

Fahmidan Journal
Issue 10: Yuletide Musings

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In My Thirties, I'm Still Expecting
Kara Knickerbocker

to be asked, because I know I will. Holidays when I return home,
every door to the question swung right open, hinged
on getting right to the yolk of me. *Are you dating anyone?*
as if the breath in this body didn't already hold enough
on its own. As if I, alone, were only a shell of a woman.

I say no, explain again, & still, it will rise: dinnertime jokes
about "food babies" & how I've always eaten for two—
while I'm memorizing each word & how it cracks into me,
taking shape slowly at first, like a hairline fracture,
you were born with so much hair, happiest day of my life

& then widening, feeding hungrily off the other:
But how could you not love them,
not want a bun in the oven, ring wrapped finger, don't you know
how your loaf of a body was designed
to serve more than you?

Each remark hatches into the next:
Worries of who will stay at the stove & tend to me
when my hair turns white, when the heavy years on this Earth
create fissures into the loose cloth of my face. Will anyone
clear the dishes, will anyone even be there to eat with me at the end?

They want to know *why*. They want to know *what if?*
I turn up the kitchen radio,
let the questions simmer where they drop,
silent. I think again of all the ways we burn,
how we split open but never break.

I'm gonna give you what it takes, I say,
to deliver you to this understanding
& then I set the house on fire
& walk out, reborn.

First Snowfall at Gullkistan
Laugarvatn, Iceland
Kara Knickerbocker

I awake to a whiteout, the earth a blank page of fresh frost. And how should I write this sudden winter? Overnight, snow has come to cover what we have spent the first week marveling: carpets of endless moss, bright cotoneaster stumbling over low shrubs, the few downy birch that stand, tall as skyscrapers against the flat backdrop of the lake. And as the flakes fall faster, I am trying to get it all down, to drift pen across paper, to scoop words that swirl and melt in my head, so that I may clear a path for a poem as sharp as this blinding reflection of landscape. Images hang heavy on my tongue like heaps of snow on the rafters, then break their hold and slide, drop below, disappear.

I want to study how to remember this: the air here God-like and always moving. Sunrises streaking across the canvas of a new horizon. How we held the night as auroras broke free over the mountain. We have hiked the trails behind the cabin, making our way through pine, admiring the green roof of the guesthouse from the crest of the hill. Everything lush with language. I'll see it for the rest of my life: Water soft dripping from the kitchen faucet, light slicing through the blinds as Alda cuts into another fresh loaf of bread, and we sit, women of different worlds, all craving what's yet to come—

Kara Knickerbocker is the author of the chapbooks *The Shedding Before the Swell* (dancing girl press 2018) and *Next to Everything that is Breakable* (Finishing Line Press 2017). Her poetry and essays have appeared in: *Poet Lore*, *HOBART*, *Levee Magazine*, *Portland Review*, and the anthologies *Pennsylvania's Best Emerging Poets*, *Crack the Spine*, and more. She currently lives in Pennsylvania where she writes with the Madwomen in the Attic at Carlow University. Find her online at www.karaknickerbocker.com and Twitter @karaknick.

nostalgia lore
Nadia Gerassimenko

a happy place / it was not / & yet / when i walked the grounds of cobblestone / i could feel
the grounding / of your presence / calling me home / a primordial comfort / kept me grounded
/ all those years / i sat in cafés / with a second cup / you were there / at one point in time /
more than a feeling lingering / like london fog / still warm in my hands / remember the
summit / bearing witness / to the glaring / of rising suns / setting moons / & ever changing
hues / of leaves cascading / down/town nearby / remember the taste / of sweet bitter / when
we never met / & still we miss each other

Nadia Gerassimenko is a Copy Auditor at [The HOTH](#), the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of [Moonchild Magazine](#), a dreamy, experiential online magazine published on a sporadic, erratic basis, former Managing Editor at [Luna Luna Magazine](#), freelancer in editorial services, writer, and visual artist.

A Temporary Aberration
Lawrence Moore

Opening my eyes to a pillowcase of presents
snuck in by adults pickling on return from Midnight Mass.
Ripping open tidy wrapping hiding trinkets, books and sweets,
slipping chocolate Santas onto my tongue.

Leaving a mountain of paper on the bed for later,
descending the stairs to gaze at a Christmas tree
draped with your initials in tinsel,
thanking God no one noticed
or was too embarrassed to enquire.

Stealthily shaking parcels and tearing corners,
aiming to reveal just enough for me to guess
without being found out.

Breakfasting with assorted pleasantries,
then contorting on wobbling step ladders
in a last-minute dash for decoration.

Eating, eating, more eating.
Laughing at Streaky knocking baubles from the tree
and chasing them into corners.
Opening presents for real
and writing thank you notes on the fly
to avoid confusion.

Making my excuses, stepping outside.

Riding, speeding,
past endless happy families.
Breath smoking, frost creeping,
too far gone for caring.
Myrrh cannot conceal,
I know where I'm going.
Circling several times,
stopping in a quiet nearby corner
where I won't be seen.
Wallowing in self-pity,
the cold washing over,
engulfing.

Slowly coming round,
checking my watch,
heading back.
Hoping I'm not too late for Yahtzee.

Star Wars Toys For Sale

Lawrence Moore

In the window of the older boy next door,
an advert came and left
faster than my disappointment.

It's a late December morning
and though my parents are shopping with friends,
I still sneak into their room
and gently shut the door.

I snoop without shame where my fancy takes me,
sifting through draws and squeezing below the bed.
I walk to the alcove,
turn the key
and open the cupboard
to find them in all their glory;
heroes and villains
propped against the Millennium Falcon,
enacting their own Christmas Truce
under the watchful gaze of an AT-AT.

I push away rolls of paper
and climb within,
closing the hangar behind me
until I have just enough light to play.

I become friends with one and all,
even Jabba the Hutt,
so when it comes to Christmas Day
and I gaze in amazement
as if they are total strangers,
I will be forgiven.

Lawrence Moore has been writing poems - some silly, some serious - since childhood. He lives in Portsmouth, England with his husband Matt and nine mostly well behaved cats. He has poetry published at, among others, Dreich, Pink Plastic House, Fevers of the Mind, Sarasvati and The Madrigal. @LawrenceMooreUK

Holidays on Ice
Robert McCarthy

The darkness is steadfast, loyal
to this monotony of snow, its fall,
continuous, from a sky
we could no longer see, dissolved
at an horizon of sleety
cloudscape: heaven sunk into earth,
earth heaving to the sky contours
of subnivean humps and scars;
and other barely-there features
of this once and forever winter.

Across the river and into the trees.
Road to the holiday
house unspools its miles of ribbons,
its roundabouts,
tying traffic into intricate
bows.

And snow, as if with tissue-paper,
disassembles the human world, a present
unidentifiable to
all inquisitors, and our hearts
(could they but have been inspected),
no doubt all aglow.

The Ice Lands
Robert McCarthy

i

Sun-remnants collect in a ragged seam,
a gradient spreading upward, broken
from black ice, from bare, lichen-scarred pillars.
The horizon has been torn away
at a pale grey margin where an iron
sky had stitched itself,
clumsily, to past episodes of planetary
violence. Friable black spearheads thrust
upwards from fractured earth. A war-party
of poniards flash-frozen. Here some troll
ascendency seems about to breach
the upper air, hectic shouts scraping,
from headstones, from light's bones, their lusters.

Snow-mist drifts like ghost-smoke
of late-burning basalt. The ever-slower trudge
of furnace-slag rivers: porridges of candescent
stone steaming at North Atlantic's icy mouth.

ii

Planet's turn reveals the most recent
Armageddon. Congealing now, textured
densities of shadow; patches grown
dimensional. A plain rifted by low,
conical hills littered with human shapes.
A mob of canted figures enchanted
to stillness. Torqued Modigliani bodies;
friezes of Munch screamers. Hiroshima
ash cartoons. A rubble of stones surrounds
a hole freaked with flowering

Angelica, with
involutions of moss,
raftered with dead
horses' bones.
Be welcome here.
This is your home.

Robert McCarthy is a writer living in New York City. He prefers to use formal means to achieve lyric ends. Mostly recently, Robert has published poetry in *The Alchemy Spoon* (Summer 2020) and *Dreich Magazine* (S3/D4, August 2021). His work has also appeared in the Fall 2021 issues of *Yours*, *Poetically* and *Neologism Poetry Journal*; and in forthcoming issues of *Words & Whispers* and *Celestite Poetry*.

Poppies & Peace
Kristin Garth

With ruby slippers, an emerald dress,
iced lemon poppy seed cookies, her Christmas
bequest to wizards, she dares not express
love in theological terms, useless
where a conman/magician's concerned,
but shares the forgotten traditions of a
monochrome land behind verdant curtains
with a viridescent man who misses this day
when he is alone. He proffers gauche gifts
with meanings unknown of malachite, jade
to green gamine girls, guards, glittered guests with
out any thought of self interest. Made
her heels click three times this day to return
to proffer poppies, peace for which wizards yearn.

Kristin Garth is a Pushcart, Rhysling nominated sonneteer and a Best of the Net 2020 finalist. Her sonnets have stalked journals like Glass, Yes, Five:2:One, Luna Luna and more. She is the author of 21 books of poetry including Crow Carriage (Sweet Tooth Story Books) and The Stakes (Really Serious Literature) and the editor of seven anthologies. She is the founder of Pink Plastic House a tiny journal and co-founder of Performance Anxiety, an online poetry reading series. Follow her on Twitter: (@lolaandjolie) and her website kristingarth.com

Private room
Chris Attack

Private
except for cackling intercom
bustling, intrusive, faceless
acolytes of illness:

Nurses, porters, emperors in white
passing and repassing,
lost travellers at Christmas airports,
blood technicians, dietitians,
sullen cleaners swabbing crusted floors.

The sick animal seeks only
silence and sleep
crawls into the comforting dark.

The wreckage of my father
lies twitching, beached
breathing shallow across the white shoals
rescue crews work languidly
to refloat this battered, sinking hulk.

So many wrecks, so many fathers,
mothers, sons or daughters
it all becomes mechanical.

Take blood, bring tray
take tray away,
take blood...

The occasional report from the shore:
doing nicely yes.

A gaunt and patient stranger
waits quietly inside the door.

Chris Attack is a science writer by trade. He has published two near-future SF novels (Project Maldon and Hunger Star) as well as assorted short stories and poems. When not hammering out words, he sails, canoes, tries to improve his French, does search and rescue with the Quebec Coast Guard Auxiliary and generally enjoys life with his wife, kids and friends.

How We Started Our Own Fires

Mirvat Manal

I've followed The Societal Recipe Book,
Word for word,
I'd be screwed if they noticed me lacking a single ingredient.
Still, my normal is an acquired taste.
My life accomplishments will be measured
By the amount of back-breaking nuggets of wisdom I dig up,
Only for them to be placed on a rigged scale.
And bias minds will sit around powerful corporate bon fires.
With me watching from afar,
Watching as all my work gradually burns, curling in to white ash,
Keeping everyone else warm.
I surrendered
Another P.O.W of the system
How do those left in the frozen shed so many tears
When we control the heat?

Mirvat Manal is a British -Somali, writer and poet based in the UK. Her work has been published in The Leon Literary Review, Maudlin House and The Cabinet of Heed. Mirvat has also been included in Best New British & Irish Poets Anthology 2021.

Sherwood in Season
Perry Wyatt

The smell of pine and the crisp nip of the air,
My nose was close to falling off but I didn't care.
We headed for the stables tucked near the birches,
Glowing orange lamps warmed our backs,
Lanterns draped through the branches as an arm did on my shoulders,
All my cold evaporated.

The cups were red and steaming,
Burgundy wine or hot cider.
The kids had hot chocolate and reindeer pretzels,
Cinnamon, raisin, or vanilla sugar.
Faces sparkling with power from donuts,
And anticipation at the shining presents under the big tree in the centre.

Someone had strung up a fairy lights along the path,
They lit in time with our steps – making my wellies shine.
My friends all posed with a mulled sort of grin,
A few had blue teeth and walked with no fear for the cold.
My scarf snagged on a drunk tree, you rescued me,
Taking my hand, I blushed, and you laughed.
I swore it was the cold.

Perry Wyatt is a Welsh writer with a love for all things strange and magical. She is a true jack-of-all-trades wordsmith, with screenwriting, journalism, and two novels under her belt. Poetry is her most recent adventure.

Tidings
Ann Howells

Tomorrow is Christmas. Carols and chorales
 swirl around her, a flickering candle. Her mind,
 finally clear, fires infrequent sparks.
Drawn tub waits.

Earlier, she slouched
 on the worn brown sofa her sister found,
 crumpled every poem, tossed it to blaze,
burn to ash, as sparks whirled.

Across the room,
 scattered books, binder clips, blank pages clutter.
 She swirls bourbon in her glass, drinks, refills,
swirls bourbon in her glass,
 she has practiced for this,
 knows how to do it right.

Television runs and reruns sentimental movies
 from the '40s.
 Throughout autumn she woke
at night's center, padded dark rooms.

Now she slips
 into a candlelit bath, frost inscribes
 feathers on her pane.

She knows how to do it –
 one sure red line,
 quick cross-hatchings.

Outside, snowflakes spiral down. It will be
 a white Christmas.

The Gift
Ann Howells

Six days before Christmas
we place packages beneath the tree

a day for me to make cookies,
you to make amends.

You gave me a child
I give you freedom—

a fair trade all things considered—
if not what we planned.

Our own version of O’Henry.

I call the first white specks *flakes*
you call them *ash*.

Too cold, you say *for snow*,
but the sky soon fills with *ash*.

We reflect in stained-glass film
you smoothed across our triple window—

no Holy family and only two magi
each following his own star.

You run fingers, unconsciously
through unruly hair—a gesture

that originally attracted me.
We’ve been together too long.

No fire left.

My eyes settle on nesting chickadees,
yours on geese arrowing south.

Ann Howells edited Illya’s Honey for eighteen years. Her most recent books are: *So Long As We Speak Their Names* (Kelsay Books, 2019) about Chesapeake Bay watermen, and *Painting the Pinwheel Sky* (Assure Press, 2020) persona poems primarily in the voice of Vincent Van Gogh. Two chapbooks were published through contests: *Black Crow in Flight*, as Editor’s Choice in Main Street Rag’s 2007 competition and *Softly Beating Wings* as 2017 William D. Barney winner (Blackbead Books). She was named a “Distinguished Poet of Dallas” by the Dallas Public Library. Her work appears in many small press and university journals.

Santa Stories

Jane Elkin

There was a time America held the holidays at bay until the post-Thanksgiving belch. The first time I caught the holiday spirit, it was the tailfeather of November. New Hampshire's hard-packed snow under my rubber boots seemed whiter somehow with Petula Clark's *Downtown* playing from shop windows flocked in spray-snow. The streetlamps were festooned with giant pipe-cleaner bells and candy canes I found enchanting, but my mother thought it all too premature. My school Christmas pageant, for which I was the Solo Angel, was still three weeks away. What's more, Jesus, the reason for the season, was absent.

She didn't decorate much beyond a plaster nativity scene and a modest tree, but up and down our dead-end street there were doors wrapped in foil, rooflines lit like runways, and plastic candles in the windows. It seemed we were the only family not to deck the halls until, tired of the mess of live trees, she bought a state-of-the-art aluminum one with a color wheel that was, for a time, the envy of the neighborhood. She liked the simplicity. I loved how our dining room glowed red, gold, green, and blue with tinsel reflections that danced on the ceiling. All that was missing was Santa, but whenever I asked to see him, she changed the subject or said, "Aren't you getting a little old for that?"

I was the youngest child in my class. All the other first graders got to visit Santa, but she acted as if he weren't real. I recalled having met him once when I was too young to truly appreciate it. I'd even found the souvenir picture in the buffet, instead of in a photo album, which was odd in itself. But when I mentioned this, she bit her cheek and changed the subject.

Then, three weeks before the big day, Santa came into sharper focus when we went to visit one of my father's coworkers in a run-down house with a leaky roof and fewer decorations than we had. The adults sat in the kitchen, smoking and talking, while the kids,

all seven or eight of us, were sent to the living room to watch a new TV special called *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*.

It was weird sitting on the floor with a bunch of strangers as buckets of rainwater splashed around us. The carpeting felt thin and dusty, as if it needed vacuuming badly. But it was snowing in Christmas Town, where all the trees were perfect and even the snowmen could sing. Everything there felt pretty ideal until Santa came on the scene and started acting like a jerk. I ran to the kitchen crying that I didn't want to watch anymore because he was so mean to Rudolph, but my mother just shrugged as if she expected as much and shooed me away.

Feeling like a witness at a crime scene, I reclaimed my spot between two galvanized buckets. Santa got nicer by the end, and it truly felt like Christmas the way I wanted it to be. The magic lingered so strong, all I had to do was close my eyes to picture it again and feel that Christmas Eve had really come. Then it did.

Tossing and turning and trying not to think of what was in all those packages under the tree, I heard a jingling sound in the road and literally sprang from my bed to see what was the matter. In the halo of the streetlamp, fat flakes were falling to a double-track in the snow.

Santa! He must have landed in the street rather than on our steep roof. I'd never expected to see him; it was a miracle I'd heard him, but he was real, all right.

I told my mother about it first thing after checking my stocking in the morning, but she said I was dreaming. I told her about the sleigh bells and tracks in the snow. Then she got mad.

"You heard tire chains. You saw tire tracks," she snapped. "You did *not* see Santa because Santa Claus isn't real. He's a made-up story for little kids!" She paused, then added, "We, your parents, are Santa. Everything comes from *us*."

Her words chilled like eggnog in my veins. I knew deep down she was telling the truth, but she didn't have to be so blunt. She didn't have to make me cry. What was wrong with wanting to believe? Why couldn't we be like everyone else?

Christmas Eve, thirty years later, she follows me to midnight mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine, where I sing with the choir. The sanctus bell chimes from the vestry, the organ swells from the clerestory, and we follow a wealth of clergy down one aisle and up the nave, singing *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, my first solo. The thurifer swings his censer on its clinking silver chain, and clouds of incense billow to the vaulted gold mosaics as we process past my family. My mother's smile looks as if it will buckle in tears. My music blurs and I am momentarily too choked up to sing.

She loves the grandeur so much that she goes with me the next morning for Christmas Day mass. Before we leave, there is just enough time to watch my girls tear into their Christmas stockings and big "Santa gifts". The jolly fat man is evident throughout our apartment: from my husband's antique candy dish to the empty plate of cookies and glass of milk we'd left for him. The fact that our kids are too old to believe does not dampen their enthusiasm.

"I hate Santa," my mother mutters once we are safely out the door.

"Why?" I ask, sincerely wanting to know. "What's wrong with letting children enjoy the myth? What did he do to make you such a Grinch?" It's a title she bears proudly.

"When I was five," she begins, a touch of belligerence coloring her tone, "Santa gave me two dolls and left nothing for my neighbor who was far more deserving." She speaks with the vehemence of an eyewitness at a murder trial. "My friend was a well-behaved little girl, which I was not. I thought he'd accidentally left *her* doll for me, but I was too greedy to fix his mistake. I felt guilty for years. By the time I realized it was The Great Depression and her

father was out of work, it was too late for me to make it up with her. That's why I never wanted Santa in my house."

I am deflated. All my life I thought she was just a killjoy instead of a compassionate friend and flawed human. If only she'd explained when I was a child, instead of slapping down my illusions and shifting the blame to poor baby Jesus.



Jane Elkin am a graduate of Bennington Writing Seminars and the author of World Class: Poems of the ESL Classroom and other works of prose and poetry appearing in such publications as Ruminare, The Old Farmer's Almanac, and Popula.com. To learn more, visit www.jcelkin.net .

Astroworld

Kayla Kim

When I was seven I saw a picture of a human stampede for the first time on the front page of the New York Times. Hundreds of people were crowded together so tightly packed you couldn't differentiate between bodies. They looked like gaping fish, reaching out their hands for whatever there was, hair drenched in sweat and faces filled with shock, terror, or nothing at all. Pictured was the Phnom Penh stampede where over 347 died and 755 were injured, making it one of the deadliest human stampedes in the 21st century. Now, thanks to the Internet I can log onto Twitter and see something eerily similar: videos of dead bodies being carried away, people getting trampled, and thousands of people packed like sardines in a can, all under the watchful eye of Travis Scott. Less than 24-hours after the Astroworld incident, I found my social media feeds inundated with memes and conspiracy theories, claims of rap being inherently 'violent', images of white girls captioning their Instagram posts with things like 'barely survived the rage!', and clips of people dancing over ambulances as they tried to reach people injured in the crowd. Most troubling, though, was a viral video of two young adults, Ayden Cruz and Seanna Faith climbing onto platforms begging for the show to stop only to be met with boos from the crowd.

There's a popular saying: history doesn't repeat itself, rather it rhymes. In the 1990s, the Hillsborough disaster echoes that sentiment, when hundreds of English soccer fans got crushed to death in a stadium, their screams covered up by the joyous cheers of the opposing team. After this initially happened, police blamed the event on concertgoers and deflected any personal responsibility. Only after years of investigation, protests, and the suicide of a friend of the victims due to survivor's guilt, was it finally found that police negligence was responsible for not aiding fans quickly enough. I think about this when I see the video of Houston Police, who deployed 500 cops at a concert with a performer known to incite disorder among fans, blaming overdoses for the stampede and that one of the officers fell unconscious because of a prick of narcan from a concert goer, a claim that has been debunked on the Internet a million times. A couple days afterwards the police officer retracted that statement.

There's another popular saying as well: 'regulations are written in blood'. In 1979, British Rock band The Who performed in Cincinnati Ohio, when thousands of concert goers rushed through 2 doors, resulting in the deaths of 11 people, all of them teenagers and young adults. For the next 25 years, Cincinnati would impose a ban on unassigned seating in festivals, and today, there must be nine square feet per person at a venue. This all could have been so preventable, after all, did we not learn our lesson from nearly 40 years ago?

The answer is that profit is always above lives. Profit is what killed Halyna Hutchins, the young filmmaker on the set of *Rust*, via the lack of proper training and safety standards. Profit is why someone would even think of hosting a massive gathering of people during a deadly pandemic that has killed over 72,461 people in Houston alone. Profit is how people got crushed and trampled to death by others as they look up at their idol; meanwhile, his billionaire girlfriend or fiancée or whatever is safely escorted with noise cancelling headphones while workers under a company with countless OSHA violations helplessly watch on. But I guess at this point, after a pandemic and too many 'unprecedented times' to count, we really couldn't care less about how profit will find the next way to take away our lives and can only think about what we can get out of such a situation. In fact, I don't even know how many people will care about this article because Astroworld is no longer a 'trending topic'. Ultimately, no event better represents the quintessential American individualism and life in a capitalist hellscape than Astroworld does.

Kayla Kim (she/her) is a freshman at Oberlin College. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. She enjoys completing crossword puzzles.

Christmas Eve

Joe Giordano

My sister suffered through her laboriously prepared Christmas Eve banquets. Supposedly a meatless sacrifice by Italian and Catholic tradition, her almost legendarily extravagant seafood feasts included, scungilli, shrimp, and octopus salad, spaghetti with crabs and crab sauce, fried eels, stuffed calamari, lobster tails, and with an espresso and Sambuca, she served a slice of homemade ricotta cheesecake.

Our parents had divorced. Afterward, if they were thrown together at a wedding or a funeral, they picked at each other like buzzards over a carcass. They presented my sister with the Gordian knot choice: should she invite one or both to Christmas Eve dinner? The previous year's experiment of inviting only one and promising to switch the next year had unleashed a twelve-month avalanche of hurt feelings and heaped-on guilt painful enough that she succumbed to inviting both. For her sins, they insisted on bringing their "significant others," which super charged the *agita* risk of the occasion.

Greetings in the living room before retiring to table were cool, but no sparks flew, and I read a nervous hopefulness on my sister's face that maybe, just maybe, we'd get through the dinner without upset. She should've recognized that their civil nods were a symbolic handshake before taking their corners. Within moments of assembling around the festively decorated, pristine white tablecloth table overladen with delicacies, my parents began lauding their dates, playing the ridiculous game of, "This pile of protoplasm is better than you." My mother's flame's face resembled an angry turtle. Allergic to the letter "r," he referred to her in Brooklynese as "Dea." My father's puffy-faced date stayed silent until she squeezed out an air burst, then immediately struck and blew out a wooden match to blanket the odor, and thankfully saving me from wanting to regurgitate my first course.

As each of my parents took turns talking about what was new and wonderful about their lives without the other, smirks abounded. Unsuccessful at convincing anyone, probably

including themselves, that they'd improved their lives, the fight-bell rang, and our parents opened old wounds like lanced boils. Tongues have no bones, but they can break bones, and listening to their rancor caused my sister's face to distort as if she'd been food poisoned.

As a child, often in bed when my parents' quarrels started, I'd squeeze the pillow around my ears, attempting to muffle their shouts that sliced me like razor wire. Somehow, I believed I'd been the cause of their confrontation. When the yelling finally ended, my father would stomp down the hall to his separate bedroom, slamming the door.

As my parents continued to jab each other throughout the meal, my sister glared in my direction, silently expecting me to intervene or exhibit upset at the tragic drama my parents performed.

No longer able to control herself she asked, "Aren't you going to say something?"

She stirred me from thoughts that cycled between recollections of my mother's comforting Vicks chest rubs the nights I suffered with asthma and the pure excitement I felt preparing for hunting or fishing expeditions with my father, ultimately wallowing in his company.

I remembered my parents together and liked them better apart.

"Please pass the stuffed calamari," I responded.

Joe was among one hundred Italian American authors honored by Barnes & Noble to march in Manhattan's 2017 Columbus Day Parade. Read the first chapter of Joe's novels and sign up for his blog at <http://joe-giordano.com/>

Memory of a Christmas feast

Zahirra Dayal

Joshua tiptoes, stretching his tongue as far as it will go to capture the lukewarm drops which slide down into the ocean of his empty belly. The rusted tap is mean: unpaid water bill. Drip drip no drip no drip drip. He feels a weak tug on his pyjama trousers and pulls a nasty face down at his younger brother. He towers over his brother Hugh in the tiny kitchen lit only by the blade of light slicing through the gap in the frayed curtain.

‘Just WAIT OK or I’ll slap your face shithead,’ he cusses. The moment the words slip out, a sharp twinge contracts his chest. His hate for his brother is only matched in strength and veracity by his love.

It’s every man for himself in Joshua’s house. Except there are no men. It’s only Joshua: 11, his brother Hugh: 6 and the woman who says: never call me mother in public. They hear her snoring like thunder in the room next to the kitchen. The flat is full of sounds that seep through the diaphanous walls of their flat: muffled screams and conversations, distorted noise from television sets and game consoles. But the boys’ ears are only pricked to every tiny shuffle and stir from within. They both know what will happen if she finds them there.

She sent them to bed after they’d eaten their bread and butter and collected her evening meal at 6.30 from the chicken shop across the road. The man with kind eyes smiled as he handed over the hot parcel.

‘Don’t eat too much fried chicken boys or you’ll get a belly like mine,’ he said, rubbing his stomach that bulged over his trousers in soft folds. ‘Make sure you eat green vegetables too,’ he lectured with a playful finger as Joshua handed over the green note.

The fluorescent lights in the lift flickered. It smelt like pee in there. Joshua cradled the precious parcel like a new-born babe all the way up. He drank in the smell of the fried chicken that wafted from the brown bag. He knew each piece without looking. With his

fingers he caressed: two drumsticks, two breasts, the back and rib portions, two wings and two thighs.

The warm bag and the coins were snatched from him as soon as they stepped into the doorway. He found the bag in the bin an hour later. The mound of chewed bones and fat mixed with ash and dead cigarettes.

Hugh's voice interrupts his train of thoughts. 'Can I have some water Joshie? It's my turn now.' Joshua catches the drops in the cup made of his palms because Hugh is too short to reach the tap and the grime-ridden glasses are all half empty with stale alcohol. The cupboards are forbidden zones. Once, they'd used a chair to reach the edibles on top and they found a half-eaten box of Rice Krispies. But as they ate their way through the bag, a solid phalanx of angry ants marched towards them through the cereal; Hugh had spat the white mulch out of his mouth with his tears.

'That'll teach you not to go in the cupboards,' she said.

A loud thump startles them now.

Joshua grabs his brother's hand and they sneak like thieves to the living room where their single mattress is laid.

'I'm too hungry to sleep,' Hugh says. Joshua feels his brother's tiny limbs wrap around his under the thin blanket. He tells a story to fill the emptiness in their stomachs.

'Remember when Auntie Sasha invited us for Christmas last year?'

Of course he does. It's a memory they've both captured and sealed in a bottle so they can unscrew the lid and relive it over and over. A memory that warms their bones and nourishes their spirit. Auntie Sasha is not their real aunt; she's the lady who used to live three doors away from them. Joshua and Hugh played with her son Wade after school every day on the broken swings downstairs. But that was before Wade's father got a new job as a lorry driver and they moved away.

Aunty Sasha was a round woman who smelt like freshly baked bread; she spent her days cooking and baking for her family. Wade was the luckiest boy they had ever met; his belly was always full. Aunty Sasha had invited them for Christmas lunch.

Luckily, a man friend was visiting their mother so they were shooed out of their flat just as the Christmas lunch began.

‘Tell me tell me again about that day at Aunty Sasha’s,’ pleads Hugh.

Joshua describes the Christmas tree with the silver tinsel and the angel on top and the fairy lights that pulsed around the room. He tells his brother about the warm circle of bodies crowded around the small table.

‘Tell me about all the food on the table.’

Joshua ruffles his brother’s hair. ‘Ok ok. Remember there was a golden turkey roast, steak pies, creamy mashed potatoes, gravy and cranberry sauce, mince pies, gingerbread cookies, Christmas pudding and hazelnut chocolates.

It was more food than the brothers had ever seen or eaten.

Hugh licks his lips. ‘I remember. I remember all of the food. The pies had juicy steak in the middle. I had six and you only had four. My gingerbread man had a pink bow tie and smarties for buttons and I found a lucky coin in my pudding-.’

‘No you didn’t. The lucky coin was in my bowl of pudding,’ teases Joshua.

‘No it was a 20p and it was mine,’ says Hugh folding his arms across his chest with a cross face.

Joshua smiles. ‘Ok Ok calm down.’ He tickles Hugh until peals of laughter fill the room. They wrestle each other until their eyelids droop. The boys fall sleep. Joshua dreams he is encircled by arms dusted with flour. Saliva dribbles down his chin soaking his pillow.

Zahirra is a writer and teacher. Although London is home, she was born in Zimbabwe. Her short stories have been published in various literary magazines including The Mechanics Institute Review, The Fahmidan Journal, Briefly Zine and many others. She is currently editing her debut novel which recently won the Jericho Writers 2021 Friday Night Live Competition. She writes about family, identity, belonging and marginalisation.

Self-Assembly
Catherine O'Brien

Two houses share one street.
In one, song-strung garlands abseil ambient lighting,
there's architecture to crochet seasonal meaning,
realness is a mitten kept firmly to its string
there's a belly-dancing Santa, a snow-globe world, endless reindeer
But a library cannot be crafted without books.

In the other, the windows are made of frosted glass,
the floor is a festive featherbed of snow,
an avalanche of ketchup sachets and a microwaved meal for one decorates our scene,
a clock makes carousels through time on the wall,
his is a choir's voice, he isn't for a yarn-darn heartbeat alone,
his dance flows like cursive,
his joy is
gold-gilded, double platinum, snaggle-toothed,
a curiosity of temerarious bliss,
a Christmas miracle house one has yet to know.

Catherine O'Brien is an Irish writer of poems, flash fiction and short stories. She writes bi-lingually in both English and Irish. Her work has appeared in print and online in Iris Comhar, Idle Ink, The Raven Review, Virtual Zine and other fine publications. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in Janus Literary, Flash Boulevard, Loft Books, Ellipsis Zine, The Birdseed and more. You can find her on Twitter @abairrud2021.

Mull & Whine
JP Seabright

Xmas marks the spot. Marks the moment between past and future presents: nostalgia and reality. Gift-wrapped, guilt-tripped, gloves off by lunchtime but boxed-up again for Boxing Day. It's the most wonderful time of the year.

I've never enjoyed Christmas. Not as an adult. There must have been a time I enjoyed it with some innocence of youth. I can recall waking up with the joyful anticipation of finding a stocking at the end of my bed. Its lightly filled presence, the slight but recognizable weight near my feet, like the pet we never had, was reassuring. A few small, sometimes wrapped, gifts like a pencil sharpener or spinning top, some chocolate pennies and the obligatory satsuma nestling at the bottom of one my father's old gray woollen walking socks. My brother and I would always join each other in the bedroom of whoever had woken first, sitting on the bed, spilling the contents out, examining each in turn. We had learnt from a young age to pool our resources together.

Then Christmas was about visitors - visiting or being visited - usually the latter. Once our elderly cantankerous grandfather came to live with us things changed. Christmas was about him, and he sucked all the joy out of it. My parents were twitchy and anxious as usual, my father's paltry teaching salary spread more thinly that year with more mouths to feed.

Around this time I stopped going to church, realizing I'd just swapped Santa Claus for Jesus Christ, and was no longer convinced about either.

Later in my teens, Christmas was about food preparation. Best tablecloth, smoked salmon, stress and (if lucky) sherry. It was about not upsetting your mother. It was about coloured paper hats, bad jokes, jigsaws and Trivial Pursuit. It was about washing up and the posh cutlery set. It was about After Eight mints and the annual bowl of nuts with all the uncrackable ones left well into the New Year. It was about candles and proper napkins. It was

about fancy cheese, special-occasion Stilton rather than everyday Cheddar. It was about my recently divorced uncle turning up to inject some lightness and a Christmas jumper into the proceedings.

Later still, it was about returning to Midnight Mass, not because I believed, but because it broke up the monotony. It was something to do, a brief escape from the yawning chasm of silence between myself and my parents who had nothing significant to say to each other, and even less to say to me. Talking, but not saying anything. No one even daring to ask: *How are you?*

Xmas marks the spot. Marks the moment between past and future personas. Between the person I once had the potential to be and the person I became. If I ever become a parent it will be a chance to start again, to re-inject some joy. To embrace the season of goodwill, gaudy baubles and all.

But, for now, it's the most terrible time of the year.

JP Seabright is a queer writer (she/they) living in London, with poetry, short stories and experimental work published online and in print. Their debut poetry pamphlet, an experimental conceptual work, *Fragments from Before the Fall: An Anthology in Post-Anthropocene Poetry* is [published by Beir Bua Press](#). A debut prose chapbook *NO HOLDS BARRED* is due out with [Lupercalia Press](#) in early 2022, as is *GenderFux*, a collaborative poetry pamphlet, published by [Nine Pens Press](#). More of their work can be found at <https://jpseabright.com> and via Twitter @errormessage.

Budding
Tuur Verheyde

With an idle sketch and
A casual shrine the budding
Practice broke the earth
To show its gleaming head.

And so I drew sigil and rune
Onto folded squares of black
And brown to slide them where
Wood and stone revealed their
Hidden haunts. And with
Every room carrying a secret
Piece of hope, I rose to plant
My paper seeds in the cracked
Ancient walls of town
To guard its gates against
The world's approaching dark.

And yes, I wondered how
Much magic some silly scraps
Could stand to do, and yes, I knew
I planted nothing but a wish
In walls that countless wars
Withstood and yet may fall
Beneath boiling rising tides.

And yet I cannot help but find
Strength in this silly symbolic
Stand against the enveloping chaos
Beyond the door. And so,
I press my ear to wayward
Moon drops sucking on secrets
In their sleep and soak up
Each shiver to scribble
When it speaks.

Tuur Verheyde is a twenty-four year old Belgian poet. His work endeavours to capture the weirdness of the 21st century; its globalised art, culture, politics and problems. Tuur's poetry seeks to further cultural, spiritual, political and emotional connectivity on an international level. His work is personal and outward looking and seeks to accurately represent the blurred boundaries between the real, the surreal and the hyperreal, as well meshing the personal with the political and the spiritual.

Black-Tar Streets and Byways in the Night
Marion Lougheed

rain that splashes, shining, black-tar streets and
byways in the night. Puffs and gusts, the shingles shake and light that trembles like
a newborn calf. Pools of lampposts, shadows, light that seeps
between the clouds.

Across the way, the other side of town you lie,
awake. Tapping
hearts and thumbs-up on a screen that keeps you
cuddled, cozy, warm.
It's nice to hear your voice, she says, but does she know for sure the voice is really mine?

Poinsettia leaves of green and red still straggling on and struggling into May
The foil of Christmas wrapped and wrinkled round
a pot too old to care
a centerpiece, an ornament to
decorate
our lives and punctuate our planet's loop-de-loop
around a fallen star

the raindrops melt the pavement, roadways lie abandoned in a night the sky alone will see
It's nice to hear your voice, she said, I nodded yes and smiled until she fell asleep
and dreamed a day when
lying here would cease to be the bruise inside the light

Marion Lougheed grew up in Canada, Benin, Belgium, and Germany. She speaks three languages, but currently only writes in one. Her poetry won the Prime 53 Poem Summer Challenge (Press 53, 2021) and the Poem In Your Pocket Day Contest (League of Canadian Poets, 2021). Her writing has been published or is forthcoming in dozens of magazines and anthologies, including Prime Number Magazine and Necessary fiction, and was shortlisted for the Sunlight Press Flash Fiction Prize (2021). She tweets [@MarionLougheed](https://twitter.com/MarionLougheed)

A Study in Snow

Asma Amjad

Soft, soundless, the snow arrives
and with it, an array of unbridled emotions—
a selection of unanswered questions.

From my window, I see a small child, wrapped in thick wool,
her bright eyes peering out in wonder
as she carves out her footsteps around the garden.

Across the street, a gentleman, shoulders heavy,
stomps through untouched snow, leaving a trace of footsteps in his wake,
a small smile dons his face, otherwise lined with fatigue.

A woman, swathed in thermals and a nightgown,
leaves the warm cocoon of her bed
to step outside, for just enough seconds to leave an
imprint of her hands on the snow.

One only has to look around to see
how similar humans are, and always will be.
Is it a call within us? A desire to be known,
a desire to be seen, a desire unbeknown
to us, that demands we leave a legacy behind.
A demand to remind.

To remind everyone, to leave a sign that we were here.
That we exist— we existed.
Enough to leave a mark behind,
though it remains for merely a few hours, a few days.

And in the same way it arrived; soft and soundless,
the snow leaves.
And I stow away my thoughts for another snowy day.

Asma Amjad is a recent graduate who writes poetry and short stories in her spare time. As a South Asian, Muslim woman, she is working on her debut collection which features a range of poetry regarding identity, religion and culture. When she is not writing poetry, she can be found reading a book or covered in paint splatters. If you would like to follow her journey as an emerging poet she is on twitter: @asmaamjad_

We Kept you in a Drawer
Damien B. Donnelly

and forgot about you most years, like mashed potato
Mum once left in the pot, no room on the plates after
the boiled, baked and the chipped. The Father,
Son and His Holy Spirit.

Pretty boy, baby in plastic, a hole pierced in his back
for awaiting spike under blanket in a crib we pushed
him into when we finally remembered, after eating
and drinking and singing of old acquaintances,

forgotten.

Funny, for someone to design a tiny bed with single
spike for a baby born to be a crucified King. Funny,
the things you don't think of at the time, like potatoes
in pots that no one really missed.

Damien B. Donnelly is a poet, podcast maker and baker of delicious cakes. His debut pamphlet *Eat the Storms* was published by The Hedgehog Poetry Press in Sept '20, followed by a Stickleback micro poetry collection. A conversational pamphlet *In the Jitterfritz of Neon*, co-written with Eilín de Paor with be published by Hedgehog in Jan '22 followed by his first full collection *Enough!* He is the Pushcart nominated, host and producer of the poetry podcast *Eat the Storms* and has been widely published in many journals both online and in print.

Holiday Cheers
Robert Pegel

Let's toast to our buddy,
he's with us tonight.
You know if he was able
he'd make everyone feel alright.
There's no time to be sad
barely time to breathe.
Build each other up.
Get rid of whatever's
dragging you down.
From this night on
promise to start taking chances.
Begin this minute shining light.
Let's toast to our buddy.
He's with us tonight.
You know if he was able
he'd make everyone feel alright.
Time passes quickly.
Friends get separated.
Things happen,
we move on.
Still, memories last a lifetime.
What I wouldn't give
for one more night.
Let's toast to our buddy,
he's with us tonight.
You know if he was able,
he'd make everyone feel alright.
No one understood me better,
cared more,
made me laugh until I cried.
Let's toast to our buddy,
he's with us right now.
Everything's going to be alright.

Robert Pegel is a husband and father whose only child died at age 16. Calvin died in his sleep of unknown causes. Robert writes as a therapeutic outlet. He hopes to find transformation by creating. Robert graduated from Columbia University where he majored in English. He has been published in The Madrigal, Trouvaille Review, The Remington Review, Goat's Milk, 433 Magazine, The Mason Street Review, A New Ulster, Bluepepper, As Above So Below, Last Leaves and others. He has work forthcoming in Sledgehammer Lit, Zin Daily, Resurrection Magazine, North Dakota Quarterly and Spirit Fire Review, and Libretto Magazine. Robert lives in Andover, NJ with his wife, Zulma and their Min Pin dog, Chewy.