Stonecrop Review

A JOURNAL OF URBAN NATURE WRITING, ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

ISSUE 5: FLORA

CONTRIBUTORS

Writers & Editors

Naomi Racz
Holly McKelvey
Stephenie Frederick
Christina Baker
Małgosia Halliop
Jessica Lott
Elisabeth Plumlee-Watson
Shelley Mann Hite
L.Lu
Clara Dawson
Sara Collie
Anaita Vazifdar-Davar
Andrea Lani
Sarah Song
Germain M.C.
Lew Forester
Vimla Sriram

Photographers & Artists

Priyanka Sacheti
Lindsey Morrison Grant
Maroula Blades
Despy Boutris
Morgan Alexa Braid
Maura McNamara

Flora Cover Image

Untitled by Morgan Alexa Braid

SOCIAL MEDIA @stonecrop.review
CONTACT stonecrop.review@gmail.com
WEBSITE www.stonecropreview.com

A Note from the Editors

When Holly and I decided to launch Stonecrop Review back in 2018, we weren't sure how much interest there would be in a creative journal about urban nature. We were both exploring urban nature in our own writing and drawing, but were we the only ones? The submissions for this issue have put any remaining doubts to rest. The answer, quite simply, is that we are not alone!

We received over 150 submissions for this issue and it was a long and difficult process to whittle them down to the twenty pieces you will encounter between these pages.

More than anything, we were drawn to pieces that explored a sense of personal connection to urban flora. Pieces in which plants are allowed to be just plants, but are also, somehow, more. In "The Trees of Montjuïc" by Jessica Lott, urban trees come to symbolize the freedom Jessica so desperately longs for during Spain's first, intense lockdown. In "A Field Guide to Ohio Wildflowers," Shelley Mann Hite writes about the flowers that symbolize her marriages and the way she has grown and changed over time.

Urban flora can also offer belonging. In "Stellaria media *Namul* and Mugwort *Tteok*" Sarah Song finds a sense of connection with her Korean upbringing by cooking with the spring wildflowers growing in her yard. And in her essay, Vimla Sriran yearns for New Delhi but discovers a sense of belonging in the Pacific Northwest through her backyard trees. We received quite a few submissions written from the perspective of a tree or plant, but we found ourselves less drawn to these pieces. My feeling is that it's probably not possible for a human to truly inhibit the "mind" of a tree, plant, or flower. Just recently, I was reading again about the "wood-wide web"—the fungal networks that connect trees within a forest and that allow them to communicate and share resources. Before this connection was discovered by scientist Suzanne Simard, trees were seen as solitary, or as competing with one another for resources and light. Of course humans (or, at least, white colonists), who were themselves competing for this resource, locked in a battle against time, which threatened to fell and rot away their investments, would view trees in this way.

It's a criticism often leveled at nature writing in general, that humans go out into nature and project our own perspective onto the landscapes, plants, and animals we encounter there. But, alas, I am also a hopeless poet and I love a good metaphor. I love the many meanings that the writers, artists, and photographers featured in this issue bring to the urban flora they explore. In her poem "Planted," Małgosia Halliop writes: I'm planted here so hard, / I can't tear myself away. I love the intensity of feeling in these lines.

When we decided to do back-to-back themes of fauna and flora, we knew (or at least hoped) they would invite a broad range of interpretations. But what I've come to realize through doing these issues, is just how interconnected they are. You can't really have one without the other. The opening piece in this issue, "Kumquats and Cedar Waxwings" by Christina Baker, illustrates this beautifully. Is it a piece about flora or a piece about fauna? It is both and it couldn't be any other way.

Happy reading!

Naomi Racz | Editor

In February 2021, approximately one year into the pandemic, we brought out an issue on urban fauna that felt unexpectedly well-timed given the increased awareness of local nature during lockdown. The Fauna issue introduced us to animals that live around and in our urban environments and which, in many cases, had actively contributed to shaping pandemic experiences. We had stories of foxes shrieking in the night from cemeteries; big cats accidentally making their way into living rooms and bears visiting neighborhood trash cans; big turtles nesting on urban beaches; and birds abundant—in other words, an issue that was rich with the movement and life of our urban landscapes.

But it was also clear to us that this was only part of the urban nature fabric. On each page, urban greenery was already making its appearance, growing between the paragraphs, creating space for the urban fauna to thrive—and in this issue, Flora, we've given that greenery the opportunity to take center stage.

Rich with incredible illustrations and photography (we had more visual submissions than ever!), the Flora issue gives us surprisingly intimate views into backyard gardens and urban windowsills; it explores weeds that grow through cracks in the wall and patches of grass that survive no matter what; it invites us to explore how poets Wordsworth and Mary Oliver captured their wonder at these plants in words and perhaps feel permission to try our own hand at putting down words or images on the page to describe our own local flora.

Trees hold an especial amount of agency in these pages. "They are mistaken, those who say that trees cannot move," writes Priyanka Sacheti in her photo essay exploring urban growth in Bangalore. And in his poem "These Trees," Lew Forester notes that they "are never where we leave them." I think these words, this sense of unexpected, uncontainable movement, could be said of all the urban flora described in these pages, from trees down to grasses on walks and new sprouts in the garden—they move far more than we realize, shaping the urban spaces around us as much if not more than the often flashier fauna.

Finally, I was very excited to see the flavors that emerged on the pages! We were able to feature some recipes for the first time in this issue: Lemongrass *chai* in Anaita Vazifdar-Davar's piece "Parvati's *Chai*" as she recalls sneaking into the kitchen for forbidden sips of delicious spicy *chai*; and guacamole in Andrea Lani's essay "Alligator Pear" on the gentle science of growing an avocado jungle during the pandemic. Flavors emerge in other pieces as well: mugwort and star-flower create the basis for Korean dishes in Sarah Song's essay "Stellaria media *Namul* and mugwort *Tteok*" and kumquats are processed into marmalade (and later, an enticing snack for migrating birds) in Christina Baker's essay "Kumquats and Cedar Waxwings".

To conclude, I am incredibly proud of and delighted by this issue—the flavors, the rich visuals, and the incredible personality of each tree, each handful of flowers, and each patch of grass described in these pages. I hope you enjoy reading Flora as much as Naomi and I enjoyed putting it together!

Holly McKelvey | Illustrator

STONECROP REVIEW

ISSUE 5: FLORA

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READERS CORNER

Kumquats and Cedar Waxwings

Christina Baker

Christina Baker received a BA in Latin and Classical Studies from Tulane University. Her poetry has appeared in *Channel Magazine* and her reflections can be read in the anthology *Darkness is as Light* (Park End Books). She enjoys hiking, gardening, and identifying backyard bugs with her boys.

The citrus trees came with the house, one in each corner of the backyard. On the south side, there is what I've taken to calling the "sumo satsuma"—oranges that look and taste like satsuma mandarins, but are about three times the size of any other satsuma I've ever met. On the north side, next to the concrete pedestal bird bath, is a kumquat.

The kumquat tree was a pleasant surprise, in a way. I had never eaten a kumquat before we moved in, and our tree turned out to bear one of the sweeter varieties. Every winter we eat as many as we can (I know a certain four-year-old who is very helpful about this), give away as many as we can cajole our neighbors and friends into taking, and make as many jars of marmalade as I can reasonably hope to eat. And still, with the possible exception of the lowest branches closest to the house, the tree looks completely unpicked.

The abundance is amazing. It seems to me that no one in South Louisiana would go hungry in the winter if everyone who had citrus trees shared their bounty. We try to do our part to spread the wealth, and still are left with more than we can handle. Except for last winter.

Last winter I procrastinated a little when it came to getting all those kumquats picked. They started to ripen in December, and I was busy. January rolled by. In February, the weather caught up to me.

Our house is only about 30 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico as the crow flies, so severe freezes aren't too frequent. But the one we had in February 2021, dipping down into the low 20s, wreaked havoc on gardens and plumbing alike.

It also froze all the kumquats on our tree.

When the weather warmed up a little, I went out and poked a kumquat. It felt like jello. A tiny ball of

orange jello, enclosed in a thin citrus skin, dangling from the tree branch.

I'll admit, part of me was glad to shed the stress of figuring out how to consume (or can) all that fruit. A weight was removed from my shoulders. On the other hand, there were now somewhere in the neighborhood of forty pounds of kumquat mush hanging in my backyard like abandoned Christmas ornaments, just waiting for the weather to warm enough for them to rot and draw every fly and gnat in the neighborhood. I wondered how I was going to clean up a mess of that magnitude. How *does* one clear up sixty square feet of kumquat jam?

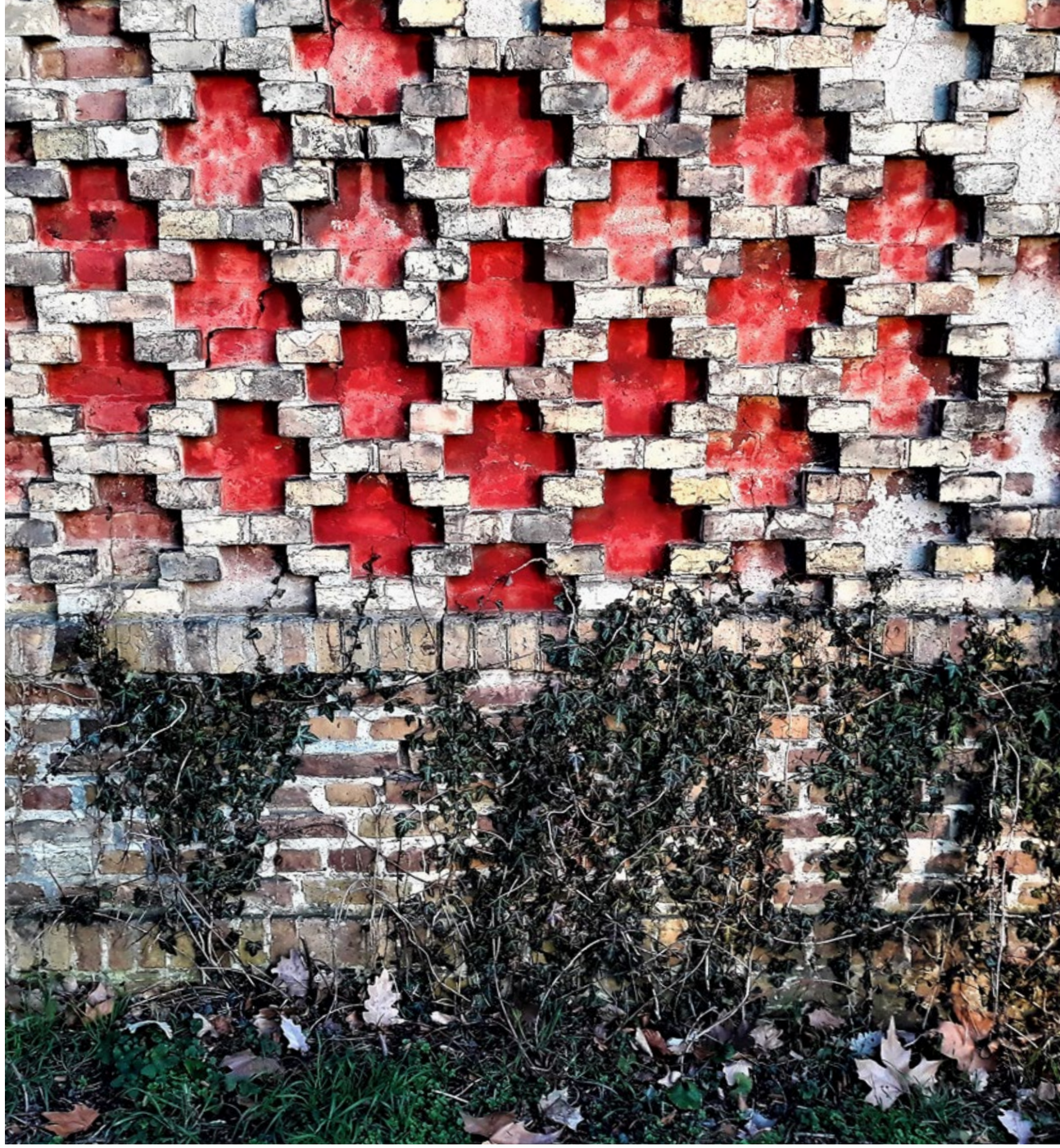
About three days after the freeze, I was in my kitchen when I heard a clamor of whistling and chirping. I looked out the back door. It wasn't windy, but the branches of the kumquat tree were in motion, dancing like bubbles in a boiling pot. I had a momentary vision of ents taking over my neighborhood, our neighbor's water oak gathering and herding all the smaller trees away. I blinked and looked again.

Flashes of highlighter yellow and fire-engine red darted from branch to branch. From a closer vantage point, out on the back porch, I could see the truth: a flock of cedar waxwings had descended, and they were merrily devouring the kumquat mush right off the tree, the ground, and even the birdbath. I think I counted around thirty-five birds on our semi-dwarf tree.

I'll admit I had to turn to the field guide—this was my first encounter with cedar waxwings. But there on the page was a full-color drawing, blessedly still, of the creatures who had taken over my tree. There were the brown-turning-to-gray body and the jaunty crest. There were the holly-berry red wingtips and the black mask. There were the light yellow underbelly and the bright yellow tail-tip. "Highly gregarious." The field guide spoke the truth.

For about three days, we reveled in the sound, motion, and color that had taken over our backyard. Then the flock moved on. The tree had been picked bare—you wouldn't have guessed it had ever borne fruit it was so clean. And the best part: no mush, no smell, no flies.

As I write, it's kumquat season again, and this year we're enlisting our kids' friends to help with the picking and with handing out bags of fruit like party favors, and still the tree is bright with constellations of patiently waiting fruit. We haven't had a hard freeze yet this year, but part of me is hopeful. As much as I dread covering plants and wrapping pipes, I have to admit that I wouldn't mind another round of the kumquat-mush tree, so that the cedar waxwings will come back, bringing all their color and motion—all their noisy, vibrant life—along with them.



Untitled by Maroula Blades (bio on page 14)

Untitled by Maroula Blades (bio on page 14)

Death of a Norway Maple in Toronto

Małgosia Halliop

Małgosia Halliop immigrated to Canada from Poland as a child, and has lived in Toronto for close to thirty years. In the past decade, she has been a writer, editor, community organizer, visual artist, wildlife tracker, and nature educator. She is currently working to hone her craft as a poet.

Intruder in ravines and parks,
crowding out the locals. Autumn leaves
tar-spotted, stubborn,
unwilling to put on any kind of show.

Yet this maple filled my window for years,
offered the first gifts
of cardinal's song and pale green leaves
in spring, kept sanctuary
for racoons and squirrels, blocked the sun's glare
in summer.

It was an imperfect companion,
a wide-limbed guardian tangled in hydro wires,
this towering being who had watched the years unfolding,
watched over my kids' first glimpses
of grass and sky, and their own startling growth.

This week, I watched a crew deconstruct the maple
bough by bough, masked climber lashed
to a high branch holding up his weight
as he slid down, carving off increasingly wider limbs—
a gleeful child unstacking wooden blocks
until the sky was empty.

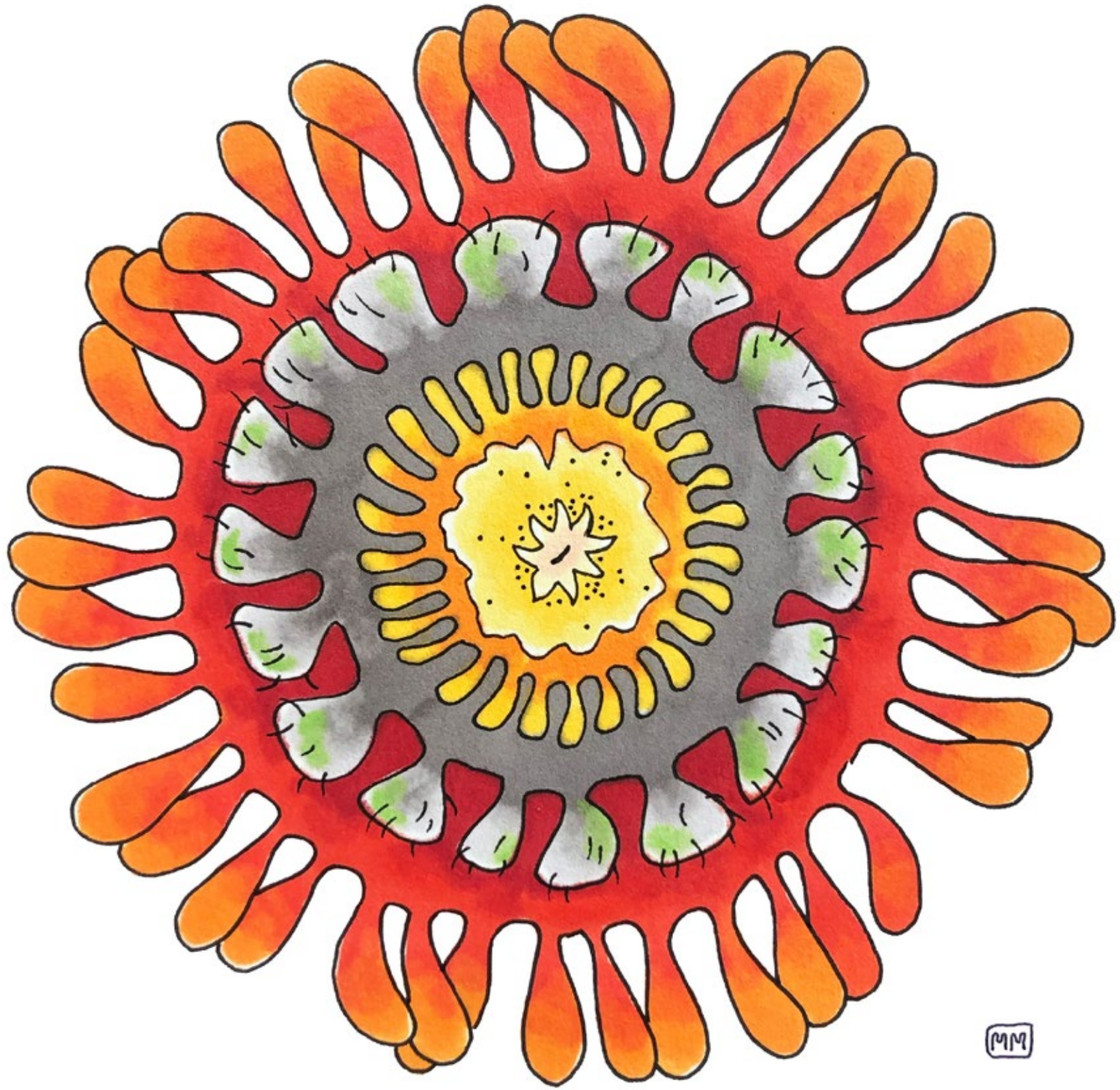
I will not live to plant a tree to grow to this tree's height.
This age of shade is over.
Each day I wake and see a wide looming sky,
denuded windows, unsheltered roofs,
a far glimpse of horizon, unfamiliar space,
distant clouds blooming and waning.

Planted

Małgosia Halliop

The spray of cosmos punches out
between pavement and border,
clutched as if by a fist
under concrete, stems widening
into a haze of foliage, flowers lobed
as if drawn by a child's
too-optimistic hand. By the back steps,
between wooden boards and paving stones,
sprawl thin scrawled leaves of the arugula
I seeded somewhere else entirely,
now always trodden, always underfoot.
Why is this what's living?
I plant seeds that bring forth nothing,
invite them into rich soil, well-watered,
but through a will I can't control,
they sneak into sharp corners,
insist on keeping life hard.
My plans are displaced by wildflowers.
Sunchokes crowd my garden
like a jungle, thick tubers grasping
each other's limbs under the soil,
yellow flowers tall as saplings
staking their claim on a territory
I have not adequately protected,
muscling out humbler offers.
I'm still here too. The concrete hurts my limbs,
but I can't stop walking. Cars creep by
like a line of ants, each its own steel bubble
protecting something tender.
Buried rivers evade their banks;
snow and ice claw holes in the concrete—
there'll always be a need for reparations.
People I love leave for more
welcoming soil; I reach out
my cut tendrils, again seeking solace.
I jostle for sun, keep my heart watered,
dig my own roots deep into cracks
in this jagged landscape.
I'm planted here so hard,
I can't tear myself away.

6 by Maura McNamara
(bio on page 14)



Issue 5 Illustrators and Photographers

Maroula Blades

Maroula Blades is a writer and hobby photographer. She received the INITIAL Special Grant from the Academy of Arts in Berlin. Published works in *The Caribbean Writer, The Freshwater Review, Abridged, The London Reader, Aji, Tint Magazine* among others. Chapeltown Books published her story collection, *The World in an Eye.*

Despy Boutris

Despy Boutris' writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Guernica, Copper Nickel, Ploughshares, Crazyhorse, AGNI, American Poetry Review, The Gettysburg Review, Colorado Review,* and elsewhere. Currently, she serves as Editor-in-Chief of *The West Review.*

Morgan Alexa Braid

Morgan Alexa Braid is a writer, ceramicist, and visual artist from British Columbia. When she's not creating, she's busy crocheting balaclavas, devouring graphic novels, or making pizza with her husband. See more of her work on Instagram @notyourmamascowboy.

Lindsey Morrison Grant

Self-identifying as a neurodivergent, two-spirit, elder storyteller, and contrarian deeply rooted in the roar and lore that's become Portlandia of The Left Coast, Lindsey Morrison Grant attributes success and survival (if not salvation) to superlative supports, mindfulness practice, and daily creative expression in words, sounds, and images.

Maura McNamara

Maura James McNamara is a multidisciplinary artist committed to exploring the sovereignty of consciousness and sensory representations of non-duality. She is the host and producer of the *Unbroken Chain Podcast*, and co-director of the forthcoming feature documentary *The Charnel Ground* about life after incarceration. More at MauraJames.com.

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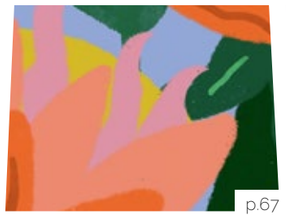

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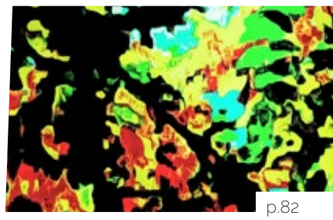

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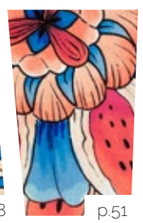

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The Trees of Montjuïc

Jessica Lott

Jessica Lott is the author of the novels *The Rest of Us* (Simon & Schuster), winner of the New England Book Festival Fiction Award; *Osin*, winner of the Low Fidelity Press Novella Award; and the forthcoming *Experimental Jet Set, 1992*. Her essays have appeared in *Artforum*, *New York Times*, *Frieze*, and *Art21*, among other publications.

www.jessicalott.com

Barcelona, before the pandemic, had the rather dubious reputation of being Europe's party city. It had its share of vice and trouble, of course, but it also placed a strong emphasis on play, discovery, socialization. It seemed to ignite an inner freedom in the people who visited, as it did in me, too, in my first years living here.

Regardless of your perspective, it was then, and still is, a city engineered for ease and pleasure. This is no accident—it is, rather, the result of a series of urban planning and policy decisions largely conducted in the 1980s, in advance of the 1992 Olympics, that massively transformed the grim, oppressed city of the Franco dictatorship into a major tourist destination. One which capitalized on its natural resources with a "sun, sea, sangria" marketing campaign.

It was also a city that could be wildly, indulgently, thrillingly social. Wide avenues lined with palm trees and buzzing terrace cafes, quaint Gothic streets, a continuously beaming sun, the expanse of gentle, clear sea. All of this seemed a backdrop for something even more essential—people in conversation, heart-to-heart exchanges, discussions about ideas, laughter, strangers swapping stories. It was the crackle of all that talk that was most alive somehow. And that long stretch of sand, the glinting sea, the crying of the gulls overhead, worked to heighten and enhance the pleasure of these human dynamics.

With a swiftness that will never cease to feel shocking, that changed. The pandemic arrived, and soon after, the Spanish government declared a state of alarm, which suspended free movement. Under the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, *el confinamiento*, people were only allowed out of their homes to go to the closest grocery store, doctor, or pharmacy; for essential work; or to walk the dog—with few other exceptions. On these trips, you were to stay near your house, and police were grouped on corners to inquire where you were off to. Children, in a decision that would later come to seem heartbreaking, weren't allowed outside at all, and I can't remember seeing any for weeks. You only heard them, as one hears a dog barking in a distant apartment.

I suppose once Italy went into lockdown that winter, we should have suspected Spain would adopt a similar model, but somehow, as was proven everywhere, we were slow to think the pandemic would spread to us. In fact, it only occurred to me one afternoon in March, after talking with a friend who was in her fifth day of home confinement in Rome. She'd never noticed it before, she told me, but the sun didn't actually enter her apartment directly. "Not at any point in the day." She said she'd spent the majority of that morning looking across the street at a patch of sunlight, masterminding how she could go over there and stand in it without getting a ticket. She thought if she paid attention, she could perhaps find a window of time in which the police were otherwise occupied, to make her move.

Unnerved, I went out onto the street. On Via Laietana, restaurants with big glass-fronted faces—tourist restaurants—were filled with laughing, eating people. Were there still tourists in Barcelona? Cutting through Plaça Catedral, I saw the open-air antiques market was set up, street vendors were still offering their Sagrada Familia magnets, plastic castanets, collapsible wooden bowls shaped like apples. A guy was still strumming a guitar in front of the cathedral. From the outside it looked normal, but there was an aura, a prodrome—there were too few people on the street, something was very wrong.

That evening I went for a walk with my old roommate Martha. We met in front of the apartment where I used to live, under the blue jacaranda tree visible from my old room, and walked down by the park, past the long row of swaying palms, through lengthening shadows, as I filled the air between us with ominous predictions. "The restaurants are going to have to close here, definitely," she conceded. She rarely eats out anyway. "Not only that," I said, breathlessly, "I think we're going to be prohibited from going outside—like in Italy!" "Nooo." "Yes," I insisted. "Think about it for a moment." She did. "Not even to go running?" She ran along the beach every morning, like clockwork, even in bad weather, even when she was tired—she'd done it for a decade. "I don't know," I said, grimly, feeling awful. "But probably not even that." We'd been unconsciously following her running route and had arrived at the lip of the sea. It spread out darkly before us. I watched as the panic cascaded down her face.

The next day the Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, announced that the *confinamiento*, punishable by fines or arrest, would begin Monday morning. On Sunday, our last day of freedom, I set out for a final walk. I snapped a photo of the nearly vacant Ramblas, our pedestrian-choked thoroughfare, and sent it to Martha with the caption "No people!" I crossed Drassanes, and then up through the Poble Sec neighborhood, under the cropped plane trees, to scale Montjuïc, Barcelona's second largest mountain, more of a hill, really, with public parks, fountains, an abundance of flowering trees and plants, and a commanding view of the city. I cut up a red dirt trail worn down by feet. I wanted to enjoy myself, to inhale all of it—the bunches of clover, the oaks and their rough bark, familiar to me from home, the blue-

winged magpies picking through the grass—to store it up for the unknown number of weeks ahead. But I was anxious, distracted. I didn't know how to draw comfort from nature. Instead, the fear within me cast its shadow outwards, everywhere, dirtying up the day, highlighting the invasive vines and curling yellow leaves of a blighted tree, the sandwich wrappers the seagulls had pulled from the trash bins and scattered across the ground.

I was about thirty minutes away from home when I received Martha's reply: "Where are you?" By this point I was already up on Montjuïc. I sent her a photo of some yellow flowers blooming on the ground. "You're brave," she wrote back. "I was too scared to risk it." I froze. "Confinement starts tomorrow," I texted back. Her reply: "They changed it. It went into effect last night."

Suddenly, like a blast of cold air, I noticed that I was alone up there, on that hill. How many people had I passed on my way up? So few. And all of them had been walking dogs. I turned and started running down, skidding over rocks and dirt. Cutting back down to Parallel, I mentally calculated that I was allowed to be out if I'd gone to the market. I ducked into the nearest corner store and grabbed a dodgy-looking loaf of bread. Clutching my sham loaf, I jogged back, relieved to get to my apartment, to be able to close the door behind me. I didn't know, none of us did, that it would be another forty-eight days until we could wander that far, or that aimlessly, again.

Urban environments do not provide the most optimum living conditions for trees. And trees in cities do not live as long as those in forests. Their quality of life is dependent on so many other factors, type of pavement and planting, the traffic, and how much light they receive. It is dependent on the height of the neighboring buildings. Trees can seem an afterthought in the arrangement of a city, but we need them there, desperately it seems. Not only for the air, but for noise reduction, for microclimate regulation, for rainwater retention, and to attract animal biodiversity.

We also need them for our psychological and emotional well-being. In the landscape of the mind, where we spend so much of our life, time operates in a nonlinear fashion. Events are emotionally chained; something that happened ten years ago can feel as if it occurred yesterday, or conversely, we can get stuck in an eternal-seeming present tense, as I did in those anxiety-choked first weeks of the pandemic, when I was unable to imagine things getting better.

But that's not how biological life proceeds. The world is in a constant state of change. A tree, with its communicative root system, its life cycle and slow, steady growth, its seasonal stages—preparation for dormancy, dormancy, new growth, blossoming—is one of the truest metaphors for our own lives that there is.

There are an estimated 1.4 million trees in Barcelona, but during those months of the *confinamiento* I only remember seeing one. It was located in front of the supermarket at the end of my block. It arrived into my field of vision one day when it seemed to have suddenly sprouted leaves, small and pinkish-green and damp like new butterfly wings. It was a plane tree, the most dominant species in the city center, as ubiquitous as a parked car. They line the avenues and parks, their multicolored bark coming off in strips like old wallpaper, their leaves growing brownish and dropping in winter. At certain windy times of the year they release their bulbous seedheads, like a dandelion, to fly into the noses and throats of anyone walking around. Their pollen is widely blamed for allergies.

Untitled **by Morgan Alexa Braid**
(bio on page 14)

I stood looking at that tree for as long as I dared linger. It was sturdy, a decent size, and had a knobby trunk with a big open knot. There was an intoxicating fragrance of summer that seemed to be coming off of it, although I knew that was impossible. But the tree transferred that feeling of freedom to me, deep as I was in the driven well of my own mind. I returned home and walked barefoot through the house, feeling hopeful for the first time.

A few days later, after massive calls to "free our children," it was announced that the children would finally be allowed out. But only to go with their parents to the grocery store. The backlash was instantaneous and fierce, and the legislation quickly amended. Children could go outside once a day for an hour, supervised, within 1 kilometer from their homes. They could bring with them one toy.

Soon after, there was talk of a May 2 release date for the rest of us, and our WhatsApp chats were filled with fantastical imaginings of what we would do with our full day in the sun. Two days before, however, it was revealed there was a catch, we couldn't just go out whenever. We had newly regulated hours, as if outside were a popular attraction, and we needed a timed entry to it: an early morning slot until 10 am or a night slot from 8–11 pm.

On that highly anticipated day, I stepped out into the dazzlingly bright street and was instantly alarmed. It was like a major citywide fitness event was taking place. The streets were jam-packed with people in running sneakers and workout gear—bikers in Lycra whizzed past. Police cars slowly rolled by, as if manning a parade.

If you looked closely, you'd find that many people weren't really exercising—there was a man in sweatpants with an enormous camera and telephoto lens, there was another man in sneakers and a neon windbreaker, covertly drinking a beer. This had to do with a peculiarity in the new provision. You were only allowed to stray further than 1 km from your home if you were engaged in a fitness activity: running, biking, or jogging. So to be on the safe side, everyone had dressed the part.

Me too. I stretched briefly and then began tearing down the street like a person being chased by dogs. My body, unaccustomed to any rapid forward movement, went into shock. I was seized by terrible cramps and had to return home to take some ibuprofen. By the time I had recuperated enough to drag myself out again, it was nearing ten and the police were attempting to herd almost the entire city back indoors using bullhorns. I'd only made it to the end of my block.

The next day I prepared better. I set out on a slower pace up to Montjuïc. Once I hit the road to ascend, I joined up with a sea of people, like at the start of a marathon, rising higher and higher until the crowd gradually thinned.

Up here, spring had burst out loudly, unseen, triumphant. Wild and ungroomed. There was a profusion of Dr. Seuss–like plants: one that smelled like honeysuckle, another like musty clothes. Wild morning glories were in the grass, along with dandelions as big as chrysanthemums. Some mornings I managed to make it as high as the castle, surrounded by its somber Aleppo pines, where I rested, watching the wind move through their branches, before suddenly, too soon, always too soon, it was 9:37 and I, along with every other sportily dressed person in the vicinity, had to leave. I pictured us as viewed from above, like a school of fish, moving all together in one direction, and then, as if in response to some unseen peril, reversing course and doubling back.

I would come shooting down the hill, through the switchbacks of roads, and burst out onto Parallel, then speed across Drassanes, behind the Maritime Museum, and up and over the Rambla, all the while cringe-listening for the clock tower to chime ten. For those weeks before the restrictions faded and we were allowed to move freely, every morning, no matter how early I got up, the same scene was repeated. It always seemed to be 9:37, and I was always just that little bit too far from home. I re-enacted my panicked return on the first day of the *confinamiento*, again and again, as if somehow, subconsciously, I'd gotten stuck there.

Has the pandemic changed us? This was a question we obsessively asked each other, ourselves, in the months after the *confinamiento* ended. I remember walking around feeling so raw to the natural world, to its subtlety, and gentleness, to its vulnerability, and our constant, repeated abuses of it, that it felt extremely painful. It was a painful way to move about the city. The city of pleasure and ease.

I had woken up to the connection between myself and the natural world—it had moved from background to foreground. My previous state of inattention was untenable. And so I started looking into habitat conservation and collaborating with a wildlife rehabilitation hospital on a book-length project. Sometimes this work is slow, but the initial cause, the waking up, happens in an instant. I imagine, if it was this way for me, it must be this way for others, too.

Months later I was at a friend's apartment near the beach. In front was a large cypress pine—a tree that appears frequently in Salvador Dalí's paintings as a tall, cone-like shape on a distant landscape. It was evening, we were on the balcony, and the birdsong was getting louder and louder. "Watch," she said. And as we did, we saw masses of small birds arriving, different species, flying to the tree and entering its tightly knit, hedge-like branches to roost for the night. Bird after bird arrived, calling to each other, as if in a convention hall or train station, the sound growing in intensity, not unpleasant, but not entirely pleasant either, a cacophony, rising in pitch, until suddenly it stopped, and a giant hush settled in. I would think about this later, about the lone tree, and the noise, about this scene that gets repeated every night as the birds arrive, some early, some late, as they, like us, sort themselves out, figure out where they need to go.

Persistence by Lindsey Morrison Grant
(bio on page 14)

A 9th Century German Poet in my 21st Century Garden

Elisabeth Plumlee-Watson

Elisabeth Plumlee-Watson is an editor, writer, and bookseller at Loganberry Books living, working, and gardening with her wife. Her writing has been published in *Terrain.org*, *Oh Reader*, A Gathering of the Tribes, and elsewhere. She also writes the monthly book recommendation Substack, *Seasons Readings*.

Back to the realms of light I summoned the worms, said Walahfrid Strabo. [1]

It's such a comically grandiose statement that, while digging in my own front garden last spring, I thought of it and almost turned to Walahfrid, laughing aloud. He really did feel close enough to turn to, and he's clearly already laughing at himself.

It was the first time this year I'd sunk my spade full-depth in the soil, and I was digging holes for apple trees. The two-year-old trees (they're actually called "whips" at this growth stage) had been dug up as the soil started to thaw in their Missouri hometown, after which their roots were washed free of every trace of the only home they'd ever known. Wrapped in soggy newspaper and plastic and shipped express from the countryside to my inner-ring suburb, the little trees' arrival prompted a headlong rush to plant what most closely resembled very expensive sticks into the ground before they started to wake up or dry up.

Digging the widest holes I could between concrete of driveway and path, I turned up worms by the dozen, tangled and moving, which brought to mind Walahfrid's line about himself gardening—casting himself as a minor god, upending the worms' universe, "summoning [them] back to the realms of light."

Walahfrid himself has been food for worms these 1,170 years and more. But time in the garden isn't quite like time in other places.

1 With the exception of excerpts from Raef Payne's translation of *Hortulus* (Hunt Botanical Library, 1966: Pittsburgh) all translations from the original Latin are the author's own.

I first encountered Walahfrid and his Latin verse memoir *Hortulus* (literally "The Little Garden") while doing what I sometimes call "my winter gardening"—digging around in garden books while, in my real garden, the snow drifts knee-deep and the sun sets at 5pm. He's in Sylvia Landsberg's book *The Medieval Garden* where she quotes his account of building a small garden in a corner of his bustling monastic community:

So that my small patch wouldn't be washed away
We faced it with planks and raised it in oblong beds
A little above the level ground. With a rake,
I broke the soil up bit by bit, and then
worked in from on top the leaven of rich manure.

Walahfrid's world and mine feel, in many ways, as distant as Earth is from Mars. He lived in the 9th century, in Charlemagne's empire, about as far before Gutenberg's printing press as I live after it. Antibiotics were a thousand years distant. I, born at the end of the 20th century, have been flown miles above the ocean just under the speed of sound. I've been lowered into total unconsciousness, cut open by doctors, and have lived to tell the tale.

And yet: Walahfrid, like me, gardened in the space constraints of a close-built university town—he complains as much as I do about overshadowing walls and roofs. Like Walahfrid, I also break up my clay soil with a rake and use planks to build raised beds. I, too, spread manure over the soil, working it in from the top. Like leaven, those few expensive bags of manure go a long way: the patient gardener, whether in the Dark Ages or the Third Millennium, spreads manure and waits for the soil to become its better self. In all times and places, the garden rises up, alive and life-giving as good bread.

Walahfrid seems as familiar as someone who just stepped out of the room.

Like the peripatetic Millennials of my generation, Walahfrid didn't live any one place for long: his professional life took him from city to town and back again. He came to his little garden late and he lost it early. He was a disabled poet of queer love and imperial power, a man who never stayed in one place very long. He was an incorrigible optimist and a devoted giver and receiver of care. He was preoccupied with "springtime, source of the world's life and the year's glory."

I'd recognize him anywhere: a gardener—no matter how far from a garden he found himself.

Walahfrid Strabo was born around the year 809 in what's now called Germany. Charlemagne was emperor and Walahfrid's family was poor enough or pious enough to give him to the abbey settlement on Reichenau Island in Lake Constance when Walahfrid was about 8 years old.

Speaking of families: Strabo isn't a family name—it's an epithet all Walahfrid's own, specific to his own body. It means "squint-eyed" or "cross-eyed." But while "Strabo" was not the body Walahfrid chose, it was the name and identity he explicitly chose for himself, from his earliest preserved writings until the end of his life. It's how he signed his many letters and poems—from the most intimate ("Remember me, Father—the boy with the squint?") to the most official, including to the Holy Roman Emperor: "Because the creator left a flaw in his work. . . I will write under this flawed name."

I wonder whether the family Walahfrid was

Untitled by Despy Boutris
(bio on page 14)

born into viewed him as more disposable because of this physical difference, if that's how they decided to send him away. Was he already "Strabo" before he first boarded the boat to Reichenau Island, or was it who he became to himself after leaving home and family, starting life over again at age 8?

Wherever he gained his unique surname, Walahfrid's journey away from his birth family across Lake Constance was the first great journey and first great parting in a life marked equally by lasting attachments and perpetual departures.

❦

Beloved: you come suddenly, and suddenly, too, you leave
I hear; I do not see. Yet, within, I see, and within
I hold you even as you leave me – in body but not in faithfulness.

All his life, Walahfrid wrote tender letters to teachers and friends who were far from him, and deliriously romantic poems to men he loved and left behind. These lines form the opening of one of his best-loved poems, written to a man named Lutiger, a work still anthologized with the great love poems of history.

All the leaving and losing while also loving that Walahfrid did during his lifetime gave rise to an abundance of writing about distance and gaps; between bodies, yes, but equally between the world as it is and the world as we can imagine it; that crack in creation we call destruction and parting, which is, yes, exactly those things, but is also another door through which creation enters again.

❦

After his first upheaval from home, Walahfrid flourished in the communal life and study of Reichenau Abbey, distinguishing himself as a thinker, reader, and writer—enough so that, around the age of 16, he was sent away from home again, this time to one of his world's most prominent centers of learning, Fulda, a large town more than 350 km north from Reichenau.

At Fulda, Walahfrid entered high-level academia, studying under leading thinkers of the day, and forming relationships that lasted his entire life. His reputation as a writer, thinker, and friend grew and spread, and when he was just 20 years old, Walahfrid—the prodigy of Reichenau, the boy with the squint—was sent another 300 km west to Aachen, the capital city of the Holy Roman Empire, to be tutor to Charlemagne's 6-year-old grandson, Charles.

Charlemagne himself had been dead for almost 15 years by the time Walahfrid traveled from Fulda to the imperial city. Aachen was, by 829, the court of Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious. Louis' eldest three sons had all but reached adulthood when their widowed father remarried and had a fourth son with his new wife, Empress Judith, setting the scene for strained factions and power struggles.

❦

This past March was the driest in my gardening memory, and Walahfrid seemed beside me again, exclaiming how "My gardening zeal and fear that the slender shoots / May die of thirst make me scurry to bring fresh water / In brimming buckets."

I've never had to water anything so early in spring, but the beautiful sunny days repeated and repeated themselves, and, finally, vexed by how vexed the lovely weather made me, I carried buckets

of water down the narrow driveway to the little apple trees, so slight and leafless that they barely cast a shadow in the brilliant sun.

This kind of love, garden-love, remains constant across millennia: embodied and compulsory. "With my own hands I pour it," Walahfrid wrote of water. "Drop by drop, taking care not to shift the seeds / By too sudden or lavish soaking. Sure enough / In a little while, the garden is carpeted over / With tiny young shoots."

During his first days in the capital, Walahfrid undertook a monumental 200+ line poem, *de imagine Tetrici*, an allegorical confection in which he praised every member of the imperial family for happily and harmoniously bearing their allotted role, no matter how paltry, in the increasingly subdivided Holy Roman Empire. (Walahfrid, the eternal optimist: I can't help but love him for it, no matter how delusional he seems.)

What interests me most in *de imagine Tetrici* is that the whole poem, a bombastic recital of imperial might, is framed as a conversation (with a Muse named "Sparkle", by the way) in a garden—a palace courtyard with an elaborate fountain at its center: somewhere Walahfrid could look up and see the sky and feel swept up in the living world:

The days lengthen and shadows soften,
as the new crops and the trees and every living thing
crossing the sea or woods or countryside or air
gives itself over to flowers and babies, and the joy of flowers and babies.

When he wrote this, Walahfrid was more than a decade away from having his own garden, but even in that grand imperial city, he had his eyes on the earth. Sparkle the Muse points out that she doesn't have all day to wait around for the imperialist bombast she came to inspire and to please get on with it already, and, in his sorry-not-sorry reply I hear Walahfrid the gardener as clearly as in his actual garden memoir: "It's just that an unquenchable love of seeing and praising came upon me."

Walahfrid stayed with the imperial family through the hectic years that followed: Emperor Louis' ouster from the throne, the consequent exile from Aachen that Walahfrid spent with young Charles and Judith, through Louis' triumphal return in 834 and four years of Charles' early adolescence, til the Emperor decided his 16-year-old son's education was complete in 838. Emperor Louis, in thanks for Walahfrid's nearly 10 years of loyal service, sent him home to Reichenau—this time, as abbot.

Like most of Walahfrid's homecomings, this one didn't last long. His next departure was forced by the empire dissolving into civil war when Emperor Louis and his second oldest son, Pippin, both died and, surprising no one, (surely not even Walahfrid?), none of Louis' surviving sons or grandsons was prepared to settle for the slivers of empire that he left them. Charlemagne's male descendants went to war, and Walahfrid, living along a territorial faultline, fled northward to a monastery in Speyer, along the Rhine.

"I have fled from lands ruined by division within the empire," Walahfrid, so recently rising from success to success, wrote to his old teacher Grimald—adding that he didn't even have sandals to wear. Soon he was on the road again, barefoot though he might have been, back to Fulda, seeking refuge from surrounding violence.

Where it once held marrow, the bone now holds a tree:
From shin-bone to sapling—surely a good omen.
We marvel that its bark is dry and tougher
Than hardwood: such strength in the bone.
Great emperor, nothing is beyond you:
You merely go out hunting
And from the doe's bones, forests grow. Hail!

Walahfrid was away from Aachen traveling with the imperial family sometime in the 830s when he wrote this brilliantly subversive vernal poem, "On the Little Tree That Grew Through the Bones of a Little Deer for Emperor Louis."

I'm simultaneously thrilled and repelled by how subtly Walahfrid situates himself in relation to imperial power. I've called him an optimist, but maybe he was just sly: to my eyes, Walahfrid here extols the power of violence and domination so forcefully that he shatters with one hand the very illusion he conjures with the other. A record of violence—the little deer's broken bones, (or, we can extrapolate: the razed mountainside, the burned-out city, the shoeless monk)—remains. But trees rise through, pushing aside the man-made rubble and the lie of lasting destruction and domination.

It's a hymn of praise to nature's generative power so extravagantly dressed up as a hymn of praise to human destruction that the illusion caves before the reader's eyes. *Great Emperor!* You cut down life, but not in its entirety. You leave wreckage in your literal dust that the living, growing world, alchemizes into creation. *Surely a good omen*: though more for the force of life itself than for anyone else implicated in the poem, including the poet himself. Life goes on—but individual lives so often do not.

Years later, Walahfrid would often use the word *pulvis* (dust) when writing about his little garden. It's the root of our violent word "pulverize," a constant reminder that dirt, soil, dust, whatever word you use for where you build your garden: it's all that's left of something that was destroyed.

Walahfrid survived three years of civil war, though thousands of others did not. A truce between Louis' sons and grandsons in 843 allowed Walahfrid yet another homeward journey to Reichenau.

The many crossings to and from Reichenau, the early academic success, the promotion to an imperial office; exile and return—all these are the unspoken preamble to the *Hortulus*, the garden memoir that brought me to Walahfrid in the first place.

The poem was probably composed around 845, by which time Walahfrid had left and lost, returned and found, home—wherever, whatever, that is—many times. After his years of palace panegyrics and imperial hunts, Walahfrid had travelled far enough to come home, see home for what it was, and praise it anyway.

This garden tour starts with imperfections, initially sounding like a classic civilization vs. nature contest in which the gardener wages battle with nature and the reward is a garden: Walahfrid writes with gusto about rampant weeds and setting after them with his mattock (*I tore those nettles though they grew and grew again!*); about the need to build raised beds so the rain doesn't take away his precious soil, about all the damn hard work.

But what emerges from Walahfrid's griping about site conditions and backbreaking labor—so familiar to any gardener—is a revelation that his little

patch of earth, crammed between human walls and dwellings, has a wisdom of its own, aside from—in spite of—human wisdom. He sings a hymn of specificity in a global key:

Whether it be where sand
And gravel lie barren and dead, or where fruits grow heavy
in rich moist ground; whether high on a steep hillside
Easy ground in the plain or rough among sloping valleys,
Wherever it is, your land cannot help but produce its native plants.

The dirt beneath your feet, no matter what kind of dirt, cannot help it. Any land cannot help but be its own flourishing self—no matter the walls or bones that hem it in. This revelation sets the stage for the tender intimacy of Walahfrid revealing his own garden's less-than-perfection:

True, that part there
Below the high roof is dry and rough from the lack
of rain and the heaven's benison; true, this
part here is always in shade, for the high wall's
solid rampart forbids the sun to enter.
Yet of all that was lately entrusted to it, the garden
Has held nothing enclosed in its sluggish soil
without hope of growth.

I recognize this place—the good-enough-garden—because it's also my own garden. It is better than perfect: it is still-becoming. It is not the place where I wield mastery, but, as Eula Biss puts it, where I practice care. I would add that it is where care is taken *of* me and apart from me. I entrust things to the soil. The garden has held nothing without hope of growth. Even myself. Even, surely, Walahfrid Strabo.

❦

After Walahfrid's impassioned account of bringing his garden into being and its ongoing issues, he gives a plant-by-plant tour of individual species along with their practical and medicinal uses—much like herbals have done from ancient times up to this day. But as he ranges through the plants, from sage and mint to roses to lilies, it becomes clear that Walahfrid, the traveler, is taking us on a journey more than he is listing a pharmacopeia. He is writing the urban garden into spaciousness, into a place where, no matter how small, we have, around every corner, opportunities for a new sight or smell or sound.

"There in the very front glows sage," he starts, then takes us on to the gourd vine, adding that "in the same patch at the bottom of the garden, I grow my melons." "Not far away grows Tansy"; "here in handsome rows you can see my agrimony"; and finally, "Here, in the last row of all, the radish." The radish is given the briefest mention and then a sigh: "I am tired. To travel this road further would exhaust my failing strength."

I know Walahfrid is here employing the humblebrag standard of the classical poet, but I also hear the same good-natured laughter of the man who called digging "summon[ing] the worms back to the realms of light," who praised the emperor for creating a forest by cutting down a little deer: there's some awe alongside the irony. He's traveled the world more than most of his contemporaries ever would, but in traveling the minutiae of this little urban patch,

Untitled by Despy Boutris (bio on page 14)

finds he's traveled to the end of his strength. The small place is made a grand landscape through the magnifying force of loving attention.

I should add, though, even in his post-radish exhaustion, Walahfrid doesn't end before showing us his roses. What gardener would?

❦

For the first time in many years, after his return in 843, Walahfrid lived in safety as the returned abbot of Reichenau. The Empire had been reestablished into fractured parts. Louis the Pious' oldest son, Lothair, ruled from the old imperial seat of Aachen, while his brother Louis the German dominated a strip of land to the east, and Walahfrid's old pupil Charles was

Untitled by Despy Boutris
(bio on page 14)

granted control over the western edge of Latin Europe, in what is now France.

Even though he was now at Reichenau rather than at court, Walahfrid's lifelong threads of attachment to the royal household remained characteristically unsevered. His genius for human connection—I think this again and again when following his life story across exile and war and violence—must have been prodigious. Why else would Lothair have asked Walahfrid to journey as envoy to his younger brother in 849? If anyone could navigate the rift between those brothers, so recently at war, it was Walahfrid, with his knack for connection and belonging. He left home again that summer, traveling westward into what is now France on a diplomatic mission to the Holy Roman Emperor's little brother, Charles the Bald.

❦

This is where Walahfrid Strabo leaves us. He enters history crossing Lake Constance to Reichenau Island as a young oblate c. 818, and he departs history crossing the River Loire on a diplomatic mission for the emperor, drowning in the river on August 18, 849, not much more than 40 years old.

His body was pulled from the river and carried home, back across the water of Lake Constance, back to the soil of Reichenau Island, where he was buried in the autumn of 849.

❦

On the same spread of Sylvia Landsberg's *The Medieval Garden* on which I first encountered Walahfrid, there's a reproduction of the idealized plan for a monastery settlement at St. Gall, less than 100 km south of Reichenau Island, in what is now the Swiss side of Lake Constance. It's an intensely detailed plan for close communal living that was drawn up during Walahfrid's boyhood—sometime around 820 AD—and it remains one of the most extensive sources available to anyone wanting a sense of monastic life under Charlemagne and his sons.

The orchard plan at St. Gall shows carefully labeled fruit trees, as expected—*apple*, *pear*, *peach*, *quince*, etc.—but these are alternated across the plan with an equal number of narrow rectangles.

The rectangles are tombs. The orchard doubles as a cemetery. *Apple*, *grave*, *pear*, *grave*, *peach*, *grave*, *quince*, *grave*, etc.

❦

O, to take what we love inside, / to carry within us an orchard, sings Li-Young Lee in "From Blossoms," a poem which, among other things, is a hymn to a peach orchard.

There are days we live as if death were nowhere / in the background.

The *Hortulus* ends with the orchard that Walahfrid carried within him; the orchard that, we can reasonably guess from the St. Gall plan and other historical evidence, would carry Walahfrid himself within it at the end. His memoir's last lines are a dedication, offering his book, "this small gift, this worthless labor of easy service" not only to a person or people, but to a moment—to a beloved garden—suspended in time.

In his dedication, Walahfrid conjures his own youth at Reichenau, a teacher and boys living like he once did, flourishing in a garden, that patch of nature most immediately available to them, as if death were nowhere in the background, let alone directly underfoot:

`Most learned Father Grimald. . . I can picture you
Sitting there in the green enclosure of your garden
Under apples which hang in the shade of leafy foliage,
Where the peach-tree turns its leaves this way and that,
In and out of the sun.
Your happy band of pupils gather for you
Fruits white with tender down, and stretch
Their hands to grasp huge apples.

During a severe bout of "eyes bigger than garden space" this spring, I ordered a peach tree, even though the only good space for fruit trees was taken by the two little apples. I promptly forgot the impulsive order, until April came, bringing a blizzard and the peach sapling in a box; it was already drifted in snow when I found it on the front porch half an hour after delivery. I dragged the box into the warm kitchen, trailing ice across the hall, and set it in a corner closest to the window.

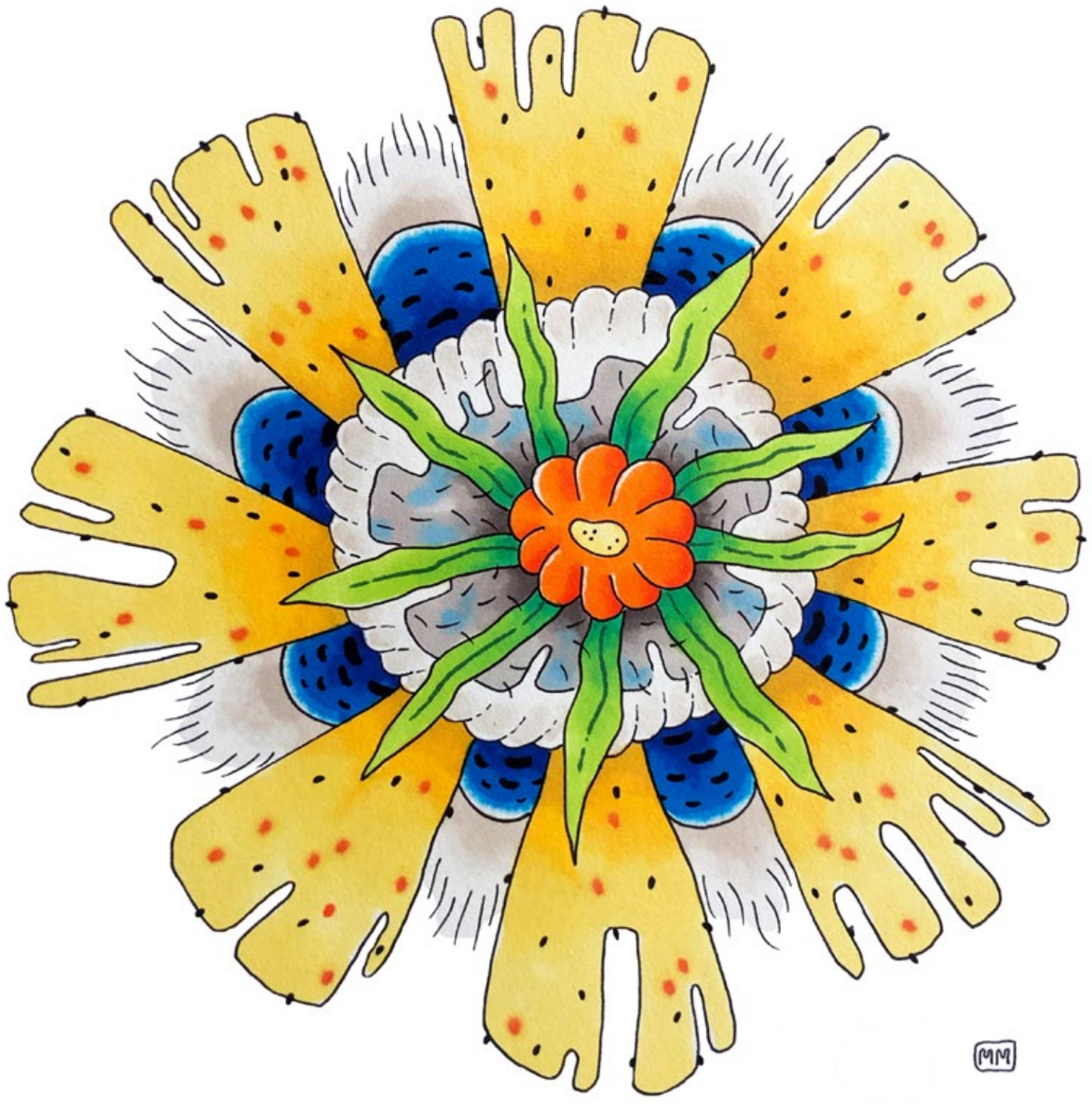
Inside its box, the peach tree, unlike the apple whips, was already in full leaf, clearly stressed by the cold journey north. It looked like a visitor from another planet who had nothing to its name but a handful of red Georgia clay bound to its roots with a scrap of plastic. Through the snowy week that followed, I nursed the little peach tree in the corner of the kitchen. It seemed to actually shrink before my eyes as the cold days passed; snow and darkness fell in equal measure.

By the time the air finally rose above 40 F, I'd fully realized that no place in my existing garden would be quite sunny enough to house a happy peach tree year-round. I hustled the little peach tree out to the garage through a sleety downpour where I nestled it and the remains of its Georgia clay in the largest pot I owned and set it by the garage window. For the next six weeks I pulled the heavy pot and its traumatized occupant in and out of the sunlight daily, following new patches of light across the driveway as the sun rose higher everyday.

The peach tree doubled in size over the summer that followed—*surely a good omen*—even as it, in its pot, remains, like Walahfrid, always on the move and maybe a little hemmed in by hard walls. When winter came again I dragged it into the shelter of the garage along with my potted roses to await spring. It is not rooted in the soil of my garden, but in my devotion to it.

Fussing over the potted peach tree, I sometimes think of the little sapling rising from the deer's bleached bone, about Walahfrid's sun-loving herbs in the shade of rampart, plants and people finding a way where there seemed to be no way. Again, I almost hear Walahfrid laughing beside me: at the worms; at the joy of flowers and babies; at the way garden-love makes a few paces around a little urban patch feel like traveling the world.

1 by Maura McNamara
(bio on page 14)



Untitled by Morgan Alexa Braid
(bio on page 14)

A Field Guide to Ohio Wildflowers

Shelley Mann Hite

Shelley Mann Hite writes about motherhood, food, and the Midwest. Her work can be found in *Motherwell*, *The Daily Drunk*, and *Huffington Post*. Find her on Twitter and Instagram at @shelleymann.

Queen Anne's lace

Features: Umbrella-shaped clusters packed with delicate white flowers; punk-rock enough to grow along the freeway but also beautiful enough to grace a wedding bouquet, a flower who can be whoever you want her to be.

When I think about lace, I think about weddings. I think about the veil I wore the first time I got married, speckled with tiny pearls to match my gown. I think of that dress's lace sleeves, straight from a Renaissance painting. It was the kind of dress I thought a bride should wear. I think of how, in the dressing room mirror, it felt romantic, but in the pictures it looked more like something from a Renaissance fair. I think of the doilies my ex-husband's grandma placed on every flat surface in her double-wide trailer. I think about how I was telling the truth when I said I wanted to grow old with him, and how it's just as truthful now that I'd be fine never seeing him again.

For my second wedding, I want nothing to do with lace, or with white, or with any of the other things a bride is supposed to want. The Bridal Depot sales clerk is confused when I explain I'm looking for a wedding dress that doesn't look like a wedding dress. If a non-wedding dress was what I wanted, it hadn't made much sense to drive an hour out of town to the middle of nowhere to shop for bridal dresses out of a converted train caboose. My fiancé, Pete, had found this place online—I think, secretly, he wanted me to fall in love with a long white lacy wedding gown.

As soon as we got engaged I wrote down my dimensions and gave them to my favorite vintage dress shop owner, asking her to keep an eye out for options, but she'd had no luck. Most vintage wedding

dresses are made for fresh-faced, tiny-waisted brides, not thirtysomething mothers getting married for the second time.

When I tell the clerk at The Bridal Depot what I'm thinking—anything but white, knee-length rather than floor, something that will show off the vintage cowboy boots I want to wear—she says she has something that just might be perfect. We follow her through the racks of white tulle organized by size to the end of the line, size 18, where she plucks a bag from the rack.

It's knee-length in ivory lace. I shake my head.

"No lace."

She urges me. "Just try it on."

Once it's on, I fall in love. Underneath the lace overlay is a tight pink satin corset, the color of a spring peony, giving the whole dress a rosy glow. It's $80 off the rack and it fits perfectly, no alterations necessary.

My grandma calls the next day. She asks if I've found a dress yet, then demands I tell her how much I paid so she can mail me the money. I refuse. I've been clear Pete and I aren't asking anyone for help in planning or paying for the wedding. We will pay with what we have, and we won't spend more than what we can afford.

As we try to find more ways to avoid going broke to get married, I begin to notice flowers all around me. I begin to believe I'm the kind of person who can go out and pick her own wedding flowers.

I've never paid much attention before, but now I see wildflowers bursting forth from between cracks in the cement, twisting through chain-link fences, and congregating in empty fields, all free for the picking. They feel so different from the tailored red calla lilies I carried down the aisle the first time around. Back then I thought callas were elegant and dramatic—straight out of the weddings in the bridal magazines I'd collected for years. In the resilience of Queen Anne's lace, I see myself as I am today, determined to bloom even when growing conditions are less than ideal.

I pay attention to the flowers all summer as I bike along the river. I don't have any clue what most of them are but I start imagining them in simple bouquets on each table. What could be more genuine, more impossibly romantic, than hand picked flower bouquets with bug-bitten leaves and missing petals? The beauty of a second marriage, after all, is the freedom from pretending everything's perfect.

From my bike, I start taking stock of the flowers that bloom near freeways, up through railroad tracks, in ditches. Ditch flowers are the kind no one will ever notice are gone.

Grandma mails me money to pay for the dress anyway, and includes in the envelope a handwritten note: "I just hope one day you find something that makes you happy."

I chuckle. In the past few years, I'd walked away from a marriage and my dream job. In my family, no one divorced and everyone worked jobs they hated, so of course they can't make sense of what I'm doing and why.

Least of all my grandma, who worked at a General Motors plant as a secretary until she met her husband, a Korean War vet who would soon be promoted to a vice president position. She quit working after she got pregnant and never went back. She also stayed married to my grandfather until he died and worshiped him for another eighteen years, until her own death.

Chicory

Features: Otherworldly purple flowers that open each morning and close as sunlight becomes more intense around noon. A flower capable of gaslighting you. No, you didn't see a field full of purple here just this morning. That was all your imagination.

By the time I called it quits, my first marriage had become anemic.

"I've been wondering if you even love me anymore," he said, on the day we finally admitted things weren't working. "And sometimes I wonder if you ever loved me at all."

"Of course I loved you," I said, but I wondered if that was fair to say. I wondered if it was even possible to love someone when you're twenty years old, before you begin to understand the trials life will give you, before you understand how this person will fail you when everything falls apart.

I don't feel guilty about ending my first marriage—we were equally at fault for letting things go fallow. What I do feel guilty about is the wedding, all those thousands of dollars wasted on someone who was not the one. I still believe in love, in monogamy, in the institution of marriage. But I no longer believe in weddings.

Instead of a wedding, I tell myself, I'm planning a party. We ask our friend, a chef, to devise a family-style menu with Ohio ingredients, and she plans pulled pork sandwiches and chilled sweet corn soup and bacon squash gratin. We recruit another friend to play DJ and one of our favorite bartenders to take photos.

I save flowers for last, waiting until the day before the ceremony to go pick them. Armed with a pair of kitchen scissors and a plastic bucket, I set out in my car. The empty lot nearest my home, filled all summer with a thousand brightly blooming Queens, has been mowed to the dirt overnight. All those gorgeous flowers, gone.

Other patches of Queen Anne's lace have shriveled and curled into crunchy brown bird's nests, their turn to shine come to an end. Queen Anne's lace blooms straight through the end of August. Who knew? Our wedding is the first weekend in September.

I keep at it, though, and load my bucket with tiny purple and white asters, like daisies but much daintier, and wide sprays of showy golden flowers that remind me of feather dusters. I find some ironweed, which resembles baby's breath, a delicate flower I'd used in my first wedding bouquet, but with deep purple petals. I snip the luminescent lavender chicory that thrives next to the blazing asphalt of the parking lot at the end of our street.

Midway through filling my bucket, I notice I've started sneezing. When I finally climb back in the car, my bucket overflowing with white, purple and yellow, I glance in the mirror and gasp. My eyes are red and swollen, and my upper lip, which I'd just had waxed the day before, is splotchy and irritated. Pete comes home to find me hopped up on Benadryl and draped in paper towels soaked in oatmeal, an anti-inflammatory trick I found on the internet.

"I'm such an idiot," I wail. "Our flowers are going to look terrible and now my face is a mess, too."

He smiles. "It doesn't matter. It's just a party anyway, right?"

The next morning, my face still looks rough and the flowers look even worse. The asters are shriveling, and a bunch of scraggly stems lack blooms altogether. Turns out chicory blooms for just one glorious day, and immediately sheds its blooms if it's picked. I had no idea.

Common ragweed

Features: Branched, fern-like, leafy plant with tiny green and yellow blooms. A menace masquerading as a flower, it's universally hated due to causing hay fever and other allergies.

Grandma stops by our house the day of the wedding, and we show off what's left of the flowers I'd picked. She inspects the bucket of raggedy wildflowers and points one finger at the tall golden sprays.

"Isn't that ragweed?" she asks. "The stuff everyone's allergic to?"

Pete and I look at each other and shrug. I don't know what any of these flowers are, really, I just grabbed anything I could find with a bloom.

"Put that on the table and everyone's going to be sneezing all night!" she says.

Everyone else moves on to the next thing, but I stay outside, yanking out the offensive yellow stalks I can no longer use, seething at my own incompetence.

The flowers are salvaged by my chef pal Lara, who shows up to the venue with an armful of zinnias from her backyard—"I knew you were picking your own flowers, figured you could always use a few extra"—and my friend Jill, who heads over early to help make everything look pretty.

She arranges one zinnia, one Queen Anne, and a few asters into each of my empty wine bottles and places them strategically on every other table. They look perfect, I tell her, and I don't think about the flowers again for the rest of the night. When we reminisce about our wedding, we will not talk about the flowers anyway, but the vows we wrote, and the dancing, and the bacon squash gratin.

Goldenrod

Features: Tall perennial with long clusters of tiny yellow flower heads. The ultimate scapegoat of the plant world, its yellow blossoms are blamed for September sniffling and sneezing. Goldenrod doesn't care, though. It knows it's one of the most striking and beautiful weeds out there.

My new husband and I buy a home together, and I want to plant wildflower seeds. I'm flipping through a field guide to Ohio wildflowers, researching the best seeds to plant in my growing zone, when I spot a picture of ragweed. Right away I understand the flowers I'd trashed before the wedding were not ragweed. I will find out they were goldenrod, which blooms at the same time and often nearby.

I had dreamed of a simple perennial garden, something that will come back year after year without much energy or effort. But here's the thing about wildflowers. Like marriages, not one of them is as carefree as it looks. Even the ones that seem effortless require just the right soil, enough direct sunlight, and extra water for those first few years.

Sometimes I think about the note from my grandma. "I just hope one day you find something that makes you happy."

When I first read it I thought she was hopeful I would find a marriage like hers, and that's what would make me happy. I wonder, now, if she'd been talking about marriage at all. Just like Grandma and the weeds, I had taken to mistaking one thing for another entirely.

By the time she wrote those words to me, after all, her husband had been dead for over a decade. Maybe she was trying to tell me that a new marriage wasn't what could make me happy. That no marriage can. That

Untitled by Despy Boutris
(bio on page 14)

a marriage, with all its ups and downs, its day in, day out commitment through better and worse, in sickness and in health, can't possibly be the thing that makes you happy. Maybe in choosing that word *something* she was trying to warn me I can't rely on someone, anyone, to make me happy.

I am still happily married, but I've found my happiness generally comes in small bursts, like when I check my garden in the growing months and discover a flower has burst open overnight. Looking at one of them unfurled, I feel the same sense of pride as when I listen to my daughter's interpretation of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, or when I finally manage to hold crow pose in yoga class. All that effort, choosing the right spot, the right soil, watering every day, it's all paying off.

3 by Maura McNamara (bio on page 14)

A Better Perfection

L.Lu

L.Lu is a long-term resident of Philadelphia, where she works as a facilitator and organization development consultant for employee-owned companies and nonprofits. When not on Zoom or writing on flip charts, L.Lu enjoys being outside, whether that's hiking, kayaking, going on bike rides, playing with her dogs, or tending her garden.

The original plan was realistic: two small flower beds of low maintenance native perennials to make our front yard look more presentable. I surveyed other gardens in our neighborhood for inspiration. Full front yard gardens captivated me with their curated haphazard perfection: clusters of yellow daffodils perched on stiff stalky leaves, dense periwinkle phlox blooms carpeting stone walls, broad hosta leaves, and other plants I could not identify, nestled among steel windmills, powder-coated trellises, and stone statues. And so my plan evolved: why settle for two small flower beds when I could transform my full lawn into a flowering meadow? The front yard of our rowhouse was only 12 by 16 feet.

The justifications for this ambitious project compounded: growing food locally and restoring a patch of nature in our city block constituted a worthwhile ethical practice. Several houses on our block had attractive yards—rose bushes, petunias in pedestal planters, irises and peonies in brick flower beds; others were science experiments of inattention—dandelions, clover, crabgrass, sourgrass, and foxtails, or, worse, depressing cement blocks to save residents from the hassle of lawn care. I wanted our yard to make our block look better kept. And I needed a break from hunching over my computer for hours of Zoom calls. Never mind that my past gardening efforts suffered from neglect as evidenced by wilting houseplants and grass proliferating alongside spinach. I wanted to be the type of person who liked to garden.

Hasty internet searches of "Pennsylvania native plants" informed a scrawled list of Latin and common names: coneflower, asters, rudbeckia, phlox, salvia, daylilies, alliums, baptisia indigo. I headed in a borrowed car to suburban nurseries and cavernous Lowe's. $199.99 Japanese maples, $49.99 butterfly

bushes, stacked racks of petunia and pansy varieties, a full aisle dedicated to groundcovers, and a table of eight allium hybrids bewildered me. Shopping conjured up gardening's whiteness and its association with baby boomer suburban life—conformist picket fences, orderly rose bushes, and well-manicured lawns, with raised beds for tomatoes hidden behind the house. Was gardening another set of objects to collect? Baskets, weeding tools, lawn ornaments, ceramic pots to match your house trim, and new planter arrangements for every season. And yet this flower catalog fantasy still enchanted me. Spring planting season was fast ending, so I impulsively bought plants with nice tag pictures, subscribing to the myth that a perfect garden might be purchased and owned.

A week later, mud glommed to my gloves. Soil and drizzle formed a cold porridge, coating my shoes and pants. After a day of Zoom, I dug holes, excavating our neighborhood history. A graveyard of objects from block parties, careless trash collectors, and littering pedestrians saw sunlight for the first time in years: firework tubes, red tortilla chip packaging, clear plastic drink lids, an AA battery. I coaxed the plants out of their containers, and placed them in their new home. The plants slumped after their displacement, floundering in watery soil. I made things worse: days later, seized by indecision, I relocated recent plantings, destroying precious new roots. Survival seemed dubious.

The perfect garden felt elusive. Plants in plastic containers still lined my porch, drooping from the hot sun. Yellow legal pads thickened with sketches as I tried to optimize layouts, factoring in height, color and season of bloom. My front yard was a patchwork of lumpy soil and scraggly plants, more of an eyesore than before. It looked nothing like the neighborhood gardens I admired, but I held out hope. Rebecca Solnit writes about how "a garden is always a place of becoming, to make and tend one is a gesture of hope. . . It's an activity deeply invested in the future." Near my front steps, four zinnias stretched skyward from thin stems. They sprouted tight green buds, clenched fists that loosened to reveal pink centers, which then unfurled into a halo of petals. My garden was becoming.

"Garden" stems from the Old High German word for "enclosure," suggesting ownership, control, and a clear boundary between private and public. Its etymology proves misleading. Gardening's essence eludes consumer logic: abundant reproduction instead of planned obsolescence, reward given to those who provide patient care, fleeting beauty that cannot be owned. My garden flourished into a chaotic mess. The gloriosa daisies, sunshine blooms with chocolate centers, grew over a yard tall, an awkward stand of slouching flowers next to ground-hugging moss phlox. Silver fern-like artemisia barely survived and then suddenly, swelled to five times its size, encroaching upon nearby salvia and lavender. Culver's root flowered floppy creamy spikes and was half its expected height, a mismatched companion next to the giant rudbeckia maxima with its cone-shaped mustard flowers that were almost as tall as me. My garden was an eclectic junkyard of flower, leaf and bud.

My initial enthusiasm waned, leaving unfinished spreadsheets documenting maintenance details and half-read browser tabs on "How to Care for. . . " Despite my aspirations to be the type of person who likes to garden, gardening felt like a chore because of the dirt, the mud, the bugs, the bending and the squatting on humid summer days. Committing to a full front yard garden was an act of questionable judgment. Some plants withered from unknown infestations, trash accumulated, and weeds entrenched themselves into the ground. Twice a month, I finally mustered the motivation—usually on a Sunday morning after a dog walk, while our house still shaded our front yard—to put on gloves and grab the dandelion weeder. Yet once I started, I lost track of time and my labor felt sweet. I paid attention. Bees assembled around the beady indigo blooms of salvia. Tiny mushrooms appeared overnight after hot humid days. I picked tupperwares of tomatoes for fresh salads and to give to neighbors.

Even the weeds fascinated me: in late spring emerald grass seedlings surfaced, popping up near the bases of plants, as did the thicker blades of sprawling crabgrass, difficult to remove with its stubborn roots. Then spotted spurge emerged in the summer, with its rust-colored branches and tiny elliptic leaves, so radially symmetric that I thought it too beautiful to be a weed (but then again a weed is merely a human designation). Purslane, with its thick succulent leaves, burgeoned, impossibly large, out of a crack between stone edging and the sidewalk. Gardening revealed what nature wanted—this year's recipe of sun, water and human disruption awakening seeds from deep sleep.

Even my intentional choices brought surprises. The zinnias, originally multi-layered pink blooms, reseeded into diverse progeny: single layer daisy-like rose blooms, pale yellow blossoms, and spiky magenta petals. Creeping strawberries cascaded over rocks, fruiting sour berries for starlings. A clump of aloha blue sprinkled the ground with cerulean cotton ball puffs.

The garden invited conversation, welcoming neighbors into my private space. A boy from a rental unit with a cement front yard eagerly watered my plants, heaving the metal can the size of his torso, splashing droplets on flower petals. My other neighbor wandered over frequently to ask what I was planting. She shared her never-die succulents with me. Inside her home, her shelves overflowed with propagated spider and snake plants. She claimed cuttings for her future garden. Next year, I might be digging holes in her yard.

One day, another young boy further up the block stopped me as I walked my dog. He wanted to know where I lived. I pointed to my house down the block. His eyes opened wide: "Ohhh," he exclaimed. "You're the person with all the flowers." I smiled, thinking of my garden's bountiful disarray and my befuddlement over the identity of the new sprouting plant—weed or reseeding coneflower? I couldn't have planned a better perfection.

Epilogue

In the late afternoon of March 30, 2022, a month after submitting this essay to Stonecrop Review, someone dumped water onto a grease fire, starting a major fire two houses down from ours. I heard the news while I was out of town, sitting in a Dallas hotel room. My husband and my neighbor texted me live updates. The fire spread to two adjacent houses, including our immediate neighbors with their carefully tended rosebush and white pedestal planter. Smoke penetrated the cracks of our shared brick wall and permeated every crevice of our home. Firefighting water flooded our basement. I watched videos of flames shooting out of windows and black smoke billowing skyward on a screen in the palm of my hand. I did not know what might be salvaged from our home.

The next day, my husband held vigil on our porch, dealing with public adjusters and remediation companies. He told me that neighbors came by to check on us and remarked on my garden:

"Are you still going to plant tomatoes? They're so delicious."

"I feel at peace whenever I see this garden."

I returned to our house the following day. Despite air filter machines running 24/7 since the fire and a N95 mask, the smoke choked the back of my throat and caused a headache. Our home was now a soot-covered museum of our life suspended—dog toys strewn across rugs, dishes balanced on a drying mat, and papers cluttering my desk.

I couldn't stay in the house any longer. The stillness and the smell was too much. I went to my garden for respite: cream daffodils blooming from fresh bulbs I planted in the fall, virginia speedwell adorning the earth with tiny blue flowers, pale pink phlox blooms emerging on mossy foliage, an artemisia fern sprouting from the larger one that the firefighters wrecked, a mystery ground covering abounding between stepping stones. The garden still brims with life.

Untitled by Maroula Blades (bio on page 14)

Readers Corner

Wandering with Wordsworth

Clara Dawson

Clara Dawson is an academic living in Manchester, where she teaches at the University of Manchester. She loves poetry, wild swimming, and waiting for the swallows to return in spring.

I've been teaching Wordsworth's daffodil poem this week. You know the one, with the sing-song lines about wandering lonely as a cloud. Maybe, like me, you had to learn it by heart in primary school. Waiting at the bus stop on a busy south Manchester road, I wince at the memory of listening to thirty children recite it on a dull afternoon, as the big school clock on the wall kept time with them. Now, after rushing out of work to catch the bus home, I'm chewing my nails at the pace of rush-hour traffic. I'm hurrying to see the horse chestnuts in the park before the November light fades. My partner has gone away with his son for half-term and I am alone. In this autumn of lockdowns, we are all caught between feast and famine, between too much company or too little, so this solitude gives me the luxury of filling my own space again, drawing deep, expansive breaths.

I step straight off the bus, head down a few side streets, turn the corner into Cringle Park, and see their dark columns gleaming in the sun, yellow leaves aflame. Standing at the entrance gate, I narrow my eyes to blur the image and the colours and light become an Impressionist painting, each leaf a daub of golden paint, the branches stark silhouettes layered over the smudged grey sky. Weirdly, as I start to walk down the avenue of arching trees, Wordsworth's poem comes back to me. Teaching it has done something to the words, dislodged them from that old school memory, made them strange and wonderful again:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Why is it coming back to me now? What connects the famous poem celebrating spring in the Lake District to this dying autumn day in an inner-city park in Manchester? Maybe it's the "all at once," the moment that arrested me as I turned the corner and saw the horse chestnuts in their full glory. I love the way Wordsworth tries to find a word to express how special this moment is, a crowd, no, better than that, a host, a holiness of daffodils. As I look at the trees, I try to hold the vision of each leaf in its own burst of beauty with the rhythm of their movement in the wind, but I can't quite focus on both at once. Wordsworth is struggling with the same thing when he compares the daffodils to the night sky:

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

Only by taking the daffodils beyond logic can he capture them in a glance. The magic of poetry is that of course daffodils aren't really like the milky way, but Wordsworth's imagination brings out the infinite in the finite moment. Experiencing a moment of beauty opens up time and space beyond the present. When we allow ourselves to be stopped in our tracks by the small things, we end up floating in the stars. As I walk up the path between the great pairs of trees, I watch the golden leaves play in the wind, each to their own music. I want to drift to my own cloud rhythm forever, not continue on the circular route laid out through the rest of the park. Like the leaves, Wordsworth's daffodils offer a feast of dancing:

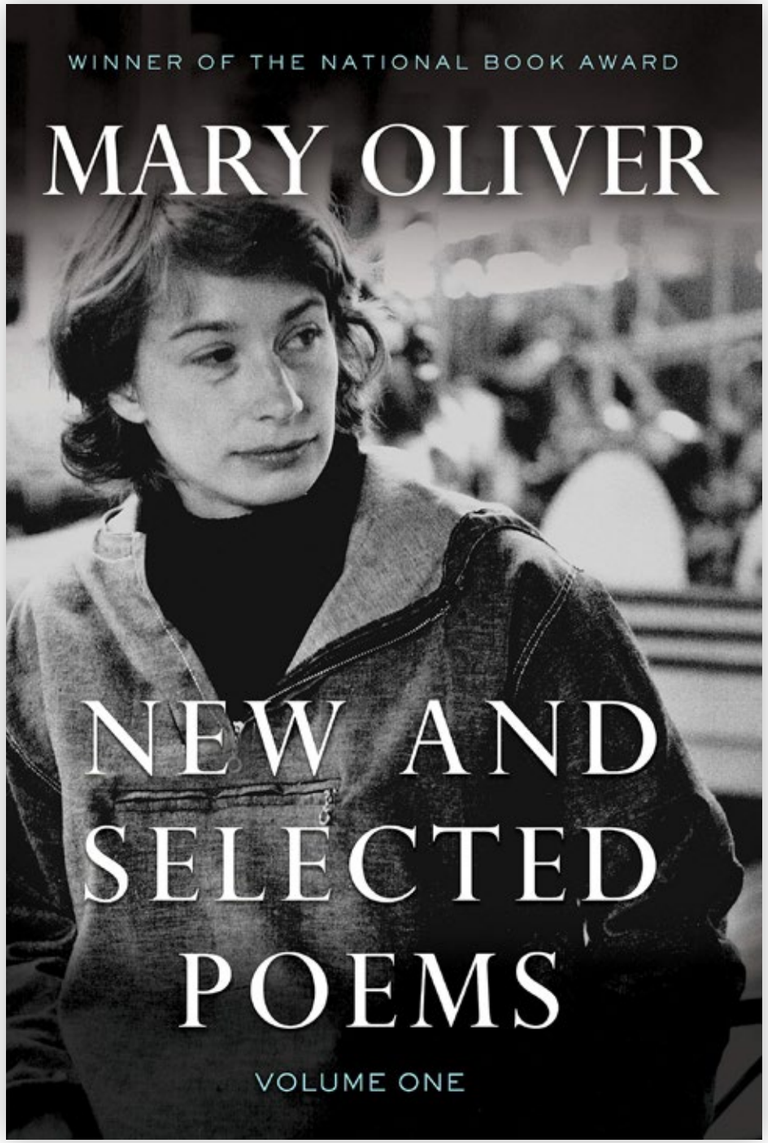
The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

His gaze, like mine, is greedy, drinking up the sight without thought, impossible not to be part of their joy. I want to be filled with the glee of autumn leaves tossing in the wind, not with the worries of life and work in a pandemic. I want the wealth of their companionship, not the distant social encounters or fraught domesticity of lockdown. But already, in the moment of their most intense beauty, I'm anticipating their loss. Walking beneath the chestnuts, I am trampling their fallen leaves further into the mulch, and I pause to think about the moment of their death. Torn from their fragile grip on branches by wind, sacrificed by the tree as it turns inward to harbour stores of energy for the winter. What can I take with me of them? I turn to Wordsworth for the answer.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

The daffodils and stars and waves have danced their way through the poem, and now, remembering the scene as he lies on his couch, Wordsworth dances too. That flash of exposure to the world's beauty promises a return of perpetual joy. The rhymes of the poem tell us something too: alternating rhymes followed by a rhyming couplet of "fills" and "daffodils." The completion we hear in this satisfying final rhyme mimics the poet's contentment and passes it on to us, through the poem and down the centuries. I'll read it again tonight, once the early dark has fallen. And as the raw autumn evenings roll on, these dancing spots of yellow, captured in memory and sealed in poetry, will feed the bliss of my own solitude.

5 by Maura McNamara (bio on page 14)



New and Selected Poems: Volume One by Mary Oliver

Sara Collie

Sara Collie is a writer and language tutor with a PhD in contemporary French Literature. Her writing explores the wild, uncertain spaces of nature, the complexities of mental health, and the mysteries of the creative process. Her poetry and prose has appeared in various journals and anthologies.

Mary Oliver's poetry came into my life exactly when I needed it. As an extended period of unemployment chipped away at my confidence and anxiety bubbled up from the shadows to engulf me, I was spending my days pacing the grey suburban streets at the southernmost edges of London, unable to remember who I was or what I wanted from life. To help fill up the hours, I enrolled on a free online course about literature and mental health, which encouraged me to read poetry for the first time in my adult life. I was surprised to discover that, once I was no longer required to analyse the imagery and rhyming structure to death in order to pass an exam, I actually enjoyed reading it. After coming across some of Mary Oliver's poetry I bought a copy of *New and Selected Poems*, which offers a comprehensive overview of the first thirty years of her work. I read it haphazardly rather than front-to-back but whichever page I randomly opened to, I was always struck by a strange sensation that I was reading the words of an old friend. Her poems—so deceptively simple in their free-verse style—detail the flora and fauna that she encountered on her daily outings "walking uphill and downhill, looking around."[1]

There is such a strong sense of curiosity in Mary's poetry, which is not dulled by years of treading the same paths over and over but enlivened by it. Sometimes she devotes an entire poem to a single species of plant or animal; at other times she weaves together observations about several different life forms. But always, her writing tells us something insightful that she has gleaned from close attention to the form and function of the life around her. She observes roses that "have opened their factories of

1 '1945-1985: Poem for the Anniversary' p.134.

sweetness / and are giving it back to the world,"[2] "sheets of moss" that "could lecture / all day if they wanted about / spiritual patience,"[3] and "the green fists of the peonies," which are "getting ready / to break [her] heart."[4] What is clear throughout is the deep relationship she forms with the world and everything in it. She gently urges the reader to do the same: "don't be afraid / to ask them questions"[5] she writes about sunflowers.

Reading her poems offered me an immersion in the wild open spaces of Provincetown, America, a world away from the gloomy streets that I was roaming. But as winter turned to spring, as if in answer to the question that opens her poem "Ghosts"—"*Have you noticed?*"[6] —I started to look around and realise how much was growing on the edges of my own urban environment: buddleia springing forth along railway tracks on a quest for domination, cheerful mustard flowers mingling with litter on a patch of scrubland, entire tree-lined avenues bursting into sweet-smelling blossom that drifted down like confetti. These plants may have been fewer and further between than the flowers in the fields and forests of Mary's poems, but they were no less significant. While I was busy noticing these things, the constant roar of traffic and intimidating crowds that were ever-present in my neighbourhood faded away. If anything, the precariousness of the urban flora I was encountering served to heighten my interest in it.

The oft-quoted line from one of Mary's most famous poems, "A Summer Day," reads as a challenge: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?"[7] I hadn't planned to spend any of mine walking along city streets feeling lost but when I look back now I can see that what felt like a period of failure was actually an opportunity for me to develop my own tentative relationships with plants. In another poem, Mary writes that she is "thinking / about living / like the lilies / that blow in the fields."[8] I didn't have lilies or fields, but I did have towering hollyhocks growing in improbable cracks in the pavement, and I started to think about living like them, which is to say, with resilience and determination. I wanted to find ways to thrive, even in conditions that weren't ideal.

Another poem stood out to me from the collection for different reasons: "The Journey" opens with the line "One day you finally knew / what you had to do, and began."[9] I couldn't have imagined such clarity of vision during the early days of my unemployment. My memory of that time is hazy: there was no beginning, middle or end to my anxiety—no narrative arc, no sense of progression to my days. It is only with hindsight that I can realise how much my life resembled the uncertain space of a poem. I wish I had been able to see it that way then and to realise that I, too, was a shifting thing, with many possible interpretations and outcomes. As I struggled to find a way through the mental fog, two things kept me company: her poems and the plants. In their own ways they offered little glimmers of light that shone a spotlight on the world outside my head.

I found a job eventually, but more importantly I finally discovered what I *had* to do, whether I was working or not: after years of writer's block I picked up a pen and began to write. What came out was incredibly clumsy at first: jotted-down notes about the plants I was growing on a tiny allotment plot and brief descriptions of wildflowers that moved me in ways I refused to accept as indescribable. But over the years, just like Mary, I have found "a new voice / which [I] slowly / recognized as [my] own"[10] and have taken my first fledgling steps as a published writer. I don't know if I would have dared to do it without her poetry—or the plants—to open my eyes and nudge me in the right direction.

2 'Roses, Late Summer' pp.95-96.
3 'Landscape' p.129.
4 'Peonies' p.21.
5 'The Sunflowers' p.138.
6 P.152, original emphasis.
7 P.94.
8 'Lilies' p.76.
9 P.114.
10 'The Journey' p.114.

Parvati's *Chai*

Anaita Vazifdar-Davar

Anaita Vazifdar-Davar is a mother of three from Mumbai, India. She lives in one of the most populous cities but dreams of open spaces. She doesn't have a garden but tries to bring the outdoors inside with potted plants and floral paintings.

"Parvati, *chai*, please," I'd whisper, peeking into the kitchen.

"Shoo!" Parvati, our aged helper, would shout for the benefit of my parents, swatting me away with the ends of her sari, mock frown furrowing her lined brow. Then, with the coast clear, she'd open the door a crack and let me slip into the kitchen.

There, sitting on the stove, brewing away excitedly, was *chai*. Known to the western world as tea (don't call it "chai tea" or you'd be asking for tea tea), the quintessential Indian beverage is steaming hot, milky, a gorgeous brown, with ginger, cardamom, and other unthinkables added to the mix. Growing up, I wasn't allowed *chai*; despite, or perhaps because of, that fact, it was my forbidden fruit, manna to my young self.

Parvati came to Mumbai, the city by the sea, from her village in India's western state of Maharashtra, when she was just a teenager. Girls in pre-Independence India were taught at a young age how to look after home and hearth, and Parvati took care of ours as if it was her own. In a way, it was. She knew every nook and cranny of our apartment, kept an inventory of what entered and left, found things we had misplaced, and was, essentially, our majordomo. Unable to read and only speaking her native Marathi, she rapidly picked up English from us and, in turn, taught us the ways of her little world, seemingly so foreign in our megapolis.

One of the treasures of her village was lemongrass for her *chai*. Whenever she went back on leave (which wasn't often, as she claimed her home was with us), she'd return with some cuttings of the plant. These she would nurture on our west-facing balcony, tending to them with the same affection that she showed my brother and me. Twice a day, Parvati would take a break from her household chores to brew a cup for herself. Perhaps it was a Pavlovian reflex or perhaps it was the aroma of her lemongrass that wafted to wherever I was at that point, but I would make my way to the kitchen at precisely the same time.

As a child, the small kitchen, with its simmering pots, gas cylinders and sharp knives, was forbidden to me. But, from the door, I could watch Parvati at work. I'd stand there as she shook out tea powder from its home in a metal tin, poured in a generous serving of milk, and spooned sugar from an air-tight container, exhorting her to add more (this was in the days before I worried about my waistline). An assortment of spices would go in and, finally, she'd add her prized ingredient—lemongrass—that she had carefully carried back from her village. All these would sit simmering in a tea pan on the stove until she was ready to strain the *chai* into her little steel tumbler. . . and pour out the forbidden few sips for me.

Here in India, you can find a *chaiwallah* (tea seller) on every street corner. You'll hear them calling out "Chai, chai" or catch the scent of hot tea even before you see them. But Parvati's *chai* remains unmatched.

Parvati died when she was 78, having lived with various generations of my family for more than six decades. Just before she passed away, she brought me a lemongrass plant. By then I had discovered coffee, easier to make in an instant, and had moved on from *chai*. But her plant sat on my urban windowsill for many, many years—an aromatic reminder of Parvati's love.

Lemongrass *chai* recipe: Parvati's *chai*

Makes two cups, because you can't stop at just one!

Ingredients:

- **½ cup lemongrass stalks**
- **½ cup mint leaves, known as pudina (optional)**
- **2 cardamom pods (optional)**
- **1 knob of ginger, grated (optional)**
- **1 tsp. black tea powder**
- **4 cups water**
- **Sugar or sweetener to taste**
- **Milk or creamer to taste**

Procedure:

1. **Snip the lemongrass stalks into one-inch pieces. These are sharp-edged, so tearing them can be dangerous; use a pair of scissors, instead. Discard the bulbs or store them to make a nice curry or broth later.**
2. **Bruise the lemongrass by pounding with a pestle to release the flavor.**
3. **Bring the water to a boil and add the lemongrass and optional ingredients. Let simmer for 5-7 mins.**
4. **Turn off the stove and then add the tea powder. Allow to infuse for a minute or two, stirring occasionally.**
5. **Strain into a cup and add milk and sweetener as per your preference.**
6. **Take a sip and "chef's kiss."**

Untitled by Morgan Alexa Braid
(bio on page 14)

Alligator Pear

Andrea Lani

Andrea Lani is the author of *Uphill Both Ways: Hiking toward Happiness on the Colorado Trail* (Bison Books, 2022). Her writing has appeared in *Spire*, *Orion*, *Saltfront*, and others. She's a graduate of the Stonecoast MFA program and an editor at *Literary Mama*. She can be found online at www.andrealani.com.

Last summer I grew an avocado jungle on my deck.

The previous fall, with school operating on a hybrid schedule and the pandemic unfurling before us toward what seemed like eternity, one of my sons asked if we could start an avocado tree from a pit. Eager for any of my children to show interest in anything that wasn't screen based, I jumped on the idea. I remembered my mom starting avocado trees by piercing pits with toothpicks and suspending them in water in a green depression glass sherbet dish. I didn't have a depression glass sherbet dish, so I used an empty yogurt container, and I didn't have any toothpicks, so I used party picks with paper Pinocchio heads on one end that my mother-in-law had given us for no apparent reason. Otherwise, my sprouting avocado looked exactly like my mom's.

The avocado, *Persea americana*, is one of the few important edible members of the Laurel family. Sources on the internet cannot agree whether the fruit of the avocado is a drupe, like a peach or plum, or a berry, like a blueberry or tomato. My glossary of botanical terms defines berry as "a fleshy fruit. . . with several or many seeds" and a drupe as "a fleshy. . . fruit with a stony endocarp surrounding usually a single seed." The avocado has only one seed, unlike a berry, and yet the endocarp (the brown "peel" coating the pit) is not stony, like an apricot or peach pit. The avocado, it appears, is in a class of its own.

I used to be judicious in my purchase of avocados, buying them only when they were specifically called for in a recipe or when I really *needed* guacamole. In

A recipe for guacamole

Ingredients:

- **One or two (or three or four or five. . .) ripe avocados. They must be the perfect shade of green and the perfect degree of tenderness, for there is nothing you can do to cover up the bitter taste of a brown avocado, and there's nothing you can do to make a hard avocado tender.**
- **A small amount of finely minced onion. Some people prefer garlic, which is an acceptable substitute.**
- **A hearty pinch of salt. Omitting the salt, or using too little, is a grave error. You may as well serve your guest pureed peas with their chips.**
- **Fresh-squeezed lime juice. Some people find it anathema to use anything other than lime, but if you need guacamole and you have an avocado at the peak of ripeness but no limes, then lemon juice or even red wine vinegar is an acceptable substitute. (This goes for Margaritas as well; if your fiesta runs long, and the guests drink you out of Margarita mix, lime juice, and limeade, squeeze up all the citrus fruit you have—oranges, lemons, clementines, grapefruit—but do not try vinegar.)**

Procedure:

1. **Mash up the avocados with one of those wooden avocado mashers, if you are lucky enough to have one, or the back of a fork if you are not, then mix in the other ingredients. Serve with corn chips, dollop on tacos or tostados, or eat with a spoon.**
2. **Things that are permissible to add to guacamole: a small amount of finely chopped tomato, a minced chili pepper, a pinch of cumin or cayenne. Things that are not acceptable to add to guacamole: mayonnaise, sour cream, tofu, salsa.**

my early adulthood I could, and did, buy avocados for five for a dollar at the bodega in my parents' neighborhood outside Denver. But now I live in Maine, the farthest you can get from avocado-growing states and still be in the US, where avocados cost one, two, or sometimes three dollars apiece. Liberal consumption of such a costly food item runs counter to the thrifty ethos of my adopted New England home, and so an avocado became a rare splurge.

Then the pandemic came. My cortisol levels went up, my dopamine levels went down. My stress response being eating, avocados became a regular addition to my grocery cart. I ate them in sandwiches with cheese and greens and mayonnaise. I ate them sliced and fanned over a poached egg with a healthy dash of hot sauce. I served them for dinner on top of bowls of grains and vegetables with savory sauces. I spooned them out of the shell and directly into my mouth. I made vats of guacamole.

My son and I did not look up directions for sprouting an avocado pit before we started our first tree. We merely stabbed three Pinocchio party picks into the pit and placed it, pointy side down, into the yogurt container of water and put it in the sunroom. He lost interest almost as soon as he suggested the idea, but each time I finished an avocado, I stabbed it with picks and set it in a yogurt container or jelly glass or small food storage container and put it in the sunroom. When I ran out of Pinocchio picks, I used American flag picks (also a random gift from my mother-in-law). When I ran out of American flags, I searched three grocery stores for normal toothpicks, to no avail, and instead bought another package of party picks—these with colorful plastic fringe on one end.

One of the avocados my mom sprouted in that green depression glass dish grew into a tree that brushed the ceiling in the winter and was dragged out to the patio in the summer, along with all the other house plants. One year, however, the plants didn't make it back in before the first hard frost, and many, the avocado tree included, did not survive. I can't help but wonder, especially now that I'm a parent, if there was some intentionality in my mom's neglecting her plants, an abdication of responsibility, a declaration that there were too many living beings depending on her and she'd had enough.

After several weeks, when none of our pits showed signs of sprouting, I finally pulled a gardening book from the shelf and discovered there is a proper procedure for sprouting an avocado:

1. Soak the pit in water for two or three days, then rub off the softened seed coat.
2. Pierce the pit with three toothpicks and place it *wide* end down in water.
3. Keep the pit in a warm place, out of direct sunlight, until the pit splits and a root grows out of the bottom and a shoot out of the top.

I brought our avocado pits in from the sunroom, which, as the name suggests, is full of direct sunlight, and which, because of all the windows, gets chilly at night in late fall. I rubbed off as much of the seed coat as I could, repositioned the party picks, and replaced the pits back in their various containers of water, wide end down. I then lined them up, two rows deep, along the kitchen counter, where it is warm and out of the sun.

Another name for the avocado is alligator pear. I only learned this recently from my youngest sister, who was horrified by the appellation. I, however, was delighted. I can't imagine a more apt description. Avocados are, undeniably, pear-shaped, and the skin is the exact color of a swamp-dwelling reptile, particularly the skin of the small, dark California-grown fruits, rather than the big, shiny Florida fruits. Though avocado skin lacks the regular pattern of alligator scales and scutes, it is warty and ridgy enough to appear downright reptilian.

Other names for avocado include: midshipman's butter, vegetable butter, and butter pear. The Aztec word for the avocado tree, ahuacacuahatl, translates to "testicle tree." It's not surprising that I, as a mother of three sons, would be adept at growing testicle trees.

After several weeks on the countertop, some of the avocado pits began to split, and from the fat end of each of these a pale root snaked down into the water and curled around the bottom of its container. I waited another week or two, to see if a green shoot would sprout out of the narrow, top ends of the pits, but when none were forthcoming, I decided to transfer the rooting pits into pots anyway. We were up to more than twenty pits at this point, and they took up a lot of space on my counter. After breaking the first couple of seeds in half when trying to remove the water-swollen party picks, I left them in place. This had the advantage of suspending the pit at just the right level in the pot, the root dangling free, while I added soil. Over the next few weeks, I transplanted pits as they sprouted roots, composting the few that did not within a reasonable period of time, gauging the length of their stay in the water baths by the style of party picks suspending them there.

The entry on avocados in the book *Economic Botany*, which my husband and I consult with the frequency and religious fervor with which other families consult the Bible, states that avocados "have a controversial history and seem to defy our often repeated theories about animal-dispersed fleshy fruits." The book is not clear about whether the avocado is controversial because of the mystery of how a fruit developed that contains up to 30% oil, when most fleshy fruits are primarily composed of water and sugar; because of the mystery of how the fruit was dispersed by animals when the seed, with its thin endocarp, has such inadequate protection from teeth or the digestive system; or because the avocado became popular in the United States in the 1920s after advertisers vehemently denied its aphrodisiacal effects, a surefire way to ensure the peculiar fruit's commercial success.

Although, in my haste to clear my countertop, I jumped the gun on potting my avocados as soon as the roots appeared, before any of the pits had developed a good-sized sprout and healthy head of leaves, as the gardening book suggested, nearly five months after we poked picks in the first pit, we had eight four-inch pots tucked in among the other houseplants in the sunroom. Each had the tip of an avocado pit sticking up out of the soil and three Pinocchio heads, American flags, or plastic-fringe-covered picks poking out over the rims. They were all in various stages of development, including not yet sprouted and quite possibly dead. The most advanced plant looked like a tiny tree: three inches tall, with a slender, reddish stem covered in minute hairs, with just the faintest beginnings of minuscule, pale green leaves clinging alternately along the stem and a bundle of half-inch leaves poking up straight and stiff from the apex, as if poised to burst forth in ecstatic leafiness.

Avocados require more than one plant for cross-pollination, since the male and female parts of the flowers develop asynchronously to prevent self-pollination. Having plants of different varieties or hybrids helps with reproductive success. Our little plants are most certainly descended from the commercial varieties that are grafted clones, possibly not fertile at all. In the sunny climes of California and Florida, avocado trees grow to be around 30 feet and can reach up to 60. Here in Maine, ours will be confined to the sunroom for most of the year, limiting their maximum height to about ten feet. We could have purchased a dwarf variety, cultivated for indoor growth, but that would have done nothing to alleviate the sameness of our days in the middle of a pandemic the way watching pits grow roots and sprouts has.

In early June, after the last frost, we moved most of the houseplants outside for the summer. By then the boys were coming to the end of a year of hybrid learning and we'd all been vaccinated, lifting some of the anxiety that had gripped me for more than a year. The avocados put up with heat and drought and sporadic watering through June and near-constant rain in July. Of the original two dozen pits, eight sprouted roots and leaves, and six survived the summer. By September, two of them were knee-high and healthy looking, with leafy crowns. Another two were the same height, but their leaves had shriveled and dropped off over the previous few weeks. The tiny new leaves that grew in to replace the shriveled ones looked healthy, however. The fifth was still short but leafy, though a little bug-chewed, and the sixth had its stem snapped off, perhaps by rain, a marauding chipmunk, or an ill-aimed soccer ball. I poked it back into the soil, with high hopes but low expectations of it rooting itself.

The pandemic was waxing, after months of waning, the Delta variant roaring through the unvaccinated. We hadn't yet heard of Omicron, which still lurked in an uncertain future. One morning, one of my sons woke with a cold, and I was sent into panic mode again. His COVID-19 test came back negative, and I settled back into low-grade worry. I wondered if this would become my permanent state of being—anxiety alternating between low idle and high rev, but always there.

When my son's cold cleared and he returned to school, I went to the store and bought an alligator-skinned, butter-fleshed, overpriced avocado. At home, I sat on the couch and ate it with a spoon. Then I took the pit to the kitchen, pierced its endocarp with party picks, suspended it in water, and prepared to grow another tree.

Tri and I might by Lindsey Morrison Grant
(bio on page 14)

Stellaria media *Namul* and Mugwort *Tteok*

Sarah Song

Sarah Song grew up in Seoul and has lived in America since 1999. After winning the Korean Literary Society of Washington's annual contest in 2014, she started writing in both Korean and English. Since retiring in 2020 after 25 years of work, she has been dedicating her time to writing.

Note: In Korean spring wildflowers are called *Bom* (spring) *Pul* (grass).

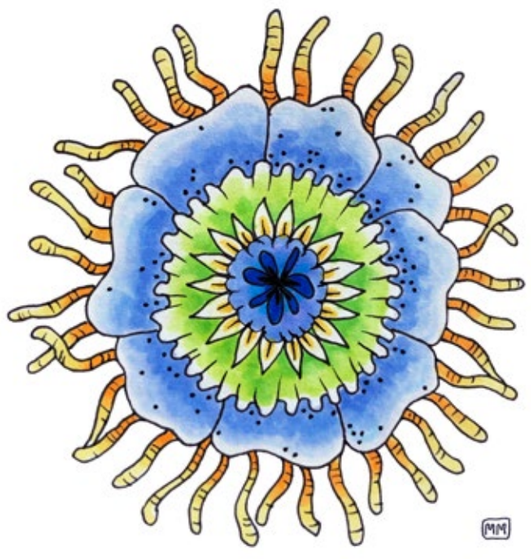
Spring comes with sound: the warbling of returned migratory birds, the murmuring of melting streams that had frozen over the winter, and the dripping of spring rain falling on the eaves of the roof where icicles had hung. I hardly see frozen streams or icicles in winter now, but the sonorous singing of all kinds of birds early in the morning signals that spring has come.

Spring also brings scent: the scent of various kinds of grass. Ra Tae-joo, a Korean poet, said in his poem *Grass Flower 2*, "Know the name, you become a neighbor / Know the color, you become a friend," but for a long time I didn't know the names or colors of the spring grasses. The only names I remembered were mugwort and shepherd's purse. In my early childhood, I used to dig them up with my friend after elementary school. I would bring home a full bag of them on sunny spring afternoons. Then, my mom made soybean paste stew with them. Their fresh scent together with the savory soybean paste made the stew my favorite dish in spring.

As apartment complexes were built everywhere in the 1980s in Korea, the fields where we dug for mugwort and the like disappeared one after another, and after a point we ended up just reading comic books after school. Since then, I have forgotten the scents of spring grasses—but they seem to be buried inside me and, in spring, sometimes flicker dimly through my memory.

Hoping to trail the lost scents of spring, I immediately replied to the email from a fellow alumnus of Seoul National University—who organizes hikes for alumni from time to time—about a Boulder

Untitled by Morgan Alexa Braid
(bio on page 14)



Clockwise from upper left: *2*, *4*, *9* and *8* by Maura McNamara (bio on page 14)

Bridge hike at Rock Creek Park on the last Saturday morning of April 2021. I had passed the park, which is in Washington, DC, everyday for nearly 20 years on my commute to work, but had never had time to visit before. It would take about two hours to complete three miles of the trail.

Entering the parking lot near the nature center, I noticed several alumni gathered around. Soon seventeen of us stood in a circle next to the parking lot and briefly introduced ourselves with our name, school year, and department. The hike's leader was Kang Soon-im, accompanied by her husband. She was twenty-five years older than me, yet still physically fit and elegant. In fact, all of the participants except for one were older than me. We took group pictures together against a backdrop of trees with spring buds, before starting on the trail.

The older women pointed to the grass growing in various colors and shapes along the trail and mentioned their names. Among the senior women, the leader, Mrs. Kang, seemed to be the expert.

"This is Doellingeria scabra. It's good to eat seasoned, or fresh," said Mrs. Kang. In Korean she pronounced the plant's name *Chwinamul*.

A woman named Soo walked with me and the other younger alumna.

"Oh, there's mugwort here," exclaimed Soo.

When I heard the name mugwort, I approached to see it, as if my childhood memories had called me. Looking at the mugwort closely, I realized what I had seen in my backyard.

"Oh, is this mugwort? I thought it was a weed in my backyard, so I almost pulled it out. . . " I murmured.

She picked one leaf, sniffed at it and gave it to me. "How could you not distinguish mugwort with such an aromatic scent?"

How could I forget this scent! I'd forgotten it completely and thought that whatever I didn't plant in my yard must be a weed.

This spring, stuck at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I could afford to spend time in my yard, and cleaned up the garden, which had been desolate during the winter, pulling out weeds. I manually removed the roots of what appeared to be weeds, instead of spraying weed killer and contaminating the groundwater. I still left behind some that seemed too good to be pulled out as weeds, wondering what flowers they would bloom into. One of them was the mugwort.

Another bright, light green grass caught my eye along the trail. Pointing to it, I asked Soo: "What is this one? This was creeping along the border of my front garden, so I pulled it out. Is this a weed?"

"Oh, these are stringy stonecrops!" She called the plant *Dolnamul* in Korean. "These are native to our country. How delicious they are when you eat them with *cho-gochujang*,"[1]

"What a bummer!" I thought to myself. How much time and money I had wasted because of my ignorance! I plucked out the precious perennial herbs because I had not recognized them, and kept buying other "edible" plants, planting them until my back hurt.

"What about this one?" I asked again, pointing to another sprawling green grass, which looked quite similar to what I saw right next to my garage.

"That's Stellaria media," she said—*Byeol-ggoch*

1 '*Cho*' means tangy sauce, such as vinegar or lemon juice and '*Gochujang*' is red chili paste, a savory, sweet, and spicy fermented condiment. '*Cho-gochujang*' is the spicy, sweet, and tangy sauce made by mixing *gochujang*, vinegar (or lemon juice), sugar (or plum syrup), minced garlic, sesame oil, and toasted sesame seeds.

in Korean, meaning star-flower. "You can eat that fresh or seasoned as well. It's savory and nutritious." She seemed so delighted, recalling all the tastes of wild greens.

"Its name sounds beautiful," I said, wondering why it's called star-flower.

Soo pulled me closer to her and said, "Do you see the tiny white flowers? Lower your head and have a good look at them. You're tall and you can't see it if you peek at it just while standing. Its name refers to the shape of its flowers, as it resembles a star."

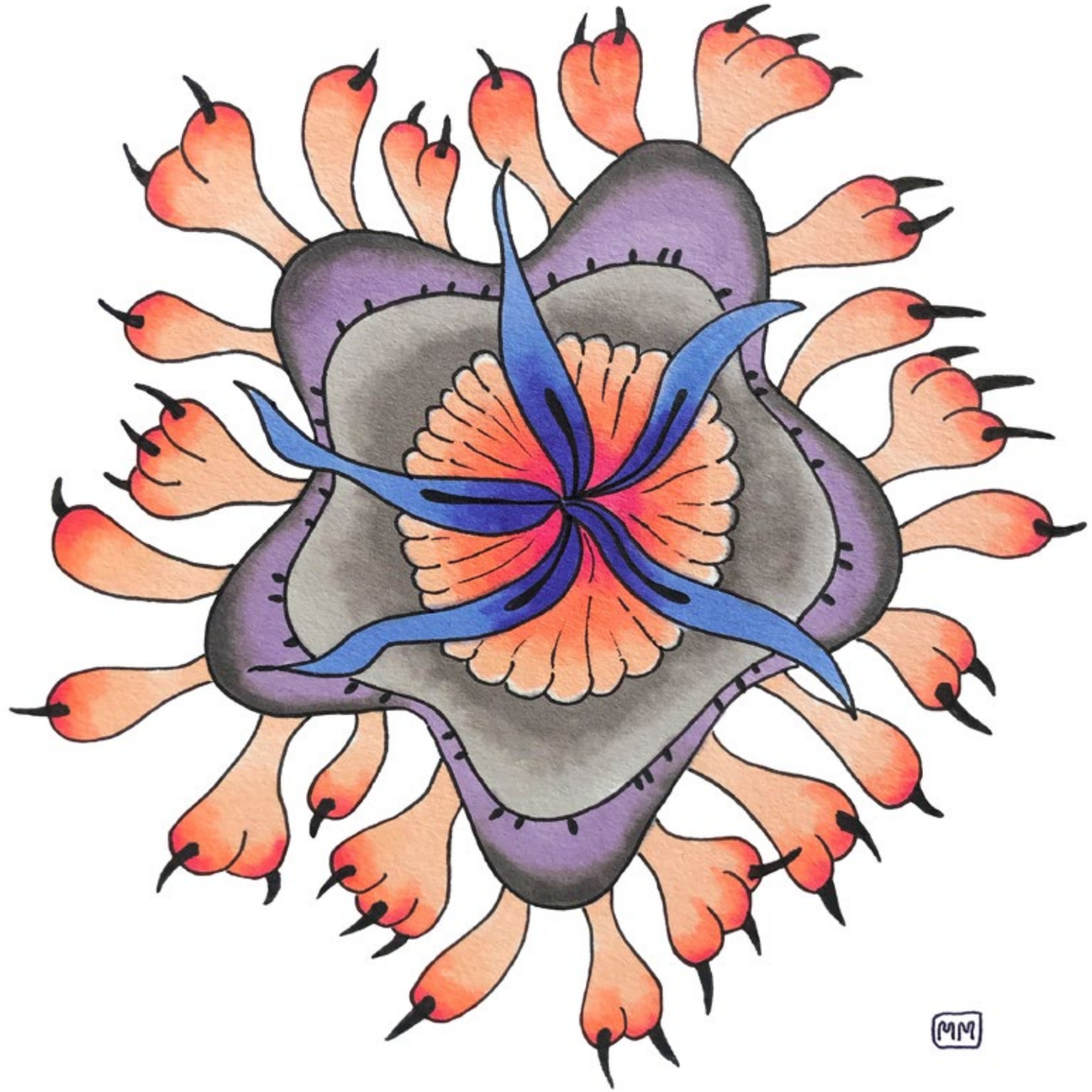
Sure enough, I noticed white star-shaped tiny flowers and said to her, "Oh, they look so cute! I am so grateful for being able to learn this from you."

After returning home from the hike, I looked around my garden. Indeed, those sprawling green leaves right next to the garage door were *Byeol-ggoch*. How fortunate I felt to have left them as they are! I stooped down to see them up-close. The white flowers were so small that I hadn't noticed them before. The flowers were surrounded by lots of egg-shaped green leaves. "Pretty / With a close look"—the first stanza of Ra Tae-joo's poem *Grass Flower* sprang to my mind. He really was right. I cut some of them and made *namul*, a Korean vegetable dish. After blanching them lightly in boiling water, I mixed them with soy sauce, sesame oil, and sesame seeds.

While I was at it, I also cut mugwort in the corner of my backyard, left intact as I hadn't had time to clean it up yet. As the next day was my twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, I decided to make a mugwort *tteok*. Following a recipe I found on the internet, I soaked the sticky rice in water for two hours, washed the mugwort clean, drained it, and put the rice in a pressure cooker with chopped mugwort. The scent of mugwort wafted up when I opened the lid of the rice cooker after the steamed rice was done. To make *tteok*, I had to pound the rice and mugwort. My mom used to pound it with a long wooden pestle in a large stone mortar. Lacking a pestle, I used a rolling pin instead.

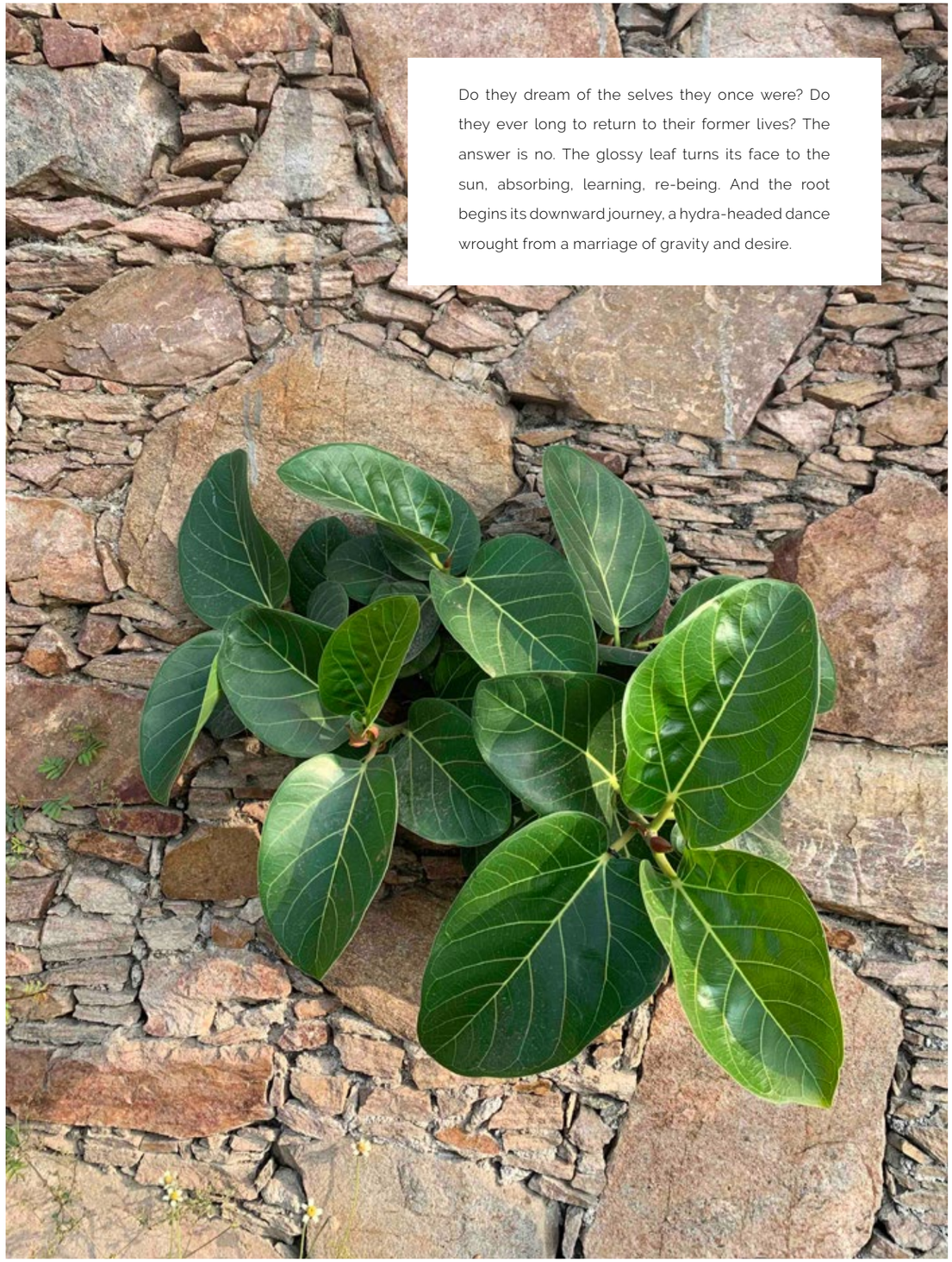
The oblique sunlight of the late afternoon came in with a breeze through an open window. The air and sunshine waltzed across my cheek. Gazing at spring-scented starflower *namul* and mugwort *tteok* in front of me, I listened to Johann Strauss's *Voices of Spring* waltz. The cheerful sound of the violin melody and the scent of spring danced together.

(April 2021)



7 by Maura McNamara (bio on page 14)

They are mistaken, those who say that trees cannot move. Their roots carve rivers in the earth below, their seeds are migratory birds, flying through the sky to finally nest in crevices between rocks and concrete. And here they are, reincarnated as many-leafed nests, new chapters unfolding every day.



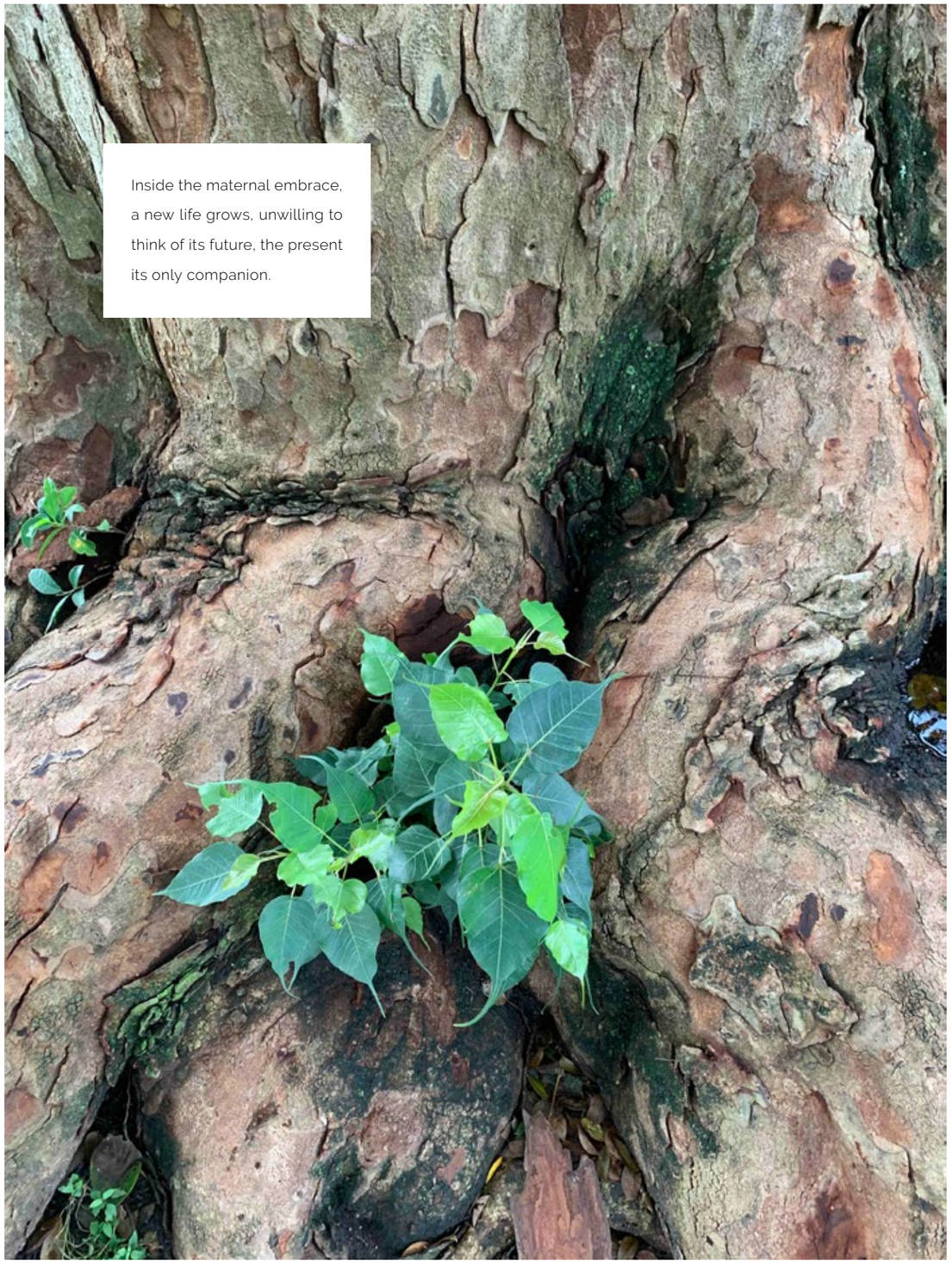
Do they dream of the selves they once were? Do they ever long to return to their former lives? The answer is no. The glossy leaf turns its face to the sun, absorbing, learning, re-being. And the root begins its downward journey, a hydra-headed dance wrought from a marriage of gravity and desire.

The wounded concrete is a collection of embroidered gardens. Green life heals the concrete, one leaf at a time. Some come searching for luck inside the gardens; others look for flavours to furnish their kitchens. And in the unexamined and examined gaze, the gardens thrive.

Quiet Emblems of Survival

Priyanka Sacheti

Priyanka Sacheti is a writer and poet based in Bangalore, India. She grew up in the Sultanate of Oman and previously lived in the United Kingdom and United States. Her literary work has appeared in numerous literary journals such as *Barren*, *Khora*, *Marble Poetry*, *The Common*, *Popshot*, *The Lunchticket*, and *Jaggery*, as well as various anthologies. She's currently working on a poetry and short story collection. She can be found as @anatlasofallthatisee on Instagram and @priyankasacheti on Twitter.



Inside the maternal embrace, a new life grows, unwilling to think of its future, the present its only companion.

One day, this shrine will go the way of its forebears, vanishing into the earth it sprung up from: but for now, its light illumines each and those who pass it, one drop at a time.

Carry Home With You

Germain M.C.

Mexican-born writer Germain M.C. grew up in the Southern United States and currently lives in Europe, where he works as an English tutor. His flash work draws from a decade as a research chemist and a lifetime as an immigrant, with published pieces in *365tomorrows* and *fiveminutelit*.

The town of Pasadena, Texas sprang up around refineries built near oil deposits. Forests surrounding worksites were repurposed into homes, brush disintegrated under pavement, bayous receded for a hardy population capable of living under an ashen sky.

The smokestacks' constant soot mingled with the gulf's humidity to form a perpetual ceiling of gray acidic storm clouds.

Pollution shaded my walks home from school, the quiet of the still smog interrupted by my coughing fits. A dirt road connected my middle school and neighborhood. It ran parallel to an empty concrete waterway turned artificial stream when summer's caustic rain fell.

Between coughing fits, I'd focus on the grass between the waterway and the dirt road. It fascinated me, each blade jutting at odd angles and different lengths but all drooping from a lack of nutrients. There was a gradient—weak green at the edge of the dirt road to pale yellow at the waterway's concrete border. I'd distract myself from my wheezing by searching for the exact point where green turned yellow and wondered what circumstances led some blades to resemble live herbage while others straddled death.

Just luck, I assumed.

I rubbed my sore throat and resented my own luck. Though I'd landed among Pasadena's yellow grass, I decided one day I'd move closer to the road's fertile loam, to greener fields.

To find these fields, I walked the dirt road every day. Through sickness and sleet, from middle school to high school, shouldering a backpack filled with books and homework, I persisted until my academics culminated in an acceptance letter to the University of Texas at Austin.

My family waved the letter in the air, calling aunts and uncles who heaped praise, but every "congratulations" carried guilt. In my eagerness to escape, I'd be abandoning a family that had traded dirty, muscle-straining refinery work to give me a chance somewhere else.

Absentmindedly, I walked the dirt road during my last afternoon in Pasadena. Studying the grass, I decided to take, if not family, a piece of my hometown with me. Against the fading dusk of a smog-obstructed sun, I unearthed a section, half-green and half-pale, and transplanted my native soil to a new home—a black ceramic coffee cup.

It occupied the passenger seat on my bus ride to Austin.

As we traveled, the landscape broke free from the grip of iron and machinery, giving way to endless wheat fields and Texas ranches.

Austin greeted us with rolling hills and architecture befitting a capital, baffling me with how the city seamlessly incorporated modern structures with natural cliffs.

I arrived at my new apartment complex with awoken senses. My eyes adjusted to the bright bluebonnets and pink primroses generously planted around the parking lot. My nose itched at the perfumed scents of healthy bark and rain lilies blowing from an adjoining forest. Here, life grew alongside brick and stone, given the space and freedom to spread leaf and branch.

A bridge-studded creek flanked my building and fed the forest's trees, all thick, strong, and upright. From my apartment balcony, I compared this view to Pasadena's meek trees, hiding where they wouldn't obstruct work operations, peeking from the shadows of industrial plants. The contrast solidified a determination to not only keep my piece of Pasadena alive, but make it thrive.

It didn't matter where it'd come from. My grass would heal in this climate and find a place amongst Austin's flora, proving origin does not define character. One day, it would leave the coffee cup and meld into the greenery of our new backyard.

Until then, the off-yellow, light-green sagging patchwork stood out from the surrounding lush.

As did I.

Pasadena's stench was woven into my clothing, impervious to heated wash cycles and powerful detergents. Neighbors in the shared laundry room would glance in my direction, noses wrinkled.

"You smoke, man?" One asked once. He folded his laundry and watched me smell mine.

"No, never." I stuttered through a cough.

These hacks had followed me from Pasadena, unaffected by Austin's clear fragrant air. I feared developing asthma. To distract myself, I turned back to my grass and added expensive soil and filtered water to the coffee cup, eager to see yellow turn green and green turn firm.

But every blade retained a slouching posture despite weeks of obsessive soil pH tests and variations in sunlight. I even played soft music to promote health.

Nothing worked.

Frustrated at the blade's stubborn Pasadena ways, I went for a walk.

The bridges crossing the forest's creek stood strong under the canopy of Spanish oaks. The location had become a favorite of mine, offering a verdant

view impossible back home. Calmed by the sound of running water, I considered tossing the grass.

"It's never gonna grow anyway," I said. The words scratched my throat enough to spur a wheezing spell. The coughs came hard, persisting. I spit blood. I collapsed.

"Do you smoke?" the doctor asked me the next day.

"No, never," I coughed.

"Are you sure?"

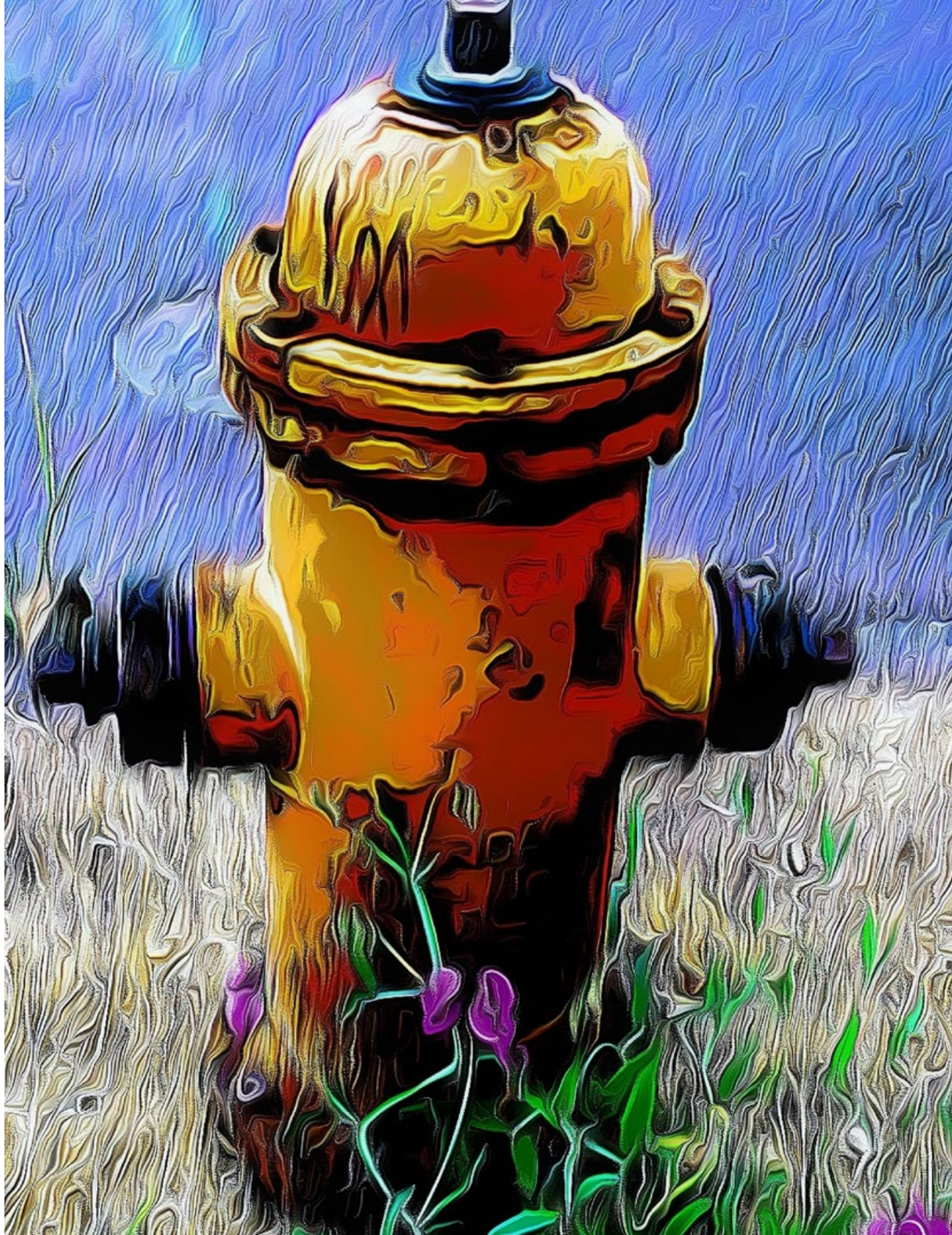
I didn't need to take a section of Pasadena. She lingered inside, silently spreading throughout my lungs.

After the appointment, I sat on my couch and watched my coffee cup grass rest on the windowsill. Backdropped by the sun, the blades looked like a crowd of people, tucked in and wavering, backs forever bent.

They were never going to change. Origin did, in part, define their character. No matter the care or attention or environment, this grass carried Pasadena to the root. The green was as green as it'd ever be, the yellow lucky to be alive.

But it was alive. This decrepit grass would never blend in, but it could survive anywhere while any piece of Austin's flora transplanted to Pasadena would wilt and die. Pasadena damaged but also fortified her natives to survive hardship.

And being from Pasadena, maybe I'd survive too.



Sweet Peas Hydrate by
Lindsey Morrison Grant
(bio on page 14)

Autumn Love by
Lindsey Morrison Grant
(bio on page 14)

These Trees

Lew Forester

Lew Forester is a retired social worker and a Multiple Myeloma survivor. He lives with his wife in Arvada, Colorado and is often found hiking in the nearby mountains.

The author of *Dialogues with Light* (Orchard Street Press, 2019), Lew's poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Stonecrop Review*, *Plainsongs*, *POEM*, *Slipstream*, *The MacGuffin*, *Evening Street Review* and other journals, magazines, and anthologies.

www.lewforester.com

are never where we leave them.
The cottonwood crawls under
the fence, sends up saplings
in my neighbor's yard.
The maple wings its way
into unsuspecting lawns.

Conscious, crafty, trees wait
to claim this city—
picture banyans engulfing
ancient empires.

Planted for a bit of shade,
trees canopy my yard,
block my view of fireworks,
though winter's bare branches
frame stars.

These rows of timbered homes
consume us even as they shelter.
How brief our history
on this plot of earth
as it morphs from prairie
to farmland to suburbs to forest.

Trees trek everywhere, travel
the Milky Way with us.
They scratch at the windows
of our dreams.
Each spring they sport
new faces, reach skyward
while we sag with age.

Magnolia Grandiflora

Lew Forester

Summer mornings began in a haze, sun
fumbling through curtains of fog, like us

in pubescent skins. Under a magnolia's
creamy flowers, its honey citrus perfume,

we heard a language our parents refused
to speak. The tree oozed fecundity—

leaves waxy green ovals with suede
undersides, scent of the face-sized flowers

heady as incense. With its phallic orange
fruit, the tree was sex, what people did

but didn't discuss. Bees slipped in
and out of hives, plundered magnolia

blooms, but love was the moon, swollen
behind locked doors— easily hurt,

with clemency granted in coital nights
while mockingbirds clamored till dawn.

Love was a delirium of pungent petals
that bruised when you touched them.

Searching for a Banyan in the Northwest

Vimla Sriram

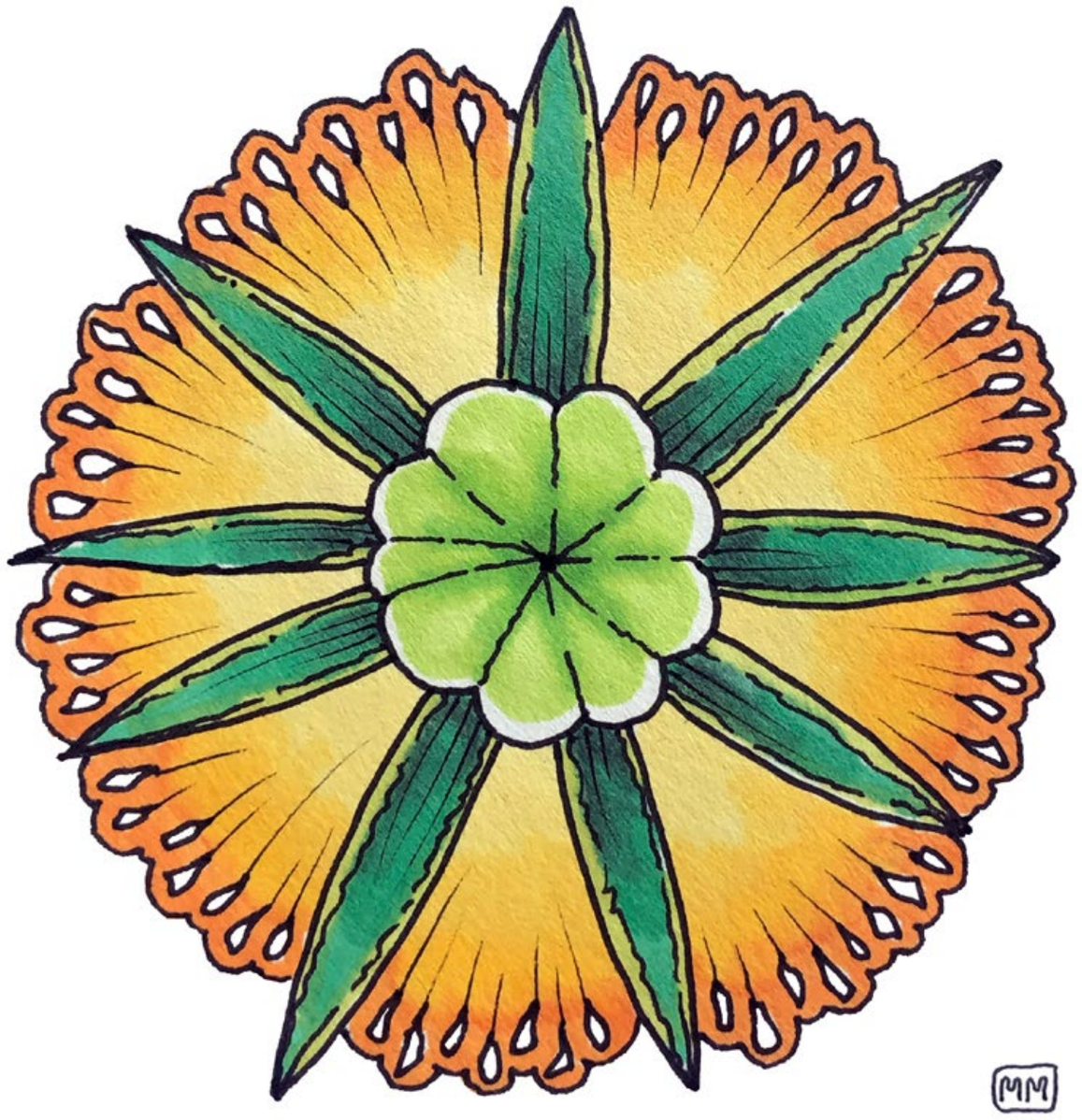
Born and raised in India, Vimla Sriram is a Seattle-based essayist. She writes about birds, women's silences, home, and identity. Her writing appears or is forthcoming in *100 Word Story*, *Wanderlust*, *io Literary Journal* and *deLuge Literary and Arts Journal*.

She was a journalist at *The Economic Times*, MSNBC and KBCS. She also edited the quarterly *ISB Insight*, a research publication of the Indian School of Business.

I share the Pacific Northwest with a thousand shades of gray, sometimes all of them appearing in the sky at the same time, layered brushstrokes of charcoal, pewter, silver, ash, circling the sky. Alone, each swatch might appear gloomy but together they create an understated yet starkly serene palette against which our evergreens come alive. I didn't always use gray and alive in the same sentence.

When I moved from New Delhi in the mid 90s, I brooded with the gray that sneaked into me through the big windows of my sparse apartment. Gray stayed with me. Together we waited for Seattle's short but bewitching summer when our lakes sparkled, mountains glowed and our pines and oaks were out-colored by the rhododendrons, azaleas and magnolias. But in over two decades of living in the northwest, gray has grown on me. I see beauty in its mellow smokiness. The trick I have learnt is to not compare what you have with what you have lost, or anything else for that matter. As a 24-year-old transplant from India, I was programmed to take the sun for granted. Seattle turned me into a human sunflower: giddy at the sight of sunlight, depressed when it faded. It didn't help that Delhi, chaotic-polluted-dirty Delhi, never let me forget her.

The tiny house where I grew up had a well-tended garden with a patch of lawn in the front. Shielding us from the sun was a guava tree in one corner and a gnarly jasmine climber in another. The tree never let us forget who the boss was. Year after year it produced hundreds of wormy guavas and still commanded respect from the straggly curry leaf tree on one side and midget rose bushes on the other. It stared me down each morning as I sat on the stone step with a bowl of soggy cornflakes that I fought to swallow before school. Among the oblong leaves of



10 by Maura McNamara (bio on page 14)

the guava tree our morning visitors would be hard to sight if not for their otherworldly squawking. Four or five parrots would fight for the guavas that we ignored. This is how I managed to finish my breakfast. When life gave me a bowl of mush at least I had parrots for distraction.

Our house was on a street lined with the edible fiery orange flowers of the gulmohar tree. On my way home from school I'd dawdle under a tree looking for fallen flowers to nibble. When we think of what we will remember of a place if we leave it behind we think of home, of people. We don't consider the many other things we won't see anymore: the parrots that sit on a guava tree, the grandfather banyan that spreads its branches all over the playground, the ugly vultures that circle the crematorium, the wandering peacocks with their excessive strut. But we are a sum of all these parts. For years I looked for the banyan in Seattle, for the blazing sun on autumn days when I should have been exploring the neighborhood trails and studying the differences between firs, pines and spruces. Seeing anew took a while; gentle prodding from my son helped.

Recalibrating my compass, I started with the pines in my backyard. In the past I had believed that as long as all tall conical trees were pines, I wasn't in any danger of forming roots. But in two decades of living in the northwest I had become the banyan and every street held a memory: the diner we ate in when we lost our house keys, the gas station where we pumped diesel instead of petrol because we were too dazed or daunted by impending parenthood, the long gone Indian restaurant where our baby refused to stop crying and we took the naans home and ate them cold.

The seven trees in my yard rise above the deck and above the roof of the house. They hold differences that I wouldn't have noticed twenty years ago. In the corner, with peeling reddish barks, are the madronas that lean into their neighbors: three straight-as-ruler red cedars. Interspersed in the middle are vine maples and western hemlocks.

My attention unlocked a world I had passed by without noticing. Hopping along the crevices of the reptilian-barked cedars were birds. Ping-pong ball sized nuthatches, black and brown with mascara-ed eyes, dug in tenaciously for hidden worms. Crimson crested birds that I later learned were pileated woodpeckers tapped rhythmically, punching holes into tree trunks. I found a place in the kitchen for bird books and a pair of binoculars. Now we are all on watch from our perch in the kitchen—a family of accidental birders.

Some quiet mornings I sit with a cup of tea, my eyes on the trees beyond the deck, searching for movement, for sounds. From where I sit the greens come alive against the gray.

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