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BLUE | RIVER

Vol. 5



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BLUE | RIVER

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Volume 5

*Omaha, Nebraska*

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## CONTRIBUTORS

## Mary Maeve McGeorge

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### *The Binding We Were Missing*

We met at a bowling alley at my friend's birthday party. He was her first cousin. He went to a different school than us, which somehow made him cooler. Like he possessed some foreign knowledge we weren't privy too. He was older. He could drive. We couldn't. This held some weight in our minds. Made him seem unattainable, although all that washed away the moment he said hello.

I gave him my number. The next day, he took me to the movies. Halfway through, he grabbed my hand. After, he kissed me. His lips tasted like candy. I didn't know just how sweet lips could be, not until then.

I wanted more.

We started kissing a lot after that, in the back seat of his car, on my front porch, in downtown alleyways so nobody could see, as if we were doing something illegal.

Eventually, kissing wasn't enough. I let him do more. That wasn't enough either. I had to Google the things he asked me to do, scour strange internet blogs detailing acts I never could have fathomed. And I did them all because I loved him.

Still, it was not enough.

He told me this is the kind of problem people have when they love each other, that he knew the answer. He said the only thing still left for us to do would keep us stuck together. It was the binding we were missing, the glue on the shelf right in front of us. Permanent, all we had to do was grab it. He told me a lot of things, but the thing I remember most was the way his eyes sparkled when he told me he loved me. I told myself a look like that would last forever.

It didn't.

The night it happened, the sky was black, the stars hibernating. He picked me up in his car, a gray Sedan with duct tape seats and a dimmed radio with a tangled auxiliary cord, spitting out the latest Kygo song. "You look nice," he said.

"Thanks," I said, keeping my tone even. Inside, I was beaming. I had put on mascara, a rare occasion for me; it meant everything to me that he noticed. His words always meant too much, his compliments rare. When it came to me, he preferred to fixate on the things that were missing. The holes in me, the fatal flaws he couldn't bring himself to ignore.

He pulled away from my house without waiting for me to put my seatbelt on, a detail I didn't recall until a few weeks later. I had told my parents we were going to the movies; we went to Sullivan Lookout instead. He put the car in park, waited for the lights to turn off, for the other cars parked a few spots over to go on their way. I secretly hoped one chose to stay.

When the last car drove away, he turned to me. "Are you sure about this?"

I said yes, though my voice wavered. How could I be sure about something I'd never done before? Then again, he was undeniably certain. You don't push for something that hard if you're not.

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He told me we could take it slow.

It was over before I even knew it began.

Of the act itself, I don't remember much. It hurt, but it hurt more that he wouldn't look at me when he was pushing himself inside. I wished he would grab for my hands, look into my eyes and make it seem like the binding he had promised it would be, an invisible string wrapping tightly around us until we couldn't be torn apart. But his gaze was planted on the seat I was pressed against, his hands gripping the cushions like they were his lifeline. After, he rolled into the driver seat and buttoned his pants. I zipped my dress, straightened the fabric so it didn't look so crumpled, and stared ahead, wondering how the city knew it was time to go to sleep. Neither of us said anything for the longest time, avoiding any further touch like the other was infected with pox. After a while, he drove me home. He kissed me goodbye. Said he loved me. I think I said it back.

I cried when I went to sleep that night. I had always that heard it would hurt. Now, I knew. My body felt different, sure. But it was more than that. I felt like a piece of myself was drifting away in the wind, so high I couldn't catch it anymore.

## Rose Maria Woodson

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### *Ladder*

& so you climb the ladder of days.  
*It leans*  
against the house  
where incense curls or  
roses unfurl in smiles, centered in  
a blue vase. It  
all depends. You climb  
through spring children full  
of sky, through  
fevered parents plowing breath.  
You climb through a small room of light,  
where you struggle through  
a window of words,  
where you struggle to hold  
anything,  
any thing  
as it was,  
as it is,  
a chipped  
cup caressed,  
a creaking  
chair that bears  
your weight,  
your wait,  
a door opening,  
an open door to  
casseroles & laughter &  
after, a walk to gamble nowhere,  
just to amble beneath a canopy  
of trees. You  
climb,  
find relics:  
that fly ball,  
the red kite,  
her baton soaring still just south of ursa  
minor. You are  
  
always on the edge of becoming,  
bridge,

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moonlight,  
a grain of future,  
a swell of past, almost  
close enough,  
close enough. Your spool of breath  
unwinds in the now  
cool air &  
you see now,  
you see every precious  
puff, evaporating, pearls,  
out of reach. The strand is  
breaking even as you  
climb the ladder of days.

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*Swimming Currents*  
*Sadly Fallen*

I tell you this  
you miss touch  
the witness of a life well  
lived that someone will  
hug you  
hold your hand  
you miss the kiss  
you miss the spool of surfaces unwinding  
rustling leaves  
sand  
grass bent & spent  
your cat's purring fur  
you miss your sky  
haloed moon  
cold zinging into your lungs  
like fake snakes  
from the gag toffee can  
you miss the two of us carrying  
the blue  
spruce two blocks to the second story      half  
a year later pine needles  
resurrected      sought bloody asylum

you miss the one hand  
sliding      smooth as a prize  
round blue agate  
into the other hand      holding  
nothing back      jazzed

skin      shocking soft      still lobster pot hot  
holds the heart pounding  
against the locked door forgotten  
keys      pounding      to make you hear      the pulse tick tick      ticking  
sixteenth notes stuck acappella a needle sticking  
in the groove      yes  
this is an old L.P. black      scratched  
vinyl      precious  
original sound you



held by the edges the world was once  
light bearable a humming



Louis Lubudda is a ceramicist out of Omaha, Nebraska.

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*What are you hoping to capture when you create your pottery? And, where do you draw inspiration from?*

The objects I make are visual representations of myself. Each piece is dressed well with a unique pattern, to symbolize the outfits worn on a day to day basis. The form themselves often go deeper. Some representing bottled up emotions, others joyous memories. I tend to hide the meanings of the forms and vessels I construct through the surface decorations.

In the beginning my goal was to make vessels that were both functional yet elegant. With making objects that fit these categories brings conflict. People begin to ask how functional a teapot is with an elongated spout, or a mug that only holds four ounces. To some the piece makes complete sense, to others it can only be viewed as something decorative. This complication has aroused a question. What is being overlooked?

Have we as a culture begun to overlook the beauty of things that surround us? By taking a step back from inspiration of fashion magazines, social media and so forth. My eyes have opened to the nature that embodies us. Patterns that I once saw only in textiles I now find living and breathing just outside our window. Trees, animals, flowers and other earthly elements bring colors of inspiration. Wood however has brought the most abundant source of inspiration into my current work. Within the grain one can find lines, dots and even colors. The proximity of these lines and dots as well as their variations in widths and sizes from a motif.

Motifs take time to construct, during this course of evolution the maker repeats marks in order to complete a composition. Like the evolution of textiles and motifs, patterns in nature have evolved. By combining the chevron, polka dot and other decorative arrangements of ceramic material in conjunction to the wood. I hope to highlight nature's beautification to the eyes of the audience through further exploration.

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You can more of Labudda's work on his website: <https://llabuddaceramics.wixsite.com/designs>  
As well as his instagram: @louislubudda









## James Miller

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### *The Old Place*

On the first day at the old place, grandmother would say, your room is ready. I laid out ten paperbacks on the locked trunk beside my bed, careful to keep each in alphabetical order. Most were tales of time travel, without paradoxes.

*middle auntie arrived with engineer husband in their brown buick  
ready to make memories tall cans of beer cradled in brown bags tight squeeze  
beer hugs and the same stories do you remember our visit to flag pole hill  
do you remember easter we dyed the eggs with bitter vinegar*

On the second day I would sit at my grandmother's vanity: faded green, tidy, dustless. Its oval mirror tilted slightly forward, as if inviting me to join. I imagined that these costume rings would awaken Akhenaten from his dry tomb.

*three daughters shouted in the kitchen here we are again years of this years  
of this years the two youngest (my mother the last to come) arrayed against  
the mad elder sister the unpredictable sister whose genius soured every kitchen,  
stained every counter with grey and black spots*

Sometimes there was no third day. We left in the middle of the night, drove a half hour in silence. When we arrived, Nettie asked, is it the same? We sat in her parlor, ate stovetop popcorn till I was sleepy again.

*middle auntie and her engineer husband stayed behind slept rough  
so grandmother wouldn't be left alone with her mad daughter and mother said  
in the driveway to middle auntie I didn't think you had it in you and middle auntie  
watched the last hour of sound of music's leaving song*

On the fourth day we sometimes hunted easter eggs in the yard. The last time, my mother took a long time hiding them—we waited inside. Cold, cold, you're cold. Warmer, getting warmer. I found all twelve stacked in the mailbox, swept them into my empty basket.

## Romana Iorga

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### *The Man, the Woman, the Moon*

#### *1. Full Moon*

Violence is blue at your fingertips.  
    Casually, you ask  
whose death  
I prefer, though we both  
    know the answer.  
It's midnight. The room  
    swims with shadows.  
The curtains hide nothing  
from the moon.  
    You're here,  
a feral part of you, the others  
    too drained to fight  
its arrival. You survey  
my bones, the delicate fusion  
    of nerve and sinew,  
the clammy skin that holds me  
    together  
a little while longer.

#### *2. First Quarter*

That window stays open. Each night,  
    they break language: sharp,  
    jagged sounds. Each night, his  
    fingers, long as a pianist's, press  
    the ruined keyboard  
    of her body.  
    He makes his music  
    that always requires pain.  
    'Art is born of suffering,' he tells her.  
    'So suffer. Give me my magnum opus.'

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### 3. *New Moon*

People see what they want to see. No one asks questions. I've told her to leave, more than once. She keeps coming back. We're one. We must be. There's no choice. We never had a choice. Wherever she goes, I go. This room might be our last. I give her the moon.

### 4. *Third Quarter*

He tells her she's always the one to follow  
and she believes. He's never fed up  
with the music. It grows  
louder, more  
jarring.  
He sleeps  
better for it.  
Awake, she holds  
a pillow in her hands.  
He secretly hopes she'd go through with it.

### 5. *Full Moon*

You rename constellations  
of freckles,  
moles, bruises.  
You kiss them. You tell me  
you're sorry.  
There are  
some tears. I'm here  
and I'm not.  
I watch the moon rise  
toward the eaves.

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It shudders, slips back  
    into the groove  
it already knows,  
    climbs up again  
    a little bit farther.  
Even the moon  
    has a hard time leaving.  
    My mind  
jumps across the chasm  
    of years, to some  
    future you, still young  
and angelic, an ageless  
    Dorian Gray,  
    no vice, no  
corruption scarring your face  
    as you slice  
    a meandering path  
through someone else's life.  
    And I see  
    myself cratered,  
pockmarked, waxing and waning,  
ascending  
    slowly, surely into  
    an endless  
sky.

## Emily Tsai

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### 06

Lend me your  
Lovely hands, dew soaked

How I wash and dry him

He is a crystal, water-shine  
Aglisten with it

From whose lips  
Is the flute sound  
Lost amid spring wind?

Palm flat as a ship's sail  
Sun-side arrival

He is, he is  
A bride without a veil



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*Haiku*

I watch the pine sway.  
The man is cut from coarse cloth  
But cowers from rain

Waits for soft horse mane  
To whip and lash his bare face:  
It flicks through white air

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*Kamikaze*

Have you recall  
His young body as a shield, as though  
The Lord needed him  
And not the other way around.

...did not understand  
Until it burned.

Star falls. Death  
From on high

## W. David Hancock

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### *Destiny Denatured*

Destiny came unglued after her trip to the antique shop. She found a photo of her dead mother there. It was tucked inside a dresser painted with scenes of Cape Cod. Destiny was raised on the Cape and knew every single landmark. A tag identified the piece as “outsider art.” Tiny cursive weaved a flimsy yarn about its being part of a sea captain’s estate. Dubious provenance aside, the dresser had definitely spent time near the sea. Salt air warped its joints, forcing the dealer to take everything apart and re-glue. He’d found a profusion of shipworm and mold.

When Destiny saw the snapshot, it felt like somebody punched her in the gut. In the photo, the mother she’d always assumed was drowned was living in a strange split-level, raising a secret family. Destiny pressed the dealer about the picture, but he was baffled. It wasn’t there when he restored the piece. Maybe a previous customer lost it. Or the dresser was possessed by a benevolent spirit. Destiny wanted to know if her mother was really dead, and her wish had been granted. To Destiny, the picture was no blessing, more a crime scene photo documenting her abandonment.

Destiny grew up inside “Ascension,” a makeshift compound of Quonset huts and yurts located deep within the National Seashore. One weekend, during the summer of 1965, a group of free-spirited physics graduate students and likeminded faculty members drove down from Cambridge on a school bus, intending to drop acid and skinny dip. They never left. The Park Service tried for years to evict Ascension, but the cult leveraged obscure Puritan-era land statutes to retain squatters’ rights. Although they pretended to be a quirky commune of harmless, countercultural academics, Destiny knew Ascension was, in fact, a haven for abusers.

Before joining the cult, Destiny’s mother had been a post-doctoral research fellow working on quantum mechanics. Destiny suspected her father was the man she knew as “Uncle Joe,” her mother’s former faculty advisor, and Ascension guru. When Destiny was four, her mother disappeared after sneaking out for a midnight swim. Uncle Joe claimed his disciple was caught in the undertow and drowned. Destiny always doubted this story, and now she’d found evidence suggesting that her mother had, in fact, escaped Ascension, leaving her behind to bear the full brunt of Uncle Joe’s upbringing and the unspeakable horrors that entailed.

Earlier, I used “ungluing” to describe the spiritual crisis triggered in Destiny when faced with the reality her mother was still alive. A more accurate term would be “denaturing,” which Uncle Joe called his process of breaking down a child’s personality before she’d fully developed her ego. To facilitate Destiny’s denaturing process, Uncle Joe fed her LSD-laced trail mix and locked her in an immersion tank filled with water from the Dead Sea. When Destiny emerged from the primordial darkness, her concept of self had been washed away. Uncle Joe could now rebuild his daughter as he saw fit.

Decades after rescue and deprogramming, Destiny continued to experience dissociation periods, where she floated above her childhood body and was compelled to wit-

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ness herself being abused. Destiny's memories were so disturbing that even her therapist caught herself questioning whether they were real. Destiny struggled to prove the cult's existence. When she searched the woods for Ascension traces, all Destiny unearthed were broken cinder blocks. In fact, the only tangible vestige of her life inside the cult was the wormhole on her forehead. Destiny briefly considered laser removal but decided to keep the tattoo as a reminder she wasn't completely nuts.

Seeking further proof of her traumatic childhood in Ascension, Destiny bought the dresser using her last open credit card, the one she'd been reserving for a root canal. She'd convinced herself that, if she just wished correctly, the charmed antique would be coaxed into producing photographs that corroborated her remembered experience. Instead, when Destiny rummaged through its drawers, the dresser continued to reveal pictures of her mother, lovingly raising her new children. When this torture became unendurable, Destiny tore the dresser apart with a crowbar, determined to expose the wicked machinery producing the painful taunts. All she found was cobwebs.

Destiny's self-perception had been so hobbled by Uncle Joe's upbringing that she couldn't grasp her own epiphany. She died without ever realizing that it wasn't her mother in the found photographs, but Destiny herself, an alternate version living in a parallel reality. While in the immersion tank, the child's soul breaks into fragments. Most pieces remain trapped in Ascension, but some escape into other timelines, where they are nurtured and thrive. I sent the snapshots through the heirloom wormhole to let Destiny know that one of us recovered from our denaturing and managed to piece together her splintered identity.

Invisible versions of ourselves are endlessly weeded so that our possibility survives. And so I've smothered that other Destiny inside a mound of wood shavings. She sanded the dresser into nothing, pursuing the wormhole, but couldn't get the grains small enough to see the trees through the sawdust—hear the ocean through the waves—taste the spirit through the mash—or whatever warped version of that antique idiom has survived in your universe. This split-level is where I've landed safely. The driftwood in my jelly cabinet is a gift from a Destiny upstream. She still beachcombs with our mother.

"But who painted the magical dresser?" my daughter asks, fidgeting in her mermaid costume while I roast pumpkin seeds. I explain that some mysteries are unraveled by neither poetry nor science. I recall a moment in the immersion tank when language broke, and Ascension denatured into "A Scent Ion," like it was the odor of chemistry that would save me, not the discipline. "And when we're finished with daydreaming, what happens to the sweepings?" Well, Destiny's sawdust blew through spacetime ductwork into my own childhood. The smell of woodworking triggered a future memory of building tree forts with my girl.



Aly Hansen is a photographer out of Birmingham, Alabama.

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*What draws you to portrait photography, and then the step further, self-portrait photography?*

I think I'm drawn to portrait photography because I've always felt passionate about documenting every detail of my life with photos (phones, point-and-shoots back in the day...). And for self portraits, I basically got tired of feeling like I was documenting everyone but myself. No one was documenting me. So, I document myself.

*What are you hoping to capture when you take photos of other people?*

I am hoping to capture people exactly as they are. Less about who they are and more as what they are in that moment. If they're sad that day, I don't want that hidden. If they're insecure, I try to have them embrace it. Clients ask me if I do blemish touch ups. No, not really, I don't want to. There are other photographers for that. I want to capture the imperfectly perfect essence of them.

*What are you hoping to capture when you photograph yourself?*

When I capture myself, I try to not try too hard, if that makes sense. Early in my photography journey I thought photographing myself meant trying to pose like a model, being in a unique scene, etc. Now I've found a rhythm in capturing myself in my elements...as I am. Home with my pets. Bathing in the light of my house. Things like that.

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You can see more of Hansen's work on her website: <https://alyhansenphoto.com>  
As well as her Instagram: @alyhansenphoto











Louise Robertson

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*The Pencil Cannot Believe It Is Here In The Cubicle Drawer*

I smell myself  
first thing, not shaved  
but dulled. Then the buzz and ozone  
of the computers expands  
into the air, my sunrise. The light  
shoves in when the drawer  
opens and I crash forward. Someone  
should hold me.  
I should be clutched  
and bitten. And  
when the night comes,  
I should be smaller  
than ever.

## Eve Rifkah

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### *Song of Blue*

We walk down the steep path back and forth grasses tangle our legs  
calla lilies browntipped cup the mist red-gray lumps of volcanic rubble skitter down to  
the shore we step into three boats  
like slippers barely larger than our feet lean into push poles lift forward push  
weight into pole move our boats among reeds all is hush but swish  
of grasses we come hunting the Blue as the songs sing us to do  
small fish glint in the currents in and out and dash away our shadows move from long trail to  
huddle close until all our eyes see  
still one leg bent balance the balance between  
now clear day smooth water clouds stir in ripples  
slow one moves like breath like leaf fall  
hand reaches reaches all our breath stilled we may never breathe again  
we may never motes  
swim in the air between us reach out one black eye stares back then yes then  
yes hand drifts across long feathered back just once only once is allowed  
one blink then wings lift up and beat down rises all the heaviness of Blue all the lightness of  
Blue long legs dangle and gone  
we all touch the hand that touched the Blue lift eyes to sky  
sing a new song of blessing to bring home  
touch hand to hand all in love all in need all

## Sandra Fees

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### *Midwife to a Fantasy*

My turn, I tiptoed  
downstairs  
slipped the house  
flashlight in hand.

My turn to ease  
open barn doors,  
peer into the starlight stall.

Spindled legs poked  
through a cloak of white  
on the matted straw.

My breath clasped  
and unclasped a lever  
in my throat, feet frozen  
then dashing.

Houselights flicked on,  
my parents roused  
and a journey  
across midnight began.

My father's instructions  
*pull the legs downward*  
*gently toward the mare's heels*

as human hands unfastened  
the world of horses

our tugs to free  
our fingers to clear.

And the mother huffing  
nostrils fluffed  
against the wingless creature  
I could not keep.

Jonathan B. Aibel

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*Old Eden*

fled my hands like frogs  
leaping from rock to rock  
while I, drenched in the chase,

bled, dear and red, my own soil,  
like annuals crowding out  
callipygean perennials

the shadow of winter over all  
I was learning, but now  
they take flight, frogs into swallows

one after another  
freckle the sky and all  
out of reach.

# Jannie Edwards

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## *Slip*

*i*

a page marker drifts  
from the library's  
*Field Guide to Getting Lost*

a list in faltering cursive:

*milk*  
*violets*  
*leotard*

*ii*

you parade before the mirror's throng  
your mother's ivory satin slip  
bloused up  
over a twist of scarf cinched at the waist  
outside the open window  
wind quivers the willow  
whispered applause  
for the future of style

*iii*

light slips through blinds // ladders shadows  
on the wall // *ship* slides to *fish* // swims into  
sleep's deep lake easy as you please // undercover  
sleight of mind's tongue losing its mind // slipping away

## CONTRIBUTORS

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### *POETRY*

Rose Maria Woodson has been published in *Inkwell*, *Gravel*, *Crack The Spine*, *Third Wednesday Magazine* and *Oyez Review*, among others. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Skin Gin* and *The Ombre Of Absence*, in addition to the mini-chapbook, *Dear Alfredo*. She holds an MA in creative writing from Northwestern University.

James Miller won the Connecticut Poetry Award in 2020. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Cold Mountain Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Atlanta Review*, *2River*, *A Minor*, *Typehouse*, *Eclectica*, *Rabid Oak*, *pioneertown*, *Juked*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Yemassee*, *Phoebe*, *Mantis*, *Scoundrel Time*, *Permafrost*, *SOFTBLOW* and elsewhere.

Originally from Chisinau, Moldova, Romana Iorga lives in Switzerland. She is the author of two poetry collections in Romanian. Her work in English has appeared or is forthcoming in various journals, including *Poet Lore*, *New England Review*, *Salamander*, *Gulf Coast*, *BOAAT*, as well as on her poetry blog at [clayandbranches.com](http://clayandbranches.com).

Emily Tsai is an undergraduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park. She has had her work featured in *Better Than Starbucks* and the *Oakland Arts Review*. She also illustrates in her free time. You can find her at [dragonfrewt.neocities.org](http://dragonfrewt.neocities.org).

Louise Robertson serves as the marketing director for Writers' Block Poetry Night in Columbus, OH. She counts among her many publications, awards, and honors a jar of homemade pickles that she received for running a workshop as well as a 2018 Pushcart nomination (*Open: A Journal of Arts and Letters*) and a 2018 Best of the Net nomination (*Flypaper*).

Eve Rifkah is author of "Dear Suzanne" (WordTech Communications, 2010) and "Outcasts the Penikese Leper Hospital 1905-1921" (Little Pear Press, 2010). Chapbook "Scar Tissue", (Finishing Line Press, 2017), "At the Leprosarium" 2003 winner of the Revelever Chapbook Contest. Single poems and flash fiction stories have appeared in many journals.

Sandra Fees is the author of *The Temporary Vase of Hands* (Finishing Line Press, 2017) and served a term as Berks County, Pennsylvania, Poet Laureate (2016-2018). Her work has appeared in *Sky Island Journal*, *Poets Reading the News*, *Chiron Review*, and other journals.

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Jonathan B. Aibel is a poet who spends his days wrestling software to the ground as an engineer specializing in quality and testing. His poems have been published, or will soon appear, in *Ocean State Review*, *Soundings East*, *Pangyrus*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *Rogue Agent*, *Main Street Rag*, and elsewhere. He has studied with Lucie Brock-Broido, David Ferry and Barbara Helfgott Hyett. Jonathan lives in Concord, MA with his family.

Jannie Edwards lives and writes from Edmonton, Alberta, where the coyotes and corvids are becoming bolder.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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### *PROSE*

Mary Maeve McGeorge's stories have been acknowledged for awards by *Writer's Digest* and Tulip Tree Publishing, as well as accepted for publication in literary journals such as *Sunlight Press*, *The Heartland Society of Women* and *Brown Bag*. A graduate of Santa Clara University, she was named the 2017 Canterbury Scholar, a prestigious fellowship allowing her to dedicate the entirety of her senior year to write and edit her first novel with the guidance of author Michael S. Malone.

W. David Hancock is a neurodivergent fiction author and playwright, whose theatrical work has radically challenged formal and narrative dramatic conventions. Hancock's stories have appeared in many journals, including *The Massachusetts Review*, *Hunger Mountain Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Menacing Hedge* (forthcoming). Among his honors are a Whiting Writers Award, the Hodder Fellowship, and 2 OBIE Awards for playwriting. Hancock's latest play, *Master*, was a *NY Times Critics' Pick* and received a *NY Drama Desk* nomination for "unique theatrical experience."