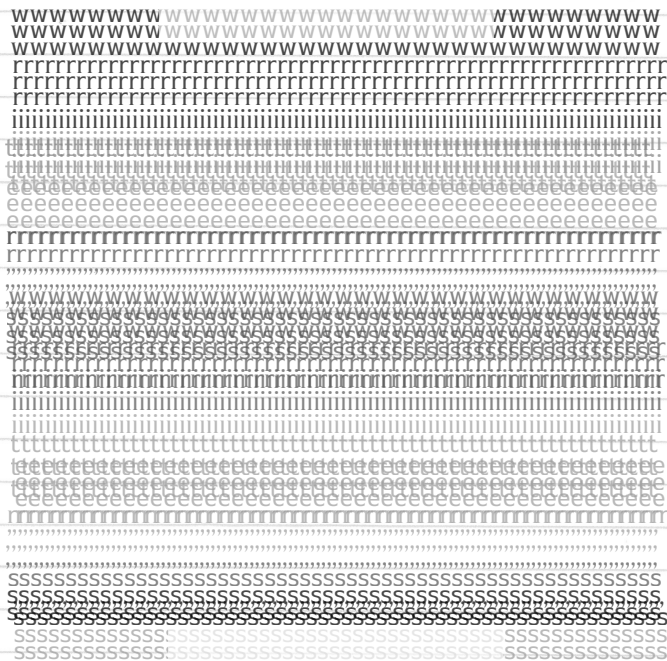


Writer's Block

Magazine for Writing, Art, and Photography



ISSUE 54

S u m m e r 2 0 2 6

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Contributors

Alessio Zanelli

Fanni Bonczi

Gabriella Garofalo

Jack Love

James Croal Jackson

John Grey

Mekiya Outini

Mostafa Badaoui

Richard Dinges, Jr.

Rizwan Akhtar

Sam Hunt

Zachary Bray

EDITORIAL

Dear Reader,

As summer starts off with record-breaking heat waves in various parts of the world, and the sun beats down with previously unheard-of force, we have managed to keep our heads cool and deliver the 54th edition of Writer's Block magazine. The short stories, poetry, and artworks collected here will take you through small moments of contemplation in nature, to the questioning of modern times, to fantastical stories of shoes and their memory, to prose on love, life, time passing, goodbyes, insomnia, and identity. The pride and joy we take in platforming upcoming authors and seeing them find their voices never gets old. It never ceases to amaze us how, in spite of distance, borders, age, and different paths of life, such a wonderfully wide array of stories finds its way to our publication.

A new chapter of Writer's Block is waiting to begin; an almost entirely new board will be responsible for putting together the next issue and continuing the tradition of the magazine. We wish them all the best and have full confidence that their fresh minds and exciting energies will manage to pick up where we left off. It was an honor to be part of the editorial board and we cannot wait to see how the team continues to grow.

We want to thank the Writer's Block board members of 2025/26 for their efforts to improve the magazine and let it expand beyond its previous bounds. We want to thank our contributing authors for their persistence, courage, and unique approaches to literature. Thank you to our sponsors, The Book Exchange and Espresso Fabriek, for believing in our message and mission, and, as always, we are grateful to our founding member Lester Hekking, without whom this magazine wouldn't exist.. Thank you and enjoy the 54th edition of this magazine. It was a pleasure.

Yours truly,

The Writer's Block team

Fanni Bonczi



"5 photographs" (Analog photography: 35mm film)

Leaking

Richard Dinges, Jr.

Lost between drips,
thoughts seep into
daydreams, a faucet
that leaks into
drains clogged with
yesterday's missed
deadlines and no
time like now, eyes
closed, doors open
on unoiled hinges
that scream wake up
and listen to
that metronome
in the bathroom
that needs to be
stopped before
nothing is left
but the sound gone
between drips.



The sun paints its life in the low night sky

Jack Love

The sky glows a deep orange above the dusky horizon,
Adding a touch of vibrance to the wintry grays that don
The world beneath it. Spindly oaks ascend to the heavens -
Their leaves departed days ago, and the dusky orange glow
Bleeds through the skeletal branches rendered barren
In the still night. It is only a moment before the sun walks
Its way down beyond the horizon - its glow trailing it
Slowly – and the old oaken trees, shaven for the slender
Winter days, stand against the glowing life like jagged
Lighting strikes – a permanent fixture of life's withdrawal
From the earth, if only for a time, while the sun paints
Its life in the low night sky.

You can't

Zachary Bray

Breathe, right now. Try to, try to

You're fine

You're fine

Fine

Easily so

You must force yourself to be

You unravel so

Completely, because

You are a

You are a

You are afraid so

Failure

Perfectionist

Breathe. Just take a deep

take a deep

Leaning over the sink

Up Up

Down Down

Running

out
of
time

Lost

Is this who you are?

No

Is this who you are?

Always

It's not true

(You know it's true)

It's not true

Smile

(Scream)

(You'd rather it was)

Because then no one can fault you for not trying

It's all right. It's okay.

There, there

was never any point

Anyway so

Relax. Relax. Just

Breathe. Just take a deep

take a deep

And you'll repress everything all over

Again.

Again.

Safelight
Jeffrey-Michael Kane



Three in a Window (1959), Lutz Dille. © Estate of Lutz Dille / Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

When people look at photographs, they think they're seeing the past.

What they are really seeing is light that changed its mind. I know this because I have spent forty years in the dark, waiting for it to decide that it was right the first time.

I was polishing the glass when they stepped into view—two coats the color of wet cardboard, four elbows, two pair of hands fumbling with the small white frames. I'd just flipped the sign to CLOSED, but the rain had paused, and so had they, caught in that narrow weather between drizzle and dark. The light in the arcade was clean—late winter, thin as vellum, the kind that made small objects briefly important.

She found her patch of sky first. She held the slide up toward the flats across the street, using the pale window-light as if she'd ordered it herself. Blue trapped in a frame no larger than a postage stamp. The sky illuminated by the sky. "Look at this," she seemed to say. The young man smiled, then raised his own, eyes squinting behind wire frames, as if the truth of it were in the grain.

I recognized the yellow cardboard box in his pocket before I recognized them. Kodachrome, twelve exposures. I'd cut those slides myself an hour earlier, the blade catching ever so slightly on the third one—overexposed, but not ruined. I remember thinking, He'll be pleased anyway. Young men are more forgiving of their mistakes than old ones.

On the reflection's surface, my own face floated behind theirs—a double exposure. His slide, my window, the apartments across the street, and somewhere in the middle, the doctor's verdict from three weeks ago: retinal detachment, left eye. "Too many years in the darkroom," the young man in the white coat had said, as if I'd chosen the shadows merely to spite myself.

The girl laughed. I heard only a muffled shape of the sound through the glass, but laughter carries its own light. She pressed a second slide into the young man's free hand. He examined it, then shook his head, a small, decisive no. She disagreed—not with words, but by tucking that same slide into her coat pocket, safe from his judgment.

I have developed thousands of strangers' photographs. Birthdays, weddings, a dog that looks exactly like every other dog except to the person who brought me the roll. I see them all before anyone else does: the first kiss captured shyly at the edge of the frame, the baby who didn't live long enough for a second album. People hand me their small, sealed cylinders as if they were dropping off laundry—Here, fix this—and I return their pasts rearranged in squares.

But sometimes, like now, I get to see the moment when the pictures see them back.

He lifted another slide. From inside, all I could see was a bright postage stamp against the sky. But I knew what image he held: frame nine. Ponte Vecchio at dusk. The only one where he'd braced the camera properly. On my light table, it glowed.

She tugged at his sleeve, pointing at something on the transparency, her finger almost touching the film, then pulling back, remembering the rule: do not smudge the emulsion. He shrugged, skeptical.

"That one is good," I told them, though they couldn't hear. I tapped the window with my knuckle. The girl glanced sideways, saw me, and smiled with her teeth. The man didn't notice; he was still arguing with his own light.

Their fingers nearly touched as they swapped frames. They were not lovers, I decided. Lovers don't look up at the same thing with that much separate concentration. Lovers share a gaze. These two shared only a roll of film and an argument about it.

My wife and I had our pictures taken together only once, in front of the Duomo, the year before she died. A tourist insisted, pressing us shoulder to shoulder. "Smile!" she said. Marta did. I tried. When the prints came back from another shop—yes, even the cobbler buys his shoes elsewhere—Marta held them to the light box at once, eager to see whether the world, reduced to a square of Kodachrome, still held the thousand reasons we'd once given each other for staying.

We weren't even in focus. Only the cathedral's stones were sharp.

The man behind the counter apologized profusely. I told him it was all right. The mistake suited us. The church was not going anywhere. We already were.

Through the window now, the girl held a slide closer to her face, squinting. Frame three: a café table, four empty cups, a hand just leaving the edge of the frame. They had left before they were photographed properly. It is a common error: people forget the picture needs time.

She said something to the boy, her lips forming a shape that might have been "still good." He looked unconvinced. He had the posture of someone who wished for perfection but bought only film he could afford. I wanted to tell him that in twenty years, he would be grateful for the blur; it proves they improved.

Behind their heads, the apartment windows reflected a tiny version of my shop. In that reflection, I could see myself twice—once as I was, and once as I used to be, hair dark, shoulders straight, the year I first hung the sign. Now most come because they want passports.

The girl shifted closer to the glass, oblivious to how her breath fogged the pane. She spread three slides in her left hand like cards, choosing. The boy reached for one; she slapped his hand lightly, claiming it. He laughed then, finally. I watched his mouth shape the sound, a little late to the party of his own happiness.

The light flattened their coats into old-film grey, turned their faces into something already archival. I stayed behind the glass. The shop smelled of fixer and stale cigarettes. My left eye blurred at the edges; the right still saw sharply enough to collect light and cut film.

I thought of the doctor's suggestion: "Perhaps you should consider retiring. Let the machines do the work." The hospital brochure had a photograph of a smiling man my age steering a sailboat. I do not sail. I calibrate. Spending my remaining sight on an empty horizon seemed like a waste of light.

Outside, the boy held a slide higher, his arm fully extended, as if to test how much sky it could hold. The girl, shorter, leaned in close, peering through the little window together. For one second, their faces aligned. Through the square of film, I saw them both framed, reversed, illuminated from behind by the accidental kindness of the afternoon.

The image inside that slide—frame twelve—was of a street performer on Via Tornabuoni, painted silver from head to toe. He had stood motionless for so long that he looked like a man thinking about the body he once occupied. Watching them now, I wondered if the silver man would ever see his own photograph. Someone like the boy brings me the film. Someone like me returns the slides. The subject remains unconsulted.

The girl lowered her arm, blinking. The moment of alignment broke. She slipped frame twelve into her pocket with the others she had already rescued from his discard pile. I suspected, in the end, she would keep them all. People say they will throw away the bad ones. They rarely do. The mind edits ruthlessly; the box in the closet does not.

Rain began again, lightly, tracing vertical lines down the window. The reflections shivered. The boy looked at his watch, then toward the tram stop. The girl gathered the little cardboard frames into their plastic case, reluctant. One last slide remained pinched between her fingers. Without hesitating, she turned and pressed it flat against the glass, offering it to me as if we had agreed on this role. For a second the small square lit her face and mine together, and I had the foolish, precise thought that I was back at the light box with Marta, watching her hold our blurred Duomo up to the glow, hoping it might yet come into focus if she believed in it hard enough.

It was frame five: the river at dusk, lamps already flickering, one barchetto gliding through the black, the renaiolo dredging up a grin. They had framed it crookedly; the horizon sloped upward as if the water were climbing west. Still, there was something in it—the way the last light pooled under the bridge—that made the error feel like intention.

I nodded approval. She couldn't see me clearly through the 35mm river, but she smiled anyway, as though some recognition had crossed the glass. She tapped the slide once against the window, then tucked it away.

They moved on, out of the frame. My reflection returned to sole ownership of the glass. Outside, the street filled with other faces, umbrellas rising like sudden mushrooms.

I flipped the sign back to OPEN, though it was almost closing time. There would be, I knew, another roll from them someday. Or not. Perhaps this was their only afternoon of caring about light.

Still, I went into the darkroom and turned on the safelight, just in case the world decided, once more, to change its mind about what it wanted to remember. In the drawer beside the enlarger, under a stack of spare sleeves, the Duomo print lay where Marta had left it years ago, the two of us soft at the edges, the stones sharp. I didn't take it out. It was enough, for now, to work by the memory of its glow.

[illegible][illegible]

everyone says my cat is vocal. everyone knows
DQ would be a poet if she could speak human.
she has the tenderness of a filet and demands
one in return. I am a filet to her. the world is cast
iron skillet with luscious smells perpetually
dispersed by overhead fan. I am a fish to her,
wet enough and wiggly. bones — an afterthought
of milk. both of us missing teeth. the only time she was
anesthetized, in the aftermath she walked in loops around
the automated feeder. in my lap she sniffs the fabric
ocean of my jeans. she smells metaphors I couldn't dream,
vibrating a better universe on my tendons. what's real to her
is real to me. that's my flag, calico — my America that I'm petting
who purrs acceptable patriotism. I'm calling the governor.
it doesn't matter who. I'll beg for our time left to be soft.

Fanni Bonczi



5 photographs (Analog photography: 35mm film)



5 photographs (Analog photography: 35mm film)

Faye is an old woman who lives in a shoe-shaped house. A drafty, one-story, chocolate brown stucco wingtip, to be exact. One-thousand square feet. Wall-to-wall shag carpeting the color of a ripe persimmon. Two bedrooms and a bathroom. A leak-prone asphalt tiled roof. The stucco wingtip is featured in Atlas Obscura's online guide to New Jersey. Daytrippers come regularly to snap selfies in front of Faye's house. If she's around, she'll introduce herself and try to sell her 4x6 inch acrylic paintings of shoes at \$10 a pop. Faye's Day-Glo paintings of cha-cha heels and Seventies-style platforms sell quickly. She's saving the money for a new roof. When visitors ask about the house's origins, she explains that she and her late husband Carl built it back in the Seventies, when they owned the successful Shoe La La store in town.

"I wasn't sure, at first, about living in a shoe-shaped house," is her standard reply. "I wanted a nice split-level, decorated in the French Provincial style. But my sweet Carl could be mighty persuasive. He said it would be good for business, so I went with it."

What Faye doesn't tell visitors is that after Carl's fatal aneurysm a few years ago, she discovered that they owed the IRS so much in back taxes that a lien had been placed on the business. Shoe La La was liquidated and became a Super Cuts. Faye doesn't tell visitors about the ulcers or insomnia. The sense of betrayal. Now she mostly just misses Carl's laughter. His warm body pressed against hers on cold nights, the smell of Old Spice on his shirts. Sometimes, she cooks his favorite meal—tuna casserole and Caesar salad—and sets the table for two, with candles. She envisions Carl sitting across from her, talking about hockey or asking her if she wants to go to Boca on vacation again this year. She imagines him taking her hand. "I love you so much, Faye," she'll hear him say. "I'm sorry I wasn't honest and left the business in debt. I hope you know that I didn't mean to die before I sorted it all out."

Loneliness and time have made it easier for Faye to forgive. "I know, honey. I know," she says to the empty chair at the opposite end of the table.

The house and his extensive shoe collection are constant reminders of Carl, so she likes to keep every pair clean, polished, and neatly arranged in closet racks. They are her companions. Occasionally, she reminisces out loud in front of the shoes. One soggy day, when Faye goes to polish Carl's old pair of black Cuban heels, she notices the right one is missing.

"Now, where could that other Cuban heel be?" she muses out loud.

"Ugh...Ernesto has left me again," says a doleful male voice from below. Faye jumps slightly. She hears a sigh. Her eyes follow the source of the sound. It is the left Cuban heel.

"Hello?" says the voice impatiently.

No, it wasn't possible! Faye blinks and swallows. "You...you...can talk?"

"Sí, of course."

"But...but how?"

"All shoes can talk, silly."

"I don't understand."

"Faye, there is nothing to understand. You must only accept. All shoes can talk, if we so choose."

Faye steadies herself by holding on the frame of the closet door. She stares at the Cuban heel for a long time, contemplating this curious new revelation. She clears her throat. "Do you have a name?"

"Claro que sí! Yes, of course. I'm Manuel." He pauses. "Faye, I need your help."

"How so?"

"Please find my Ernesto. I want to make up. I'm going crazy without him."

Ever the romantic, Faye endeavors to help. "You can count on me, Manuel. I'll start looking right away."

"You might look under the bed. Ernesto sometimes goes there to sulk," says Manuel.

Faye nods. With effort she kneels and peeks underneath the bed. Instead of Ernesto, she encounters the glamorous Claudette and Simone, Carl's black Oxfords from Bally's, and Sonny and Cher, the tan Minnetonka laced moccasins. After a round of introductions, Faye asks, "Have any of you seen Ernesto?"

"Non, Ernesto eez not here, ma chérie" purrs Claudette. She and Simone are rubbing against each other's back heels.

"Christ, you two. Get a room," groans Sonny.

Cher turns towards Faye. "Ernesto is pals with Moby and Dick, the penny loafers. You should check with those two."

"Faye, aftair you find Ernesto, we could maybe use a leetle poleesh, no?" asks Simone.

"Yes, of course, Simone. I'd be delighted to spruce you both up."

There is loud joint popping as an arthritic Faye stands back up. "Whew. Ok. Well, I'm gonna go talk to the loafers now." In the guest bedroom she finds Moby and Dick in their spot on one of Carl's shoe racks. "Hello there," she says.

"Hiya, Faye. How's it hanging?" asks Moby.

"Well, I'm looking for Ernesto. Do you know where he is? Manuel is upset."

Dick chuckles. "Manny is such a drama queen. If Ernesto so much as looks at another shoe, Manny accuses him of flirting and then they squabble."

"That sounds unpleasant,"

Moby chimes in. "Honestly, Faye. It's quite entertaining."

Dick continues. "Manny has even accused Ernesto of having an affair with Claudette. As if!"

"Oh...I see," says Faye, unaccustomed to the intimacies and caprices of shoes. "Ernesto can't have gone far. It's not such a big house."

"I bet my Vibram bottom sole that Ernie's in the mudroom again, with Lenny and Squiggy," says Moby.

Faye cocks her head. "Lenny and Squiggy?"

"Yeah, you know. The rubber rainboots?" Moby snickers. "Ernesto really has a thing for guys in rubber."

"Ignore him, Faye," says Dick, nudging his mate. "Moby's just trying to shock you."

Faye giggles like a teenager. It's been years since she's had this much fun. "Hey, I'm no prude. Carl and I were married for nearly forty years, remember?"

"Was it really that long?" asks Dick.

"Yes."

"Carl was a nice fellow. I bet you miss him, even though he left you in a pickle," says Dick.

Faye sighs. "Yes, I do. I suppose I should have asked more specific questions about the business side of things. But I didn't, and that's on me. He always said we were doing great. God, I was naïve."

"Well, nobody's perfect," says Moby. "You know you can always talk to us, right? We shoes got lots of problems, too. Loose eyelets. Broken stitches. Dogshit. Ground down heels."

Faye closes her eyes and nods. Like her, the shoes have suffered the indignities of life.

Dick chuckles. "Faye, you really should talk to Lois and Barb, your old pair of gold spring-o-lator mule heels. Those gals have some crazy stories!"

"Oh, I'd love to hear them. Those heels—Lois and Barb, I mean—they were a birthday gift from Carl. Sometime in the Sixties, if I recall. I wore them every time we went to Atlantic City." There is a flash of memories. Carl, young and handsome in a suit. Black hair shiny with Brylcreem. The two of them alone on the beach at night during their honeymoon. From her pocket she withdraws a crumpled tissue and dabs her eyes. "I've missed having someone to talk to."

"That's what friends are for," adds Moby.

Faye places her hands over her heart. "Thank you," she says. She starts to head in the direction of the mudroom.

"Good luck finding Ernesto!" the loquacious loafers croon in unison.

Faye walks to the front of the house, which is in the toe section. How enchanting are these new little friends! Carl would be tickled to see how well they were all getting on. If only he were still alive! She would forgive him and take him back in an instant. Faye arrives at the foyer/mudroom. As Moby predicted, Ernesto the Cuban heel is snuggling in between the much taller Lenny and Squiggy. "Ernesto!" she exclaims. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Manuel is worried sick."

Just as Ernesto is about to reply, there is the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. The opening and shutting of doors. The chatter of young people.

Faye claps her hands gently. "We have visitors," she trills.

Lenny and Squiggy scoot forward slightly. "We are at your service, Madame. It was raining earlier."

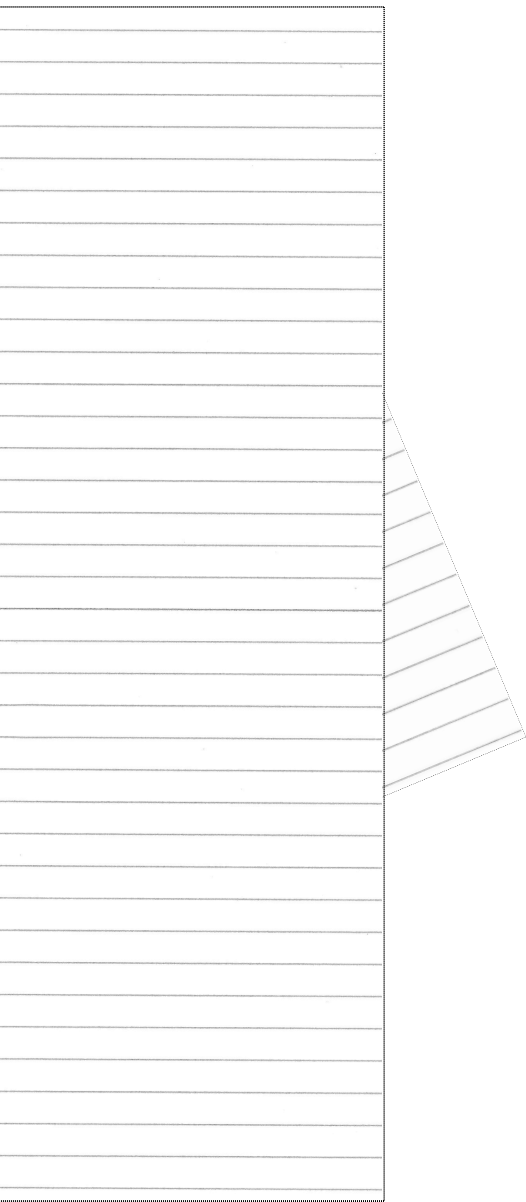
"You're too kind," Faye says, reaching for the box that holds her assortment of watercolor shoe paintings. "I want to say hello and see if they're interested in buying any of these."

Faye slips her left foot into Lenny and her right into Squiggy. "Ernesto, we'll be back in a flash. Then I'll make some coffee and you can tell me all about the fight with Manuel. He really loves you, you know."

Ernesto smiles. "Sì, ok."

As Faye opens the front door and waves to her camera-toting visitors, she smiles and counts her blessings.

Silence in your pockets, the sea is a liar,
 And tides forget to whisper a promise,
 Hard and alive in her slow, incandescent crawl,
 A challenge to the sea, the sin, the watchful gods,
 To every soul that refuses to let her stay,
 The green tides that forget no sin, yet forgive your soul
 While the sea keeps stitching light
 Over the parking lot's dark hymns, your absolution,
 And traffic signals blink mercy in a light
 Only the homeless can decrypt-
 Sure, as if the universe ever cares about our thoughts,
 As if nights ever care to name the blue of souls-
 No hymns get here, only the cold white of salt, a baptism
 Of hope and sharp sea, maybe a wheeze of dead light
 Dissolving in the brine of your hands if no guilt clings
 To the foam's white fingers, or no God's hands
 Shake these waters, only the silence-
 Yet a green sea holds our fragments,
 A fractured faith, fractured selves, it breathes,
 Then soars among white silent sins,
 So let souls believe that water keeps alive,
 A shelter of weeds and unspoken prayers
 Where evils swim in hues of greed and envy,
 Then dissolve in salt and foam, a baptism
 Of waves wiping out names we can't say,
 The sins only breakers know-
 What mercy there is, it bears no hymns, no robes, no altar,
 Only a running breath blowing over souls etched
 In green scripts, as lost horizons blur,
 And shade fades away when set to sing
 To daunted souls how to breathe again,
 But mercy is just a tide raising
 Those who dare to sink, maybe a lifebelt you never reach.



Our talk is dust motes mostly.
Words float. They're unambitious.

But they do look pretty
half-lit by the café's fluorescents.
Nothing we say deserves an archive.

If posterity were in the room,
it would shut down its ears.

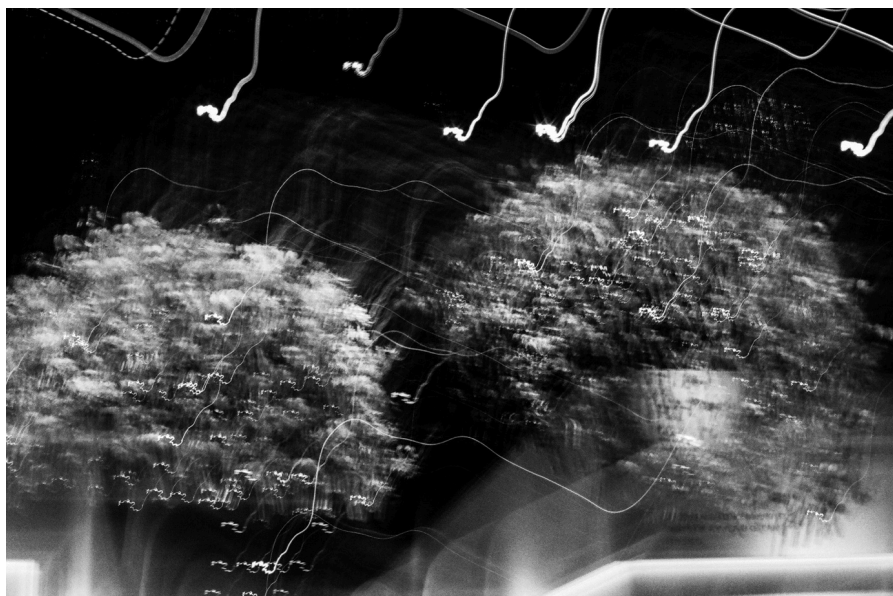
Such embarrassment.
For us. For itself. For the entire species.

The talk is braced by good old English,
the mongrel tongue with its barbs and glories,
but we wield it like a couple of butter knives,
smearing whatever's handy.
No one would mistake us for the wise old ones,
like Antiphon polishing a courtroom thunderbolt,
or Lysias orating at a funeral.

But, as the moderns say, so what.
We're not being graded.
Our chatter doesn't ride radio waves.
ping some distant nebula.
It has a half-life of zero.
And a life of even less.
It's like steam off a muffin.
Or foam fading in tepid coffee.

Deep meaning is irrelevant.
Weather, gossip, the usual detritus,
they take their turns and nothing
seems the worse for it.
Meanwhile the entire café percolates
with sports news, political gripes,
the price of everything climbing
its little Jacob's ladder,
the litany of spouses and lovers and bosses,
the roadwork everywhere,
and 911 calls that go unanswered.

Every lung, every larynx, every vocal chord,
gets in its reps,
curling syllables like dumbbells,
building up the musculature of nothing much.
No one here has much to say.
And maybe that's the mercy of it.
The tongues keep wagging.
They're like wind through grass, all of them.



5 photographs (Analog photography: 35mm film)

DEPORTEE, IN AN AIRPORT, STARES AT A VASE

It's a gray December morning.
The border trees stand alone.
Oh, they convince themselves
that the mist drifting
from one to the next is a bridge.
But, then again, they are trees.
They have a long, long time
to maintain the lie.

And the country I have come to
is now a flashing sign –
“Exit only.”

With kisses, hugs,
my wife bids me goodbye.
Her lips intoxicate, her touch likewise.
But soon enough,
the way to her will be sealed shut.

I wait for the plane back to El Salvador.
Exile, love, solitude - three petals
from the same bewildering bloom.

Like flowers in a vase.
Beautiful one moment.
Cruel the next.

John Grey

My aunt takes sixty milligrams of melatonin every night and proudly tells me that she has no trouble sleeping. My father wiles away his witching hours in the tub or the garage, smoking, drinking, scrolling.

My aunt says that sooner or later, I'll have to face up to the fact that the world doesn't run on my schedule. My father chastises me for getting so worked up about not sleeping.

My aunt informs me that there's no good reason for anyone to get up after 7:00 a.m. or stay up past 11:00 in the evening. My father says rhythms are a thing of the past, there are no seasons anymore, the world's ending, and besides, we're unemployed.

My aunt, who agrees with my father about very little, agrees that I am unemployed. Once, in an ungarded moment, she let slip that she wished she'd started a business, as my wife and I have, instead of spending decades wrangling students in Missouri's public schools. But then she remembers herself, remembers the hard-won pedestal on which she stands, and remarks that, like she and her husband, we're living like retirees.

It's 7:00 a.m., and I'm awake and typing. Last night, I slept a few hours. A lot for me. My head is clear. Not Funes el Memorioso clear, but clear enough. I can't recall everything I've ever perceived, but this at least isn't one of the days, routine enough, and unendurable, when I feel as if someone pumped raw industrial sludge into my brain, then went in after it with an ice cream scooper. I am grateful.

I am grateful to have found a wormhole through my family's gridlock, pouring myself into a business whose key duties—writing, producing a podcast, and reviewing clients' manuscripts—can be discharged at 7:00 a.m. US Central Time, 7:00 a.m. Azerbaijan Time, or 7:00 a.m. Malaysian Time. Do I have a day job or a night job? Yes. Mid-shifts, openings, or closings? Yes, yes, yes.

Most of all, I am grateful to not be my grandmother, who was reportedly always awake when the rest of the family was sleeping, irritable and groggy whenever they were on the go. Who likely suffered from, and caused others to suffer because of, undiagnosed Bipolar 1. Who grew up in an era with limited options: no online businesses, and most respectable people did work 9:00 to 5:00.

Maybe it's been in our bloodline since time immemorial, but from where I stand, given what little I know of my own family's history, my grandmother looks like the wellspring from which all these contradictions geyser. The root, not of perfect recall, but of willful denial. Selective forgetting. Having little latitude to shape her own life, she instead applied her hand to warping others'. The effects are still rippling.

She can't have had too much to do with herself at 3:00 a.m. in 1959. Maybe that's how she developed her more idiosyncratic habits, like cleaning the cabinet doors. That's when insomnia is most intolerable, after all: when there's nothing to do but lie awake remembering and ruminating, nursing guilts, resentments, fears, knowing that morning is coming, that you will not be its equal, that day's about to break, that it will break you. When you meet the enemy in your body every hour, when you discover that it's too strong for willpower, too strong for pill power, too strong for you, madness becomes a real concern.

Ireneo Funes, Borges's most famous insomniac, remembers and remembers, but he does not—cannot—do. He is paralyzed, not by the blow to his head that remade him, not by his subsequent sleeplessness, but by his remembering. Thoughts are nine tenths of reality, insinuates the Argentine, who knew acute insomnia himself. The rest is chance. Bad luck, bad hands, bad genes—but nine tenths is a lot to work with. And eighteen, twenty, twenty-two hours daily—that's a lot to work with, too. And when the tide of industrial sludge begins to rise, when the ice cream scooper hangs above me, Damoclesian, ready to lobotomize, there's still the infinite minutiae of self-employment to attend to, the emails to be chewed and swallowed, the forms to be filled out and filed, the myriad mindless tasks to be performed; and then there are the meals that must be prepped, the floors that must be swept, the dishes to be scrubbed, the errands to be run; and then, when all else has been said and done, there are the cabinet doors.

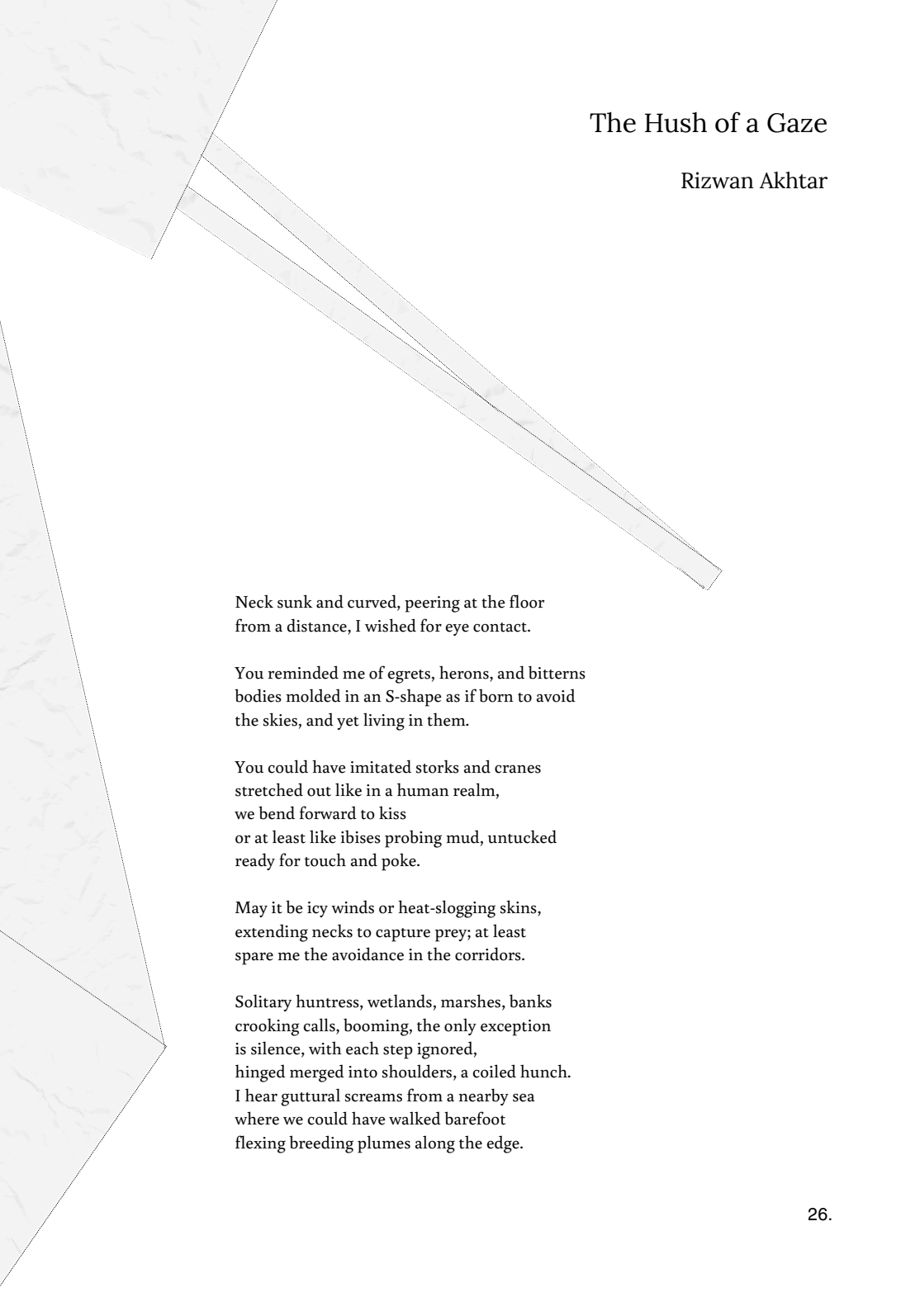
But it's been years since I last cleaned my cabinet doors. My endless nights do not need filling anymore. They're full. Overflowing. And when I sleep, I'm grateful that I've slept. And when I don't, I'm grateful that I didn't, too.

END

Chi si ferma è perduto!

(They Who Stop Are Lost!, Italian comedy film from 1960)

I've walked, and walked, and walked,
aware that walking was the sole way
not to let time have the upper hand,
not to hear its thin voice reprove me—
what for? maybe having been born?—
and also warn me about staying still,
as listening to it could be ill-omened,
a curse, or become a mark of infamy.
I've kept walking, carrying my burden,
like a manufacturing defect of a kind,
one dull, gnawing underlying malaise
that only constant footfalls can allay.
Gone a long way—and yet never done—
at a certain point I've met a milestone,
at the end of a steep, straight decline.
Perhaps others I had passed by before,
but that was the one I happened to note.
It wrote no distance, rather two puzzles:
How come you've hiked so far, walker?
Really, haven't you ever wondered why?
I just went on, and on, and on—a mask—
fearing that time might be the engraver,
it would soon morph into my thoughts
and finally absorb all my momentum.



The Hush of a Gaze

Rizwan Akhtar

Neck sunk and curved, peering at the floor
from a distance, I wished for eye contact.

You reminded me of egrets, herons, and bitterns
bodies molded in an S-shape as if born to avoid
the skies, and yet living in them.

You could have imitated storks and cranes
stretched out like in a human realm,
we bend forward to kiss
or at least like ibises probing mud, untucked
ready for touch and poke.

May it be icy winds or heat-slogging skins,
extending necks to capture prey; at least
spare me the avoidance in the corridors.

Solitary huntress, wetlands, marshes, banks
crooking calls, booming, the only exception
is silence, with each step ignored,
hinged merged into shoulders, a coiled hunch.
I hear guttural screams from a nearby sea
where we could have walked barefoot
flexing breeding plumes along the edge.

Like a Soldier Tuning His Watch in a Late Hour of Weariness.

Mostafa Badaoui

There—yes, there—where the directions heap themselves
and the hands of time stumble, lagging like tired pilgrims,
I recall—dimly—a poem by Abbas Beydoun,
and perhaps I stumbled upon a line
wrapped in the morning's impatience,
a morning scowling at death as one scowls at an unwelcome guest.

I swallowed a Doliprane
to quiet the sudden boiling in my skull,
and bit into a square of Spanish chocolate,
the taste opening its borderlands inside me.
I remembered Lorca—always Lorca—
and I imagine, as I often do,
that Guernica's cries still thunder
across the gravestones and the faucets of silence,
echoes beating their wings in the long corridors of the dead.
Futilely I kick away my thought of the gypsies,
those drenched in longing for Córdoba,
and I heave my footsteps forward—
each one the shape of a window clogged with dust and breath.

I hang my head upon the frame of emptiness,
a headless fish offered to the void,
and I gesture to the insects
to slap at one another in joy
for a drizzle that will not come.
I break my bitterness inside a cup
delicate with the scent of soap,
then fling my body onto a cement bench
tampered with by the solitude of passersby—
a bench that knows their weight but not their names.

And I straighten myself,
like a soldier exhausted by wars,
whose appetite for returning salutes has died,
whose hunger for longing itself has thinned away—
a soldier now mending his watch
only to sell it to the first traveler on the road,
as if time were the last possession he carried,
and the first he wished to be rid of.

Fanni Bonczi



5 photographs (Analog photography: 35mm film)

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