English copy, all safe. *Esperanza Renace* was a borrowed gift from my best friend who could roll her r's between her teeth the way Maestra Mayra did, native and nascent. Unlike its English counterpart, it lies deadpan on the carpeted floor, its interior pages flopped over and fanned like the crumpled sky.

Last September, a time of peace before *la pandemia*, my friend entrusted her copy to me. She instructed me to read it over and over for practice. But even after countless hours raking over the conjugations and translation quips, I never passed *Esperanza's* riches to rag transformation in Spanish. I flipped to the last page too often, hoping that happily ever after would supersede rolling r's and linguistic lapses. I memorized the last sentence as if it were my name: "nunca temas empezar de nuevo." *Do not be afraid to start over again*. I wonder if the world can start over. I wonder if there will be anything left to start from.

In *Esperanza's* story, her mother named

her after hope, a promise that terrorized the family for an entire generation. With hope, they escaped the unwanted life in Mexico, fleeing wanton luxuries puppeteered by invisible strings for the toil of *campesinos* drunk with the intoxicating freedom of America. I used to believe that parents named their children after their greatest fear, that Esperanza was no exception. During the Great Depression not long after Esperanza's immigration, Dolores spiked in popularity; "Dolores," in Spanish meaning pain, an elegy moist with sorrow—the nation's greatest fear.

My name is a distortion, a misspelling botched in Sharpie, bleeding on a birth certificate issued minutes after I tumbled into a life christened with pandemonium. If spelled correctly, Serrina would be Spanish for "serenity," soft to the touch and synonymous with peace. Perhaps the Sharpie merely slipped and unconsciously voiced the fear my mother could not bring herself to confess: that she would lose her only child to a country whose earliest visions had no place for our ancestors,

whose manifest destiny our yellow ancestors cultivated brick by brick only to have their bodies carted across the sea once again, unwelcome and unwanted. Perhaps misspelled, it meant that the native Mandarin she grew as a second skin would eventually drive a great wall between her and me, that her child would eventually fall in love with the perverse beauty of an English she stumbled to tame under her tongue, its pronunciations and grammar sticky and viscous, trapped. On the news: "Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese-Americans Fear for Their Safety," and "Couple names newborn twins Covid and Corona" are trending from halfway across the world; the greatest fear, confirmed.

If I had a child, I would name them Cielo, after the sky and heaven I have always feared most of all. Someday I will tell them stories about la pandemia, about how I wished this life to be a lie. Someday, I will tell them that in naming them after my greatest fear, I gave them the chance to forge their greatest strength. 🌸



**Serrina Zou** is a Chinese-American writer from San Jose, California, a 2019 California Arts Scholar in Creative Writing, a 2020 Foyle Commended Young Poet, a two-time Scholastic National Medalist in Poetry, and a 2021 National YoungArts Finalist in Writing/Poetry. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *National Poetry Quarterly*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Rust+Moth*, and elsewhere.











# *cathedral of dread*

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jennifer ochstein

Because I was afraid, I left my mother's hospital room two days before she died and never returned. I did not attend her funeral. Instead, I hiked 320 miles across Spain.

b

Before I left, I kneeled beside her hospital bed and held her thin cold hand. I sobbed. I admitted to her the truest thing about me as she lay dying and curled in the fetal position like an exhausted child. "I am not

brave," I said. I pleaded for her forgiveness: "I cannot watch you die."

This melodramatic cowardice, this catastrophizing, has permeated my outer edges and floated along the periphery of

every decision I've ever made: Don't tell your mother how much it hurts when she leaves so she will come back; attend the same university as your brother so you don't have to be alone; don't move away from the Midwest because you're a terrible writer and you won't make it; marry your second husband almost immediately after divorcing the first; beg both to stay even though they'd both been unfaithful; don't tell anyone so they don't remind you how stupid you are for staying, for following, for worrying, for being needy.

My confession is the only time I remember not blaming my mother for who I am.

Many people I know have said that they didn't regret dropping everything to be with their loved one as they died. I'm not one of those people. I dropped everything to get away.

My mother died alone. Her son promised to be with her when she died. So many people in her life had abandoned her that he wanted her to know he never would. Yet, she thwarted him. *I am an island*, she always reminded us. She kept her promise. After sitting with her for several hours, he left to check in with his family. Fifteen minutes later she was dead.

When I told her my truest impulse, my mother confessed that she was not brave either, but she was tired. I did not ask what she was afraid of. I already knew. As dying people often do, she'd been hallucinating for the past week. The day before, she'd hallucinated that someone pointed a gun

at her and shot her in the face.

When she was sixteen her abusive mother pointed a gun at her before turning it on herself. My mother was so afraid that she ran out of the house before her mother could shoot.

I don't know if she was able to forgive her mother, but she forgave me.

The week I realized my mother was going to die was the same week my husband was fired from his job for sexting a work colleague. I'm still not sure if I walked across Spain, from Burgos to Santiago, for the next three weeks because I was not brave enough to watch my mother die, because I was not brave enough to hear my husband's explanations, or both. Even though I needed to walk, walking did not give me answers. I am still afraid. I am still melodramatic.

The day after my mother died, I walked ten or so miles outside of Burgos. Along the trail, tiny iridescent blue butterflies gathered and shimmered in the cold, bright sunshine along the trail ridge as I walked. A cuckoo bird called from above. The butterflies fluttered around my legs and rested gently, privately, along the side of the trail on long stalks of grass sprouting in the dry dirt. My mother loved butterflies, as delicate and elusive as the freedom that I so often and easily surrender to fear and melodrama. The foreign, alien creatures surrounded me. My mother has arrived, I thought. They are her, pieces of my mother, tiny prayers of forgiveness caught on the breeze. As they trembled and floated

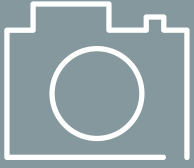


in space and alighted atop small yellow flowers and new-green grass, I kneeled beside them. I wanted to believe they were my mothers so I sat motionless, studying

their translucent wings. They only stretched in slow motion, oblivious of me. I closed my eyes and breathed them in. I glided away. 🦋



**Jennifer Ochstein** writes essays, plays with poetry, teaches, and has been shaped by the wide open spaces and flat lands of the Midwest. She's published work in *Sojourners*, *America Magazine*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Lindenwood Review*, *Connotation Press*, *Brevity*, and more. Much of her work has been conceived while hiking the Cathedral of the Outdoors and urban trekking to wherever her terrible sense of direction takes her. Getting lost is never out of the question.



the *color*  
of the *street*

---

christopher yu























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PAINTED LADIES

ONE WAY























EXPERIENCE





Christopher Yu is a freelance photographer, videographer, and editor based in San Francisco, California. His focus is in travel, portraiture, and street photography. His branded work has been published in *The Guardian*, Getty Images, *Vulture Magazine*, Life Framer and Artnet. Previous projects involved novelist Dave Eggers, artist Suzy Kellems Dominik, and US Congressman John Lewis. In 2016, he had the chance to tour various parts of the world through which he met numerous inspirational individuals, including *National Geographic* photographer Matthieu Paley. Upon settling in San Francisco in 2018, he has been heavily involved with local non-profit organizations in both photography and videography.

For more, visit:

**[christophersyu.com](http://christophersyu.com)**

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# *tom's american girl*

---

melanie j. malinowski

I first saw Tom Petty in concert on July 9, 1980, at the  
Spectrum.

m

My four best friends and I lifted a bottle of blackberry schnapps from behind the coffee mugs in the apartment above my grandmother's house where my brother, sister, mother, and I had lived since my

parents' divorce the previous summer. Karen, Theresa, Lisa, Katryna, and I somehow acquired tickets to Tom, hot on his *Damn the Torpedoes* tour. Somehow found a ride from Wilmington, Delaware,

to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on a Wednesday night. I have no recollection of how or who made that happen. I was fourteen—Tom, a youthful twenty-nine. Our seats, fold-out chairs, were in the sixth row—inexplicably—so close to Tom and his heartbreakers. He, a heartbreaker of all our tender freshmen Catholic schoolgirl selves. We stood on those unstable chairs, tipsy on my mom's booze and scream-sang, "Don't Do Me Like That" and "Refugee," Tom

your *something*. Insert your *heaven*. Feel that longing. Tom's singing to you, to your purpose, heartache, lust, and love.

Listen. Go. Tell Alexa to play "The Waiting." Try not to hear Tom making love to the air with those lyrics, that intonation.

To me, though, he made love to me, Tom's intimate American Girl, every time he mouthed those words.

At fourteen, I didn't know what that meant, really; or, more precisely, what that

“I was a naïve, chaste, very innocent freshman girl with naïve, chaste, very innocent friends. Yet we had secured Tom Petty tickets and delivered our sweet and beautiful selves to him.

sounding every bit as mellifluous as he did on our parents' car radios, until a security guard yelled at us to sit and behave.

But nothing could calm down that lusty verve I had at fourteen for sexy Tom with his Barbie blonde winged hair, full-toothed grin, raw voice like warm gravy, gawky body in tight jeans, that perpetual red and white guitar lung low on his bitty hips.

Tom.

He sang to me, about me.

So I became Tom's American Girl.

• • •

Nobody says *Baby* in song quite like Tom: *Oh, Baby, don't it feel like heaven right now? What? Don't it feel like something from a dream? Insert your dream. Insert*

might *feel like*. Fuck. I was a naïve, chaste, very innocent freshman girl with naïve, chaste, very innocent friends. Yet we had secured Tom Petty tickets and delivered our sweet and beautiful selves to him. I know he saw us, five pretties up front dancing and singing and flirting. I never thought then how close in age we were, fourteen to twenty-nine. He was a rock star; we were new teens, still just girls, the brevity of youth a bloated thing surrounding our angsty, arrogant bodies and haughty alluring faces and we had no idea that life unmoors us from this attractive flash of perfection and moves us along. We sang and swayed, arms linked, hair flowing and soft in the light from the stage.

As the years passed, it seemed to me



that Tom was always surprised by his own success or good fortune or luck. Tom, his courage, his willingness to sing our hearts, *babied* his way through all of our lives. *Oh, Baby, don't it feel . . .* I would turn the knob on my mom's Jeep all the way to the right when Tom came through the speakers.

This has always been the conflict of my addled mind and my more convoluted trickle-down heart: *how? How can I inhabit the music?* The music, sexy and full, nonjudgmental, nonthreatening, a haze of narrative webbed together with guitar and keyboard and drums and delicious vocals sat on some front porch, waiting, waiting for me. Life is life: We grow up and go to college and then graduate school and earn a PhD and have a daughter and a husband and a car and, shit, I just want to listen to some music, no, *live* in music, climb into Tom's mouth and claim my place as his American Girl.

My thirteen-year-old daughter, Echo, doesn't get it. She listens to awful "music," a pretty face with a marginal voice—male or female—singing over canned, electronic dreck—no energy, no balls, no tears in that creation, no pick on guitar string or stick on skins, lips on the metallic mesh microphone absorbing all of that power. To her, that music is simply another "thing," like an episode of "This Is Us" or "American Ninja Warrior," an ice cream sundae, a soccer game—then . . . gone.

More music flows in my veins than blood. My dad was a musician, and we heard KISS and Aerosmith and AC/DC and

the blues and The Beatles, and that love, Baby, that love roots in my cells and *don't let go!*

. . .

My husband Andy and I saw Tom Petty in Houston on April 29, 2017, a few months before his death. We had great third row seats, and the heat shimmered on the stage and on sweet Tom in his black jeans and red vest. My mind could not quite rectify how the man on the stage in Houston was the same boy I had seen in Philly in my own youth. Yet his *babies* were no less sexy with age. I bought those sixteen-hundred-dollar tickets, and we hired a babysitter and drove my husband's fancy red car to the Woodlands for the show. I wore a denim mini-skirt and black slinky top, still thinking I was Tom's American Girl. Thirty-six years separated my audiences with Tom Petty, and I longed to hear him in person again.

And he sang, so close to us. But this production many decades after my first Tom Petty concert smacked of overkill—as concerts go these days: giant screens, too many lights and amps, and, well, that's what has happened over the years. God, I miss those sexy simple concerts of the '70s and '80s with the band members, instruments, microphone stands, no frills, just the pure flow of the music.

During the concert, this beautiful family in front of us—three grown daughters, a son-in-law, mom, dad—sang and danced. A very drunk woman, the married one, yelled, "I love you, Tom" over and over.

Tom stopped and looked her way. With all of his sexy, grown man confidence, poise, and loveliness, he said, "I love you, too, *Baby*." The audience went crazy, wild. Then he said, "It's nice to see a young person here, really nice."

Suddenly, my fifty-one-year-old self thought, *I am fifty fucking one! When did that happen?* I am no longer a fourteen-

concrete apron? the boy who broke our heart? the tiny front porch where we dreamed our dreams?

My friends and I all grew up. Karen twice survived breast cancer, and she lives in Georgia with two children. Theresa, a ballerina, danced in New York. Lisa birthed four kids, moved to Michigan, became a housewife, and Katryna is a dentist in



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year-old cupcake delicious in my smooth skin and perfect breasts and long blonde hair as thick and shiny as Tom's. I'm not even a twenty something year old, like the drunk yeller in front of me with her hair in and out of a bun all night, but who cares because her gorgeous face defies hair styling?

That April night with my husband, both of us carefree and singing to Tom's music, close to Tom, closer to Tom than in Philadelphia, I knew I would always be Tom's American Girl, at least in the privacy of my quivering, slightly jaded heart. Who of us didn't want to escape the dirty, lonely, small town of our upbringing? the Dairy Queen where we hung out? the neighborhood pool with its cracked

Virginia and a mother of three. Yet I do not keep in touch with any of them. Not one. Tom is more a familiar voice and sound and reality to me than these girls who once yoked themselves to me on rickety chairs in front him. What were the promises we were going to keep? Did they keep them? Did I?

• • •

The weeks before the Houston concert, I listened to "The Waiting" no fewer than a thousand times; it's my favorite Tom Petty song, and I could not wait to hear it live. When I saw Tom in 1980, "The Waiting" was no more than a gleam in Tom's psyche. Now, *oh, Baby*, now . . . I wanted to hear it. Live. *Oh, Baby, don't it feel like heaven right now.*

Yet Tom Petty did not sing "The

Waiting." Nope. He sang "Wildflowers" and "I Should Have Known It," "Yer So Bad," and "It's Good To Be King." I wanted to feel disappointed for his omission, but I did not. I felt free and happy, somehow knowing in my little heart that he had curated his playlist from how the music spoke to him from his personal front porch where he dreamed his way to us.

*I love you, Tom*, I echoed to myself. How can you not love Tom Petty? Tom Fucking Petty! Not to love Tom Petty is not to love Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen or, well, yourself. These musicians are our mirrors,

showing us the best and worst of who we are and were and what we know to be true in our bruised and aged hearts. They reflect in song all the *babies* we ourselves are unwilling or unable to say, and oh how we long to absorb them.

Of course, Tom encored "American Girl" that humid Houston night in April. My husband and I sang every one of those words, screamed them through breath and hair and spit into the dark air, a collective uprising of sound, the stunning joy of a familiar song. Everyone is an American Girl.

I simply prefer to believe myself Tom's. 🇺🇸



**Melanie J. Malinowski** earned a PhD in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Houston, receiving the C. Glenn Cambor Fiction Award, an MA in English from the University of New Mexico, winning the D. H. Lawrence Fellowship, and a BA in English from Penn State University. Her essay "Stone Cold Fox" was published in *Hippocampus Magazine*, and her essay "Arena Rock" won the nonfiction Prize for the Don't Talk To Me About Love contest. Her short story "Girl Weds Dog: Same Old Story, Same Old Song and Dance" won *Opossum's* short fiction contest and is forthcoming in the publication.











*of mangoes,  
memories, and exile*

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katarina wong

The very thought of mango season makes me quiver  
in anticipation.

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The many varieties—bowling ball-sized Tommy Atkins, green Kents that blush red just on top as they ripen, skinny Ataulfos with their sweet, mellow flavor—beckon like tropical sirens.

But this year we are in lockdown,

my mother in Florida and me up north. Enjoying fresh mangoes with her is just a shimmer of a memory. There's no possibility of me visiting. There's no discussion of us going to Cuba to see our family whose trees are dripping with the fruit. The

pandemic has rendered me too fearful even to wander over to my grocery store for an imported one.

Instead, our mango adventures take place by phone. One day my mother tells me she's cooking marmalade, and I envision the thick orange bubbles popping in the pot. On another call, she says she's freezing slices of mango for my next visit. *My next visit, when will that be?* My heart surges—then sinks when I realize it may not be until the new year. She tells me she's sending me *chupa chupas*—our nickname for a type of mango so stringy they can't be eaten, only sucked dry.

Our conversations meander, uncovering forgotten memories, and with them, we embark on unforeseen journeys. We visit the row of mango trees her father planted a century ago in their village in western Cuba—trees that still bear heavy fruit. We travel back to our apartment in Old Havana where simmering *mangas blancas* fill the kitchen with the scent of hot summer. We talk bitterly about the “mangoes that got away,” golden footballs we spied rotting in a stranger's yard.

My mother tells me of childhood trips to the *rio*, of Saturday night dances and the ladies dressed in flared skirts that rustled to the music, of boys catching *cangrejos*, the summer bounty of crabs the entire family spent hours cleaning before devouring together.

Her childhood grows sweeter upon each retelling, but she sadder. I can tell she's thinking of what was lost in her

unexpected exile on this side of the Florida Straits.

“When I came to the US in 1960, I only wanted to see the world,” my mother tells me again and again, as if she is protesting her innocence.

Six months later she was stuck, frozen out by the Cold War. When she finally returned to visit in 1979, the Cuba of her youth had been swept away. Shops were empty, her father was dying, her siblings married and had children—a new generation that was as foreign to her version of Cuba as her American-born girls were.

• • •

Sirens wail nonstop outside my window; infection and death are charted each day. Overnight my friendships play out on screens rather than in cafés and restaurants. There's no escaping this time of loss, each of us exiled to our own homes.

My daily calls with my mother become constant reminders of her absence. After years of pulling away from her, I realize how mistaken I was, how what I thought were shortcomings are actually evidence of her grit, her resilience, and I find myself wanting more stories, more memories, more of her.

• • •

My mother sends me boxes filled with mangoes plucked green—our daily ruminations suddenly appearing in the flesh. The *chupa chupas* are smaller than the ones I recall eating as a child perched in the tree, their juices running sticky

down my arms. Now, they sit on my city windowsill until they ripen into the color of sunshine. When they're ready, I'll roll them on my kitchen counter until I feel the fibers release their juices and the skin becomes a squishy sack. I'll pierce one end and hunker over the sink while I squeeze, squeeze, squeeze the nectar, consuming it like something feral. I'll think about my mother standing over her sink as well—apart but together, as we drain every drop until nothing is left but pit and peel. 🍷



**Katarina Wong** is a writer and artist based in New York City. Her work has been published in the *New York Daily News*, the *Miami Herald*, *Entrepreneur*, and the *Bronx Memoir Project Anthology* [Vol. 3], among others. She is currently writing a memoir about reclaiming her Cuban identity through renovating a century-old apartment in Havana. Katarina has an MFA from the University of Maryland and a Master of Theological Studies from the Harvard Divinity School.











*upon receiving the california  
department of fish  
and wildlife angler update*

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lynn mundell



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**1970**

Memory is like fishing. Out of the murk it swims; we pull it up, keeping even what's too small to sustain us. In May the new motor fell into the Pacific and we floated,

you and I, waiting to be towed. I carry an image of our catch hooked to the links of the heavy silver stringers until they made strange necklaces, the bass like charms,

following our boat back to land. You said you'd never seen anything like it, the way the mullet jumped out of the ocean all around us that afternoon. I recall little of that day. The rest you told me. All I know for sure is that I had a bucket hat with a real starfish sewn onto it. That when I was a kid you sometimes fried up fish for breakfast.

### 1992-1997

Summers on Shasta Lake we'd reach the limit but keep fishing anyway, returning the bluegill to their home so we could delay returning to ours. You'd bring the poles, tackle, bait. Fluorescent

I know I was adrift then, uncertain of place and purpose. By handing me the pole, you were telling me to hang on, and I did.

salmon eggs, writhing worms, bobbers like miniature red beach balls. I could learn it all later. What fish like to eat. How to un snag from the rocks. Failing that, how to snip and re-tie the line. Being on the water was this: Coors and sandwiches in the white cooler. Sun on our backs. The old boat rocking like a cradle. Those days like my deck of playing cards picturing a single boat on a tree-rimmed lake. Identically perfect. Thumbed over time. I know I was

adrift then, uncertain of place and purpose. By handing me the pole, you were telling me to hang on, and I did.

### 2009-2017

You'd finally sell the boat, but for many years it was parked in the driveway, as though saying a fisherman is beached here. In early September you'd read the salmon updates, then call Dave or Tim to take us out on the Sacramento for a day. Their tackle. Their favorite spots to wait. At dawn the river was cool, black, and empty. By the hot afternoon, blue-gray and crowded like a paved road. But despite it all, the familiar tug of the line, bent pole, screech of the reel. Sometimes I'd lose my fish. But you never did, rising up out of your seat, an old man grown strong again. In the last photograph, you hold the big salmon by its gills, your freckled hand stuffed into it until I can't tell where the fish begins and you end.

### 2019

Once I caught an old trout, battered like your big body would become over time. Gold and rose, with brown spots, grand in its own fashion. When you gutted the fish, you showed me its scarred mouth, someone else's rusted hook deep in its belly. How many others caught that fish, then saw it break away. Some creatures fight harder to live than others do. In November you finally began to gasp for air, retreating to the lake, the river, the water. In the ICU, I closed your eyes. You spent

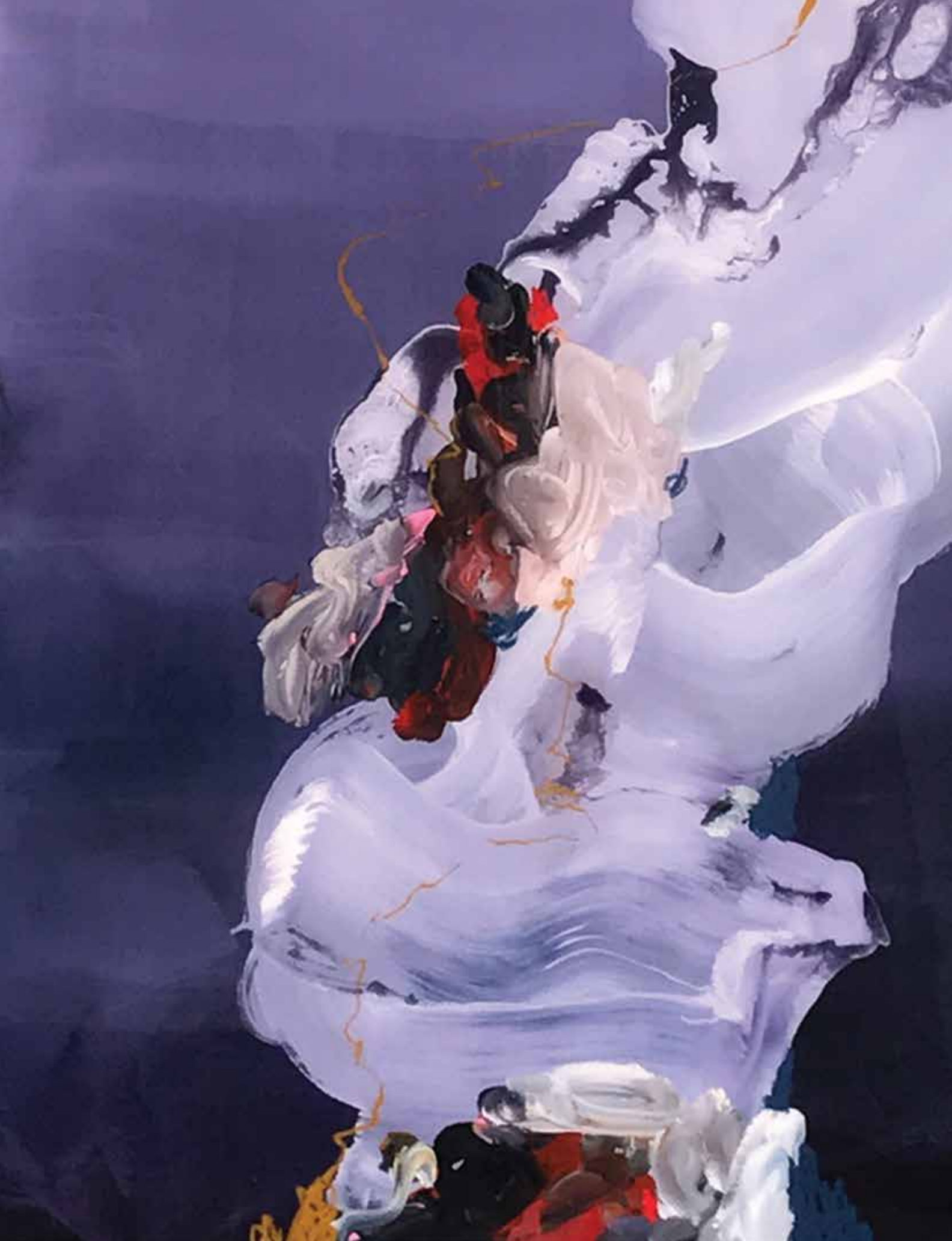
so many years teaching me how to fish,  
while showing me other things, too. Where  
to cast out for our stories. How to be the

vessel that would bring them from the sea  
even after you were gone. 🍷



**Lynn Mundell's** writing has been published in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Five Points*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere, placed in the *Wigleaf* Top 50 Very Short Fictions short and long lists between 2017 and 2020, and earned the 2019 Lascaux Prize in Creative Nonfiction. She is co-editor of *100 Word Story* and its anthology, *Nothing Short Of: Selected Tales from 100 Word Story* (Outpost19). Read more of her work at [lynnmundell.com](http://lynnmundell.com).







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Janna Watson holds an honors degree in Drawing and Painting from the Ontario College of Art and Design, and since graduating has exhibited extensively across Canada and internationally in over thirty solo exhibitions. Her work has appeared in notable public collections including those of TD Bank, CIBC, Telus, the Ritz-Carlton, ONi ONE, the Soho Metropolitan Hotel, and Saks Fifth Avenue. In 2013, she was commissioned to create an 11-foot painting for the lobby of AURA, Canada's tallest residential building. Watson's paintings circulate regularly at international fairs, including Art Toronto, CONTEXT Art Miami, and in Seattle, where they were recently featured by Artsy in its list of "10 Works to Collect at the Seattle Art Fair." Watson's work has been covered by publications such as *The Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail*, *NOW Magazine*, and *House & Home*. She lives and works in Toronto.

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