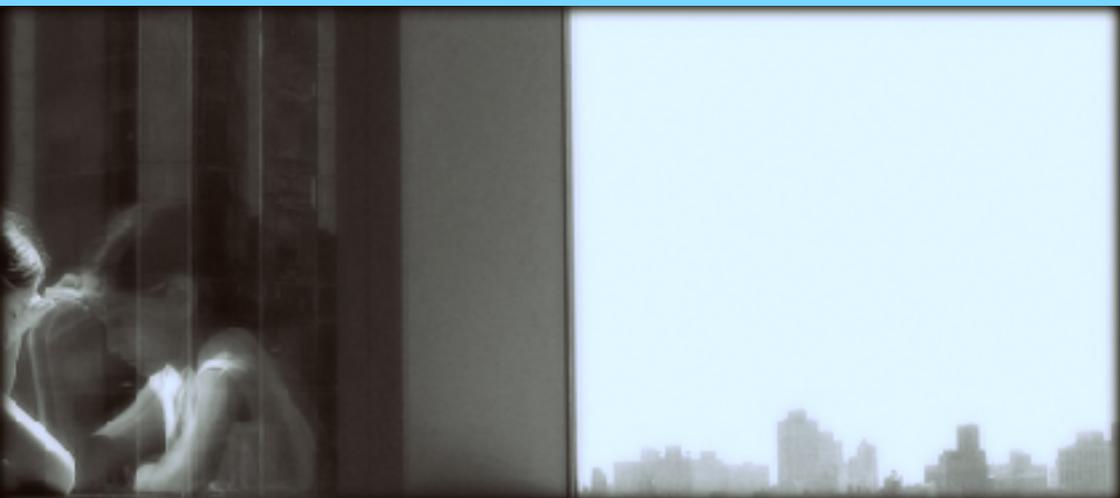


TWO CITIES REVIEW



ISSUE 16 WINTER 2018

Two Cities Review is an online review featuring quality fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Our editors are:

Blair Hurley (Toronto Editor) has a B.A. in English and Creative Writing from Princeton University and an M.F.A. in Fiction from NYU.

Blair's writing has been published in *West Branch*, *Washington Square*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Fugue*, *Descant*, *Quality Women's Fiction*, *The Best Young Writers and Artists in America*, and elsewhere.

Blair lives in Toronto, Canada.

Olivia Tandon (New York Editor) received a B.A. in Creative Writing with a concentration in nonfiction from Columbia University. She went on to earn a Masters degree in Earth Science Education from Brooklyn College.

While at Columbia, Olivia was an editor of the school's literary magazine *Quarto*. She has been published in *Creative Nonfiction*, *Gravel*, *Bluestem*, *Kudzu House Quarterly* and others.

Olivia lives in New Jersey.

Letter from the Editors

Dear readers,

This December, our writers are thinking about religion and belief. How do we reconcile the beliefs of our childhoods with the insights of adulthood? How do we leave faith, fall out of faith, fall in love with faith? The stories, essays, and poems of this issue wrestle with these questions in very different ways, from a discussion of how to dispose of Mormon undergarments to what it's like to be the only Jewish student at a conservative Christian school. What does belief mean to us, and are we really just looking for a sense of belonging and protection against a cold, indifferent world? Or is there something more there?

We're proud to present stories, essays, and poems that tackle these and other topics with sensitivity, power, and pain. And we'll continue discussing the big ideas these pieces bring out in our biweekly podcast, now on iTunes. How does belief operate in your own writing? We'd love to find out.

Happy reading!

Blair Hurley & Olivia Tandon

Visit twocitiesreview.com to read our blog on city life as a writer today. For information on how to submit to Two Cities Review, visit twocitiesreview.com/submit.

Be sure to check out our podcast, available at twocitiesreview.com/podcast, or the iTunes library. Search for “Two Cities Review” — and remember to leave us a review if you enjoy it!

Table of Contents

POETRY

<i>Winter Solstice</i>	Noorulain Noor
<i>The Empty City</i>	Douglas Cole
<i>Visit to a Small Planet</i>	D.G. Geis
<i>Giving Birth at the End of the World</i>	Meghan Joyce Tozer

FICTION

<i>The Visitor</i>	Brittany Ackerman
<i>Boxing Life</i>	Nancy Christie

NONFICTION

<i>The Disposal of Mormon Garments</i>	Dayna Patterson
--	-----------------

ART

<i>Cover: Contemplation</i>	Thomas Gillaspy
-----------------------------	-----------------

Winter Solstice

Noorulain Noor

The moon, only a half-arc wafer,
and the darkness discordant
with rush hour traffic.
This throng of lonely souls,
in accidental communion with each other,
their heartbreak heavier than night.
Together, we wear a shroud of invisibility
under the same barren stretch of sky,
inching along the same patch of road
amidst the sinusoidal symmetry of hills --
sentinels of many other sorrows.

Tokens and signs and shields. Garments were easy compared to the rest. The rest clung like sunburn.

V — — L

I remember removing them off for the last time. I'd taken a sabbatical from church attendance, and the months stretched, unraveling any desire I had to return.

Why am I still wearing these? I asked myself.

A 12 years' habit, I answered.

I didn't have any other underwear, had to go to the store—What is my size?—to buy a package—Should I choose white? Bikini cut or briefs? What fabric do I like? Spandex? Cotton? After an hour of painful deliberation, a package in pastels—not white, but not a loud red or black or striped. No lace or frills. Cotton Hanes for Her. Size 7, I guessed, not bikini cut or square, but not spinsterly, either. So many, too many choices emanating from one.

V — — L

For months, I felt naked under my clothes, wore a tank top under my blouse, leggings beneath my jeans. When I'd forget to don a camisole, I felt exposed, cold, too much air on my midriff instead of a garment top's insulating hug. I realized some of my shirts were semi-transparent, which hadn't mattered with garments. They'd

lent a layer of substance to any shirt. Rather than downsizing my wardrobe, I bought undershirts in every conceivable color.

V

—

—

L

I remember the stories I heard in church—bullets deflected, burns absorbed—by the power of garments worn by faithful members. But for me, faithless, they've lost all magic. The care, ritual, mysticism, respect I've shed. I empty the bin beside my bed, bag the dry silk, maternity tops, cotton bottoms cleaned and packed here four years ago in case . . .

They smell of must. I slip them in a plastic garbage sack like the carcasses of doves, all feather and rot, bodies devoid of spark. I toss them in the dumpster's dark.

The Empty City

Douglas Cole

In the plaza on Howard Street
you'll find the unlikely fountain
prohibited by iron rails
beneath a walkway encased in bronze glass
and surrounded by red - brick
would - be windows if the concept made it
through the financing,
and tucked up in there like an afterthought is
Benjamin's Café with one woman serving
through the grim afternoon,
her face a relief map of untreated tumors.



West on Main

Lincoln stands a mute copper witness
to the convergence of afternoon drivers ,
and further west find the Shrine Auditorium
with soot black colonnades of Corinthian dolor
and a Sphinx replica with shattered nose
inglorious on a side street
without even the embrace of a desert.



Into Peaceful Valley and Glovers Field
the young woman carries a baby in her arms
and leaves a trail of milk blankets
on the street of scattered homes
begun in the dream of the nearby river
with shopping carts in empty lots
and cars that will never run
all contained in the old woman's gaze
as she sits on her porch
under the tides of the afternoon
clouds blowing over —
and is that the howl of water below ,
or the sigh of traffic on the bridge above?



And I ascend the steel steps
into the green hillside artifacts ,
whiskey bottles, lost coat,
newspapers, coded cry of graffiti,
turn and see one child running
through the relay of barking dogs.
Soon enough the streets empty,
not one sound but the river,
construction begun and ended
midway in rubble and oily pools,
one engine in the black train yard
going nowhere , all in all,
born old and driving their carts
over the bones of the dead
among the ghostly whispers
of spirits looking for a way back in.

The Visitor

Brittany Ackerman

Duncan Leeds used to go to my school, but transferred when his dad got a promotion and his mom wanted a house in Wellington Gardens, a house that had an elevator and a trampoline in addition to the standard two stories and a pool for Florida mansions. Wellington was thirty minutes away from where I lived in Boca Raton, and in Florida time, that was a whole other world. He was my first real boyfriend, even though we only saw each other on weekends.

“I love you,” Duncan said on the phone. It was late, past eleven o’clock on a school night, and we both spoke in low voices. “Do you love me?”

“Yes,” I said, immediately uncertain of what “love” even was. Did I know? Did I want to be in love at age fifteen? I couldn’t even drive yet without an adult in the car. In a year, we’d both have cars, and we could meet up in the middle of the night if we wanted to instead of talking on the dumb phone, and maybe then we’d be able to be in love, real love, because we could be ourselves, and not these immature versions of kids who want more than they have.

But Duncan seemed happy. He seemed okay. He seemed to believe that this was it, this was love and we had it.

“I wish you went to my school,” He said after a long pause.

“Me too,” I answered in solidarity.

“Maybe you could shadow me for a day, and if you like it, you can transfer too. It’s private, so you don’t have to live here or anything.”

“It’s so far away though,” I said, picking at my nail polish, flicking red chips all over my white bedspread, collecting them in a pile that I would dispose of when we got off the phone.

“But next year you’ll be able to drive yourself to school, so it won’t matter. You’ll like driving. It’ll be fun. And maybe you can sleepover, if we ask my mom or something, like downstairs in the basement, or you can have my bed and I’ll go down there, or, I don’t know, something like that.”

“Yeah,” I said, my thoughts drifting off to what would happen after high school though, if I’d be the same person, if I wanted to be someone else, what would happen if this was it, if Duncan and I would have kids of our own someday who fell in love or thought they knew what love could be.

It was arranged for me to visit Wellington Christian High School and skip a day of my own classes. I had to beg my mom for this, even though I didn’t really want to go, and it took days of arguing for it to finally happen. I told her that my school was making me materialistic because all the girls had purses instead of backpacks. I told her I wouldn’t mind the longer drive to school in the morning, that it would actually help me practice driving because it’d be the same route everyday. In the end, she knew it was because of Duncan, but she let me go anyway because I think she really believed in our love.

“You play a cat and mouse game with him,” she said the night before my visit.

“What do you mean?” I asked, lying on the floor of the library room in our house. She hated when I did this. First, because she couldn’t see me when she was on the computer playing her puzzles, and second because she didn’t think it was safe even though it wasn’t dangerous at all. Sometimes parents worry for absolutely nothing, and the floor thing was definitely one of those things.

“When you like him, he runs, and when he chases after you, you run. Cat. Mouse,” as she spoke, pieces of her virtual puzzle clicked into place. She always had the volume up way too high. Sometimes if she couldn’t sleep, I could hear the pieces clicking, clicking, even up in my bedroom on the second floor with the door closed. I’d call the house phone just to be annoying and tell her to lower the volume. “Don’t call so late,” she’d say, as if I didn’t live there.

“That’s not true,” I said in response to her remark. I pictured Tom and Jerry chasing each other through various scenarios, and I remembered that Tom always goes after Jerry. The cat always goes after the mouse. I so desperately hoped I was the mouse in the situation with Duncan, and then I realized I probably was since he asked me to consider transferring schools, but then I also recognized that maybe I was the cat since I agreed to try out Wellington Christian.

I wanted to be in love, and maybe that’s why Duncan was so appealing at first. He asked me out by slipping a note in my locker. He wanted an answer by the end of the day. I never had a class with him, but I said yes and we started dating. And then he left after Christmas break. Even though we did long-distance, he was so

available, so willing, so uninterested in anything except the hypothetical future. We didn't have to worry about how any of us would get there. Maybe we were just in love with love, with the kind of love that didn't have to exist because no one ever talked about it. We said it at the mall into our Nokia phones, we wrote it on the back of our hands, we called it the "L" word so it remained a small and easy thing.

"Do you have to wear anything special?" My mom asked.

"No," I said. "But I think I want to wear jeans since everyone will be in uniform."

"Is that allowed?"

"I'm the visitor. I can wear anything. And I want to look nice."

"I don't know if jeans are nice."

"Oh my God!" I said and rolled myself up, off the carpet.

With traffic, it took thirty-seven minutes to get up to Wellington. Duncan was waiting for me at the end of the carpool line when my mom dropped me off. I begged her to let me drive so I'd look cool when I showed up, but she said I would go too fast since I was so excited. I didn't want to argue with her because then she'd know I was basically doing this all for a boy, so I smiled when I got out of the car and ran to hug Duncan.

"We can't really, hug, or anything here," Duncan said, detaching my body from his.

"Oh, 'cause it's like, super Christian here," I said back.

"Not super, but, well, yeah," Duncan shrugged and waited for me to be upset. But I wanted him to think I was really down to earth, go with the flow. I turned around and waved at my mom,

who said she'd be waiting at the Wellington Green Mall, reading the paper and doing the crossword puzzle with her cell phone on loud in case I needed to escape. I told myself it was just one day, a few hours really, and then I could break-up with Duncan and date someone else, or no one, or whatever. I didn't want to be in a relationship anymore if I was unsure of it, and even though I wasn't sure if I was unsure, I took that as a no anyway.

"I understand," I said and smiled. "Where do I sign in?"

Duncan led me to the office where the secretary had a nametag waiting for me. No one had inquired about my religious background, but I began to feel uncomfortable around so many crosses and plaques stating that Jesus was the answer to all my problems. I was never forced to go to temple or pray or anything, but I still considered myself Jewish. My mom was Jewish, and my dad, so it was really deep, down in there in my blood. But I didn't know most of the Torah stories. I couldn't have told you anything about Judaism other than you get eight presents on Hanukkah.

Duncan's classroom looked like the rooms at my school, but there seemed to be fewer students. My classes had 25-30 kids per class, where here I only counted fifteen. There were nine girls and six boys, including Duncan. Some of the boys gave him a hard time for me being there, but I knew it was just because they thought I was pretty and probably wished I were their girlfriend and not Duncan's.

The morning started off with the pledge of allegiance, followed by a whole minute of silent prayer, finished with an "Amen," from everyone. I tried to stand up and sit down at the right parts, but felt jumbled and out of place. Also my jeans were really tight and

bugging the crap out of me every time I moved. I should have worn a dress. The class schedule was normal. They had Science, History, English, Math, and then lunch. I was most nervous for lunch because I didn't want to have to talk to any of the girls. The whole morning they eyed me up and down and gave me weird looks. I understood though; I was treading on their territory. Duncan was really cute and they all probably wanted to date him. They must have hated me for being his girlfriend. I tried to tell them with my eyes that it wouldn't be much longer, that they could have him, soon.

After we ate our dry, turkey sandwiches, Duncan dragged me to the tennis courts so we could be alone. He kissed me, hard, with a lot of tongue, more than ever before.

"I thought we couldn't do this," I said, backing away a bit.

"No one's here," he said, pulling me back.

We kissed for a few minutes until I felt his boner through his khaki pants.

"You really need to get a digital camera so you can send me pics of your tits," he said, grabbing my boobs over my shirt.

"Stop!" I laughed, even though I liked the attention.

"You know, all my friends are jealous of me," Duncan said.

"I know," I said.

"I can't wait until we can be alone like this all the time."

"Me too," I said.

I looked out beyond the tennis courts, past the school's courtyard and offices, out into the Wellington scenery of trees and dirt roads and nowhere. I didn't want to be here. I missed Boca. Wellington was a wasteland for the religious youth. I had no

place here. I belonged at a mall or an extravagant restaurant. But I didn't want to let him down, let my mom down. I didn't want anyone to know that I wanted to try things, like sex and weed and maybe pills and maybe date an older guy or kiss a stranger at a party or even just go to a party and not have to answer to anyone. I felt like everyone just wanted me to do the right thing, and I didn't want to do that.

When the bell rang, Duncan told me we'd have to separate until the end of the day. The last two periods were religious study and personal reflection. The class would be divided by sex; girls with one teacher, boys with another. My stomach dropped.

The boys stayed in Duncan's original homeroom class, while the girls went across the hall and a few doors down to another room. The girls were arranging the desks in a circle and I pulled a desk to complete it and sat down. The teacher read us some bible verses and then told us a story about the woman at the well. I tried not to pay attention and bit my cuticles down instead, but I heard her talk about this woman who was a prostitute, a whore, who came to the well and had a conversation with Jesus. He ministered to her and accepted her, despite her character, and even wanted her to fetch him a drink of water, which was like, crazy apparently. I liked how the teacher told the story. The room was so relaxed, I almost wanted to lie down and sleep. I felt comfortable, like every girl in the room was accepting of everyone in the world, but for real because they believed in something greater than themselves. I wondered if Jesus would love me if he knew me, if he could love me like he loved the girls in the room, and if I could ever believe that it was possible to be loved that much by anyone.

The teacher asked the group of girls what they thought about stereotypes and judging others before getting to know them. Most girls gave generic answers about how that's bad and we should love everyone as we love ourselves and as Jesus loves us, but one girl, Samantha, brought me up.

"Her for example," Samantha said and pointed to me. "I didn't know what to think when I heard she'd be coming here for the day. But she's been so quiet and respectful of our school. She really belongs here. And Duncan is one of the best guys I know, so she has to be great if he likes her."

I couldn't believe she was saying all this to a teacher. My teachers didn't even care if I showed up to class, let alone knew anything about my personal life.

"How do you like it here so far?" the teacher asked me.

"Everyone's been so nice," I said, which was true. I felt a shift, like maybe I had the wrong idea. Everyone was nice, a lot nicer than at my school. Maybe if I went to school here, I'd be popular because boys like me and I know about fashion and everyone was already jealous of me, jealous in a good way, a positive way.

"Do you think you'll transfer here?" Samantha asked and smiled.

"I hope so," I said.

"Let's all join hands," the teacher said. "And you too," she directed her voice at me. I nodded and offered my hands to the two girls next to me. "Let us pray that Brittany find the strength to leave behind her old school and the courage to try Wellington Christian and know that she will be loved and supported by you, our Lord Jesus, and that you may bestow her the wisdom to know

what choice is right to make and instill that choice deep in her heart. Let us do your work, good Lord, and keep our hearts focused on you. Lift me up so that I may guide these wonderful girls and bless me with your spirit that I may stay in your word. We adore you, Lord Jesus, and we will follow you forever and ever. Amen.”

Duncan gave me a hug goodbye, but we couldn't kiss because the other kids were around, some teachers too. The one that prayed for me smiled and waved as I got in my mom's car, the driver's side this time. She let me drive home and I wasn't sure if it was because she knew how important it was to me or if she was just tired and wanted me to drive. I didn't speak to her as I drove away from Wellington Christian and watched the school disappear into the dust and dirt and palm trees and trailer trash neighborhood and strip malls until we were finally on State Road 441, a long a desolate road that led back to Boca.

I never spoke to Duncan again after that day. It was like we said goodbye without having to. The kiss we shared on the tennis courts burned in me for a long time until I fell in love again and again, forever and ever, with so many others.

After a few minutes of driving, my mom finally asked me how it went and I told her I loved the school and wanted to transfer and she laughed and told me I couldn't go to a Christian school because I was Jewish.

“I'm not that Jewish,” I said.

“I don't understand you!”

“You don't have to understand me, you just have to love me like God loves me!”

She stayed quiet and looked out the window, mad.

“The whole class prayed for me!” I yelled and all of a sudden there was a noise. Something shattered. The window, the passenger window fell into my mom’s lap and she screamed. I swerved and she screamed more and I pulled over and stopped the car and we both got out. She started crying and her arm was bleeding and I pushed the OnStar button and it called them and they said they were coming and we waited.

I asked my mom if she was okay and I don't remember what she said. I just remember her picking glass off her clothes, the way she shook her head in disbelief, disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” I kept saying, like a chant, a prayer of my own, asking for her forgiveness, for the way I was, for the way I would be the rest of my life; impulsive, indecisive, and wanting the wrong things.

Roadside assistance said it was a temperature fluctuation that caused the window to break, but the temperature changes all the time in Florida, rain to burning sunshine, humidity to random windy chills. My mom guessed it might have been a tiny pebble that was caught in a lawn mower, got spit out onto 441, faster than the eye could see. Maybe it was God that shattered our window. Maybe it was Jesus Christ. Maybe it was just a rock flying through the sky that happened to hit us. But I wanted it to be more.

Visit to a Small Planet

D.G. Geis

No telling
what He thinks—*or if*.

His ears,
a zillion light years wide,

pressed to the fizzy heart
of the universe,

a hydrogen gasbag
folded in on itself

like table napkins
on the Hindenburg,

an omelet,
or a quantum quesadilla.

What we call spiral galaxies,
He calls soup and sandwiches.

What we call supernovas,

He calls shoe polish.

What we call black holes,
He calls a paycheck.

What we call space,
He calls the barstool.

What we call the Big Bang,
He calls Louise.

It's why the sun's
so hysterical

and the moon
so matter of fact.

But it's also why
stars twinkle--

The Big Guy winking at us,
humming a little tune

to Himself,
while he helps Louise

with her zipper.

Boxing Life

Nancy Christie

*“There are years that ask questions and years that answer”—
Zora Neale Hurston*

This is the year that asks questions. It must be, because I have no answers, no answers at all.

I have spent the better part of the past month packing boxes—writing directions with a fat black marker on rectangular white labels: “Put in storage room,” “Put in bedroom,” “Leave in garage.”

I keep thinking that, if I write out enough labels and put them on enough boxes, all the scattered bits of my life will come together like giant jigsaw puzzle pieces to form a new picture. One that is better, happier, safer than the old. One that holds the promise of tomorrow without any overshadowing threats from yesterday.

But the bottom line is that there aren’t enough labels. Or enough ink in my marker. And even if there were, no one is paying close enough attention to the words I’ve written so carefully.

It’s just as well. I have a sneaking suspicion that, despite my planning, the bedroom box will really go downstairs and the garage box will undoubtedly hold the very items I will be requiring first thing in the morning, as I stumble around the unfamiliar kitchen looking for a cup, a spoon, a bowl.

I mold my hands around the chipped mug as I sip my sixth (seventh?) cup of coffee. Despite the calendar announcing the month as July, it's chilly in the house this early in the morning. Last night, we hit a record low of 49 degrees and the house still holds most of that untimely cold. When I went to bed last night, I had wrapped myself in your old flannel robe, huddling in its warmth.

Do you know what I remember right now? I remember how, before you came to share my bed, I used to have to pile blankets and comforters on top of me to keep warm. I was always cold in the winter. I wore long flannel nightgowns and knee socks every night. The first night you stayed, you told me at breakfast I looked like a little girl, with my hair all which-way and my socks bunched around my ankles. And when I went to make the bed, I found that all but one of the blankets had been kicked to the floor.

I realized then that I hadn't been cold, not once, throughout that long, frozen January night. I had been warm as toast, warm as a cat's fur when she lies stretched out in the hot summer sun. Warm as a little child, held safe and secure in her mother's arms. So warm I thought never to be cold again.

Questions—this started out about questions, and the dearth of answers. Of course, I had all the typical questions: When? What happened? Why? Why me? The last, I am ashamed to say, was the one I repeated endlessly for weeks, until someone had the courage to answer, "Because! Because things happen! Because it was your turn and that's just the way it goes!"

So I stopped asking, at least out loud, and instead did all the things I was supposed to do: make coffee, make calls, make plans.

Now I am packing boxes. Most of them are gone already. I gave away so many things—things of yours, things of mine, things we had purchased together. The house is sold. The new couple will be in it tomorrow. They are a nice couple, young, with two children and a third on the way. She looks tired and he looks strained, but it's probably just the effort of moving to a new place and leaving the old one behind.

You know, you always leave a piece of yourself wherever you have been. And I have been a lot of places in these past years. I am sure, if I walked very slowly along the Lake Erie shoreline, I would find traces of my six-year-old footprints in the sand. My parents had a vacation cottage at the lake, and we used to spend weeks up there. To this day, the sound of the waves breaking on the shoreline brings back the image of dying fish and the feel of gritty sand, the smell of my father's tobacco and the clink of the ice in my mother's old-fashioned. Late every afternoon, she would have an old-fashioned.

"Earl, I need my drink," she would say and my father would drag himself up from the hammock and fix it for her. I don't know why she didn't do it herself. She was certainly capable of it. She knew how to make, and drink, more alcoholic concoctions than any of my friends' parents did.

But she always asked my father and he always did it. And I never knew why. Questions, always questions....

But that isn't what I am talking about. What was I talking about? Oh, yes, about leaving behind pieces of yourself. In which case, I should be but a shadow of my former self, with all those pieces lying around in the world. Or maybe arrested for littering. I

can hear the judge now: “You have been charged with first degree littering and in evidence, we bring this footprint, this dog collar, this spot of blood. How do you plead?”

“Guilty, Your Honor,” and I would be sentenced to search for every bit of me that was scattered far and wide. And once I found them all, I would have to glue them together until I made a life-size replica of the me-who-was-and-who-is-no-more.

Dog collar—and if she hadn’t been so damned clever she wouldn’t have managed to slip free of the rhinestone-studded collar I had bought with my allowance. I never had a pet before. And with no brothers or sisters, I was lonely. Or was I? Maybe I didn’t know I was lonely. Maybe I thought everybody felt this way—as though life was one long, dark corridor filled with doors, and behind every door there was a party going on. But if you didn’t know the right words—and I never did—the door wouldn’t open and you would have to just keep on walking.

She was my dearest companion, too small to cause much trouble but not so small that you would think she was a dustball with legs. I would take her with me on walks along the shore, and sometimes I could even convince her to wade out a bit, just enough to get her belly soaked into cold wet points of fur. When she left the collar behind, I thought it was her way of telling me she’d be back. But she never did come back, not once the rest of that summer. And the next summer, when my father left to make old-fashioned for someone else’s mother, the trips to the lake stopped. If she did come back then, she wouldn’t have been able to find me.

As for the blood, well, I expected a lot more. Veiled comments from my mother had led me to believe a veritable river of red would

come gushing out and all the world would know what I had done. But the fact of the matter was, it was just a little spot or two, easily rinsed out of my panties. Nothing much. And, in retrospect, the event that preceded it was nothing much either.

Everybody did it back then. Doing it—"it" being, of course, the accepted term for losing one's virginity, generally in the back seat of a car—was the way through the doorway leading from innocence to knowledge. At least, that's what we thought.

"Come on come on you'll like it I'll be careful you want it I know you do" the words running together faster and faster as though the speed alone would push you to make a decision. And all the while, hands here and hands there and really, while it wasn't so great, so wonderful, so earth-shattering, it was exciting enough, dangerous enough, to make the decision so much easier.

Later, of course, while the bra was being hooked and the jeans zipped, you wondered what all the rush was for, if the act itself was going to be over in a matter of minutes. What was the hurry, you wondered, and close on the heels of that question came the others: Was it me? Didn't I do it right? Wasn't I good enough?

Questions that never got answered back then, but soon, if you were lucky enough, became irrelevant in the context of the next duet.

Where was I? Oh yes, packing the boxes, labeling the boxes, sealing the boxes. Wouldn't it be nice if everything in life came in such perfectly packed and labeled boxes? "Don't open until you're 16 and then put away in your underwear drawer." "This is for your 35th birthday." "To be opened only in case of emergency."

That's the one I need right now. A box for situations that threaten to be overwhelming. You once said that I could handle anything. But you're wrong, you know. If I have handled everything life has thrown at me, it was only because, until now, life had been kind. It weighed each brick on some great cosmic scale and measured it against my strength.

"Not yet," I can hear life say. "This one is just a little heavier than she can take."

Clearly this past year life took a vacation. Or maybe the scale was broken and he had to resort to guessing, squinting with one black eye closed as he hefted the brick in his bony hand.

"Yeah, I think it's okay. It feels a little heavy but you know, I've gone pretty easy on her these past couple years. Besides, I'm tired of the whole thing anyway. I think I'll just give it a good heave and consequences be damned."

I bet if the light was strong enough, I could even see the bruise where the brick hit me. It hurts like hell. Ah, well, if it had to be one of us, I guess I'm glad it's me, not you. You had it easier. They told me it was just like taking one deep breath and letting it out and then not taking another. That's what they said, anyway, but what do they know? They are still breathing.

I hear the moving van out front. I suppose they want to load the boxes now and get on the road. It will be strange leaving this house where we had spent so many years together. I take one final walk-through, opening bedroom closets and checking kitchen cabinets for unforgotten items.

Did I pack all the memories? Or would it be wiser to leave some, to reduce their painful weight to manageable proportions? But if I did that, what part of me would also be left behind?

Questions, always questions... and with them, the hope there is enough of me safely packed away in all these boxes to go on.

Giving Birth at the End of the World

Meghan Joyce Tozer

The most mundane of all things
was the birthing of new small things like ourselves.
Before the fall, things like this happened every day.

The world did not need new things
to unravel and undo things even further.
Yet we grew things in our bodies anyway.

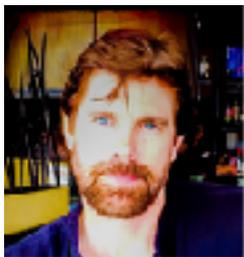
We knew what we were doing.
There is nothing more to say.

Contributors



Brittany Ackerman is a graduate of Florida Atlantic University's MFA program in Creative Writing. She currently lives in Los Angeles with her forthcoming collection of essays entitled, *The Perpetual Motion Machine*, to be released by Red Hen Press in the fall of 2018.

Nancy Christie is the author of *Traveling Left of Center and Other Stories* (Pixel Hall Press), *The Gifts Of Change* (Atria/Beyond Words), *Rut-Busting Book for Writers* (Mill City Press) and numerous short stories. A professional writer, she also teaches writing workshop and is the founder of “Celebrate Short Fiction” Day.



Douglas Cole has published four collections of poetry and a Novella. He has been twice nominated for a pushcart prize and a Best of the Net and received the Leslie Hunt Memorial prize judged by T.R. Hummer. He has had work in *The Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Chiron*, *The Galway Review* and *Slipstream* among others. His website is douglastcole.com.

D.G. Geis is the author of 'Fire Sale' (Tupelo Press/Leapfolio) and 'Mockumentary' (Main Street Rag). Among other places, his poetry has appeared in The Moth, The Irish Times, Fjords, Skylight 47, A New Ulster Review, Crannog Magazine, and Into the Void. He lives in the Hill Country of Central Texas.



Thomas Gillaspay is a northern California photographer. His photography has been featured in numerous magazines including the literary journals: Compose, Portland Review and Brooklyn Review. Further information and additional examples of his work are available at: <http://www.thomasgillaspay.com> and <http://www.flickr.com/photos/thomasmichaelart>

Noorulain Noor is a member of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley and a two time Pushcart Prize nominee. Her poetry has appeared in Spillway, Sugar Mule, Santa Clara Review, Muzzle and other journals. Raised in Lahore, Pakistan, Noorulain now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her poetry explores themes of identity, multiculturalism, and the immigrant experience.





Dayna Patterson was raised in northern Utah, fed by the faith of her ancestors, who emigrated from Manchester, England, in 1855 to be part of the Mormon exodus to the West. She is Editor-in-Chief of Psalter & Lyre, Poetry Editor for Exponent II Magazine, and a Consulting Editor for Bellingham Review. *daynapatterson.com*

Meghan Joyce Tozer is a film music scholar, editor, and activist in the San Francisco bay area. She holds degrees in English and Music from Harvard University (B.A.) and the University of California, Santa Barbara (Ph.D. and M.M.) and is currently an independent Research Scholar of the Ronin Institute.



