

The image is a complex collage of holiday-themed elements. In the upper right, there's a text overlay. The background features a fireplace mantel with several framed photographs of people. To the right, a Christmas tree is decorated with warm white lights and red and gold ornaments. The bottom of the image is filled with various holiday decorations, including a large red bow, a string of lights, and several round ornaments in shades of red, gold, and pink. The overall aesthetic is warm and festive, with a soft, slightly blurred quality.

Still Here Magazine
Holiday Mini-Issue:
A Light in December

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Letter from the Editor

This issue of *Still Here* features 24 pieces in total. 19 poems and 5 works of prose, each offering its own reflection, voice, and moment of honesty.

As always, I'm grateful to every contributor who trusted this space with their work, and to every reader who continues to show up with openness and care.

I hope you find something here that lingers, resonates or simply keeps you company for a while. Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy the issue.

Warmly,
Alauna Lester
Editor-in-Chief, *Still Here*



HAPPY NEW YEAR!!

2026

Christmas Peel by Simon Collinson

Christmas is magical,
till it is not,
followed by boredom,
then chilling fear,
next year it'll be anger,
then loss,
you feel sad and shunned,
until numbness surrounds,
hardly noticing,
lights going out,
one by one,
they're not coming back,
what's lost is,
lost for good.





December 26th by Simon Collinson

There's a jolly man,
dressed like Santa,
hanging and dangling,
on our tree top,
waving and smiling,
at me, just
waving and smiling.

He's been up there,
waving and smiling,
since Boxing day,
just hanging around,
waving and smiling,
enjoying the view,
he must have had,
quite a few.

It was on the 28th,
that the jolly man,
who looks like,
a smiley Santa,
waved goodbye,
and flew away.

I was sad to,
see him go.
I missed him.
but I'm sure that,
Wherever he is,
he'll still be,
hanging around,
just,
waving and smiling,
smiling and waving.







SPECIAL DELIVERY
DEC 25
YANKEE

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE BEEN
 NAUGHTY NICE

Santa Claus

CHECK YOUR BEHAVIOR
7 21

SIGNED BY
SANTA CLAUS

A Seasonal Story by Simon Collinson

Growse was a misery, of that there could be no doubt.
All who had the misfortune to encounter the man could attest to that fact.
You could feel life being sucked out of any place he entered.

To all entreaty for charity, to show concern for others, or to enjoy the frippery of the seasons,
The old misery would only reply.
“Bah Buggery”.

For no matter what time of the year. Halloween, New year, Mayday, it was all the same to him. Nothing, but
a lot of old, “Bah Buggery”.

So, it was no surprise to find Growse on Christmas Eve refusing to take part in any of the festivities. Growse
eschewed presents, cards or decorations. Of all the festivals, Growse detested Christmas most of all.
And if anyone chided Growse on his attitude, he'd just sniff and snuffle and blurt out, “Bah Buggery”.

Growse lived in a grim house gripped by a saturnine solemnity that never lifted. He walked alone,
permanently cloaked in a cloud of gloom. He took the cold with him wherever he went.

Growse was settling down in his bleak bed. He told Alexa, “Set the alarm for 6”
A sorrowful reply came, “You're such a misery that tonight you'll be visited by the spirits of the year and
shown the error of your ways, starting at midnight. Do you want me to set an alarm for this?”

Growse replied, “Bah Buggery” and sunk his head deep into his pillow.

But Midnight duly arrived, and upon the last stroke entered the spirit of Spring.

Spring was a spritely young woman. All smiles and tricks. Dashing around, doing cartwheels and giggling.
she told Growse, “Despite all the new growth and greenery your heart remains as stone. You greet the
daffodils like a dire and dismal event.
You must mend your miserable ways.”

And all that Growse could say was, “Bah Buggery”

A Seasonal Story by Simon Collinson

Summer strode in, the spirit a tall golden man, all radiant, shining, dazzling strength. He said, "The sun shines and gives warmth yet you just moan and groan.
Just say no to negativity."

To which Growse responded with a hearty, "Bah Buggery"

Next came Autumn, who was a strange spirit, that shambled in trembling and shaking, bringing with it gusts and gales. Its face and body were covered in quivering leaves of all hues of Autumn. It trembled as it spoke, "My season provides a spectacular show of colour and there's guising and sparkle a plenty. Yet all you do is complain about the leaves, tricks, treats and smoky bonfires."

As the spirit of Autumn spoke, leaves were constantly dropping from this creature, till when it departed all that could be seen was a dendritic outline of twigs and branches.
Its departing words, "drop the dourness."

To which Growse grumbled, "Bah Buggery".

Then the spirit known as Winter arrived as a stooped and gaunt old man. More bone than flesh. Who slowly and gravely advanced. He was stamping his feet, shaking off the snow from his boots. He brought coldness with him, leaving a frost wherever he passed.

Growse shivered as he said, "Spirit because you drag December and Christmas along with you, I fear you most of all".

Winter replied, "You avoid Christmas and New Year like the plague. You hate the snow and fear the frost. In an ocean of merriment, you're a mirthless island. You just go around griping and telling everyone, Bah Buggery.

Change your woeful ways to wonderful ones
A whole year has nearly passed and what have you done? Spent it sniping and griping.
You might as well be dead!

See how your misery has caused you to waste a whole year.
Are you going to waste yet another?

Growse got down on his knees closing his eyes, shouting "I will be of good cheer next year, I will be merry, and stop moaning. I'll stop saying "Bah buggery".

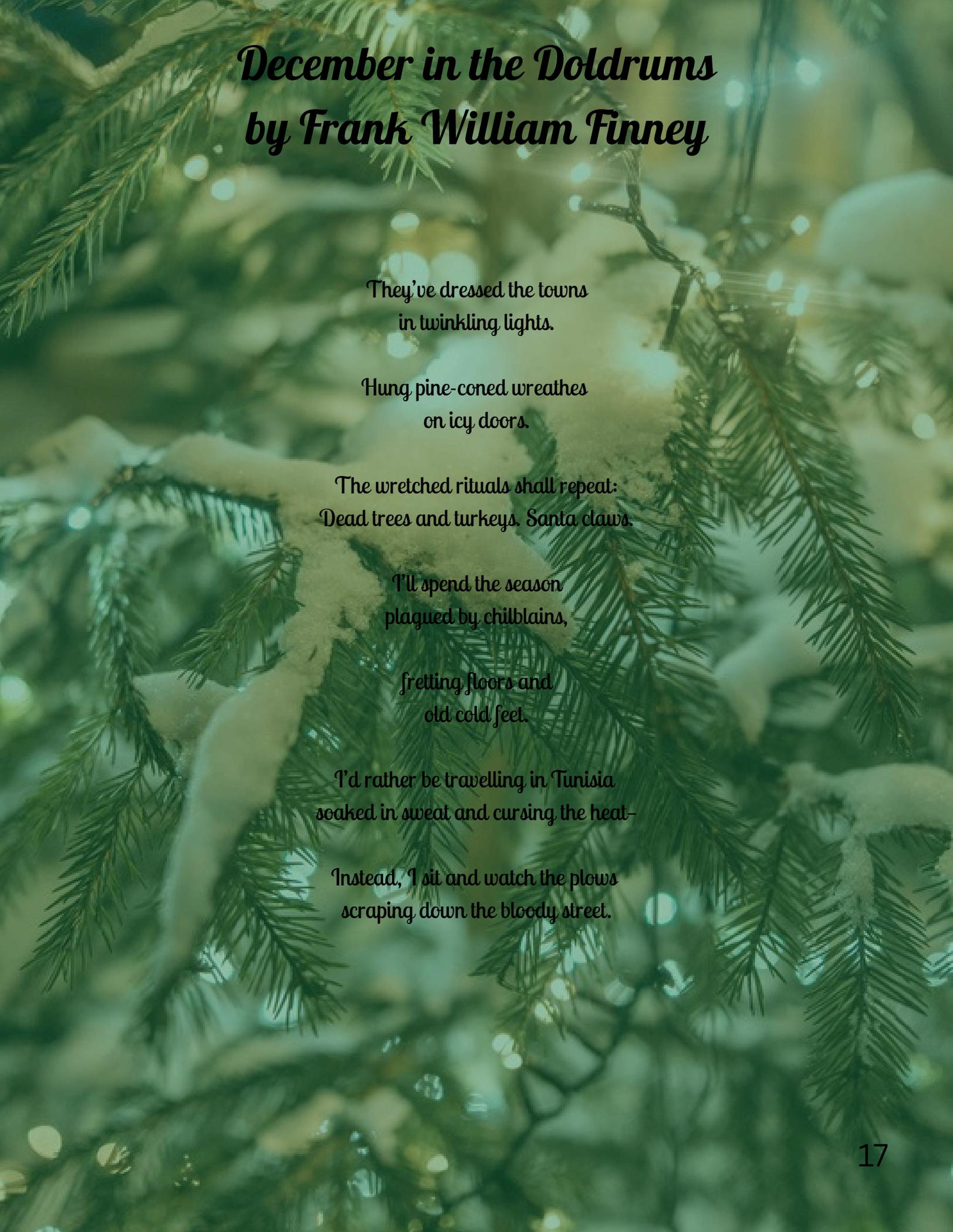
A Seasonal Story by Simon Collinson

Upon opening his eyes Growse discovered that Winter had vanished and took the snow and the chill with him.

but Growse was as good as his word. He found that his heart was filled with laughter. That sullen cloak was forever cast aside. Growse spent the following years enjoying himself and smiling. And everywhere he went the people would remark there goes a man who lives and enjoys his life to the full. It was said of Growse that he knew how to live life and live it well.







December in the Doldrums
by Frank William Finney

They've dressed the towns
in twinkling lights.

Hung pine-coned wreathes
on icy doors.

The wretched rituals shall repeat:
Dead trees and turkeys. Santa claws.

I'll spend the season
plagued by chilblains,

fretting floors and
old cold feet.

I'd rather be travelling in Tunisia
soaked in sweat and cursing the heat—

Instead, I sit and watch the plows
scraping down the bloody street.





Just For a Moment by Karina Ten

I take my seat at the table, overflowing with food.
The candles are lit; the fireworks lie on the floor.
Just for a second, just for a moment, I think that I could
forget what awaits me beyond the wrong side of the door.

The guests keep arriving, bringing salads and cakes;
My grandmother and I are sharing a bottle of wine –
rather unusual, but no one else in my family drinks.
And just for a second, just for a moment, we are all fine.

The kids sneak into the kitchen, grab a carrot – and run.
They are building a snowman – we will later find out.
They have grown in the year I have not been around.
I'm sure it's dark outside, but I feel the rays of the sun.





Christmas by Karina Ten

This is the first time I've brought gifts for my cousin.
I've flown them from Europe all the way here -
beneath the Christmas tree.
My smile is mechanical; my hands are frozen.
I hope she won't notice.

This might be the last Christmas before everything changes.
Her mother needs surgery, and she doesn't know;
She only admires the snow.
We adults exchange glances heavy with danger.
I hope it won't show.

We're on a stage, performing a show called Christmas.
Her mom has asked us to be actors today,
and so, we play.
My dear child, I will seek your forgiveness,
when the mirage fades away.





The Recovery by Paul McAllister

On December 17th, Harry left his home in Belfast to attend a funeral in County Fermanagh. The deceased was his father's cousin and several people, including Harry's brother Mark who'd phoned from Seattle the day before, had suggested he go on his father's behalf.

Harry disliked that phrase: 'on his father's behalf'. It implied he and his father had sat down, discussed things and made arrangements. But his father was lying in a Belfast hospital-bed amid a tangle of tubes and wires, and for a long time had been unable to discuss or arrange anything.

His wife Gwen wasn't keen on him going, however. She worried the post-funeral reception would hold him up and he wouldn't get back in time for the primary-school nativity play that evening. Their younger son was performing as Joseph.

"No fear o' that," he assured her at the breakfast table, the jacket of his black suit draped about the back of his chair. "That wing o' the family's holy rollers. The reception will likely be a do in a church hall. Oul ladies carting around pots o' tea and trays o' sandwiches. Mourners making quiet conversation. No drink, no jokes, no craic. Absolutely no reason for me to hang around."

He felt Gwen come up behind him. Her woollen cardigan brushed against his bald crown; her hand descended onto his shoulder. "Ye better not hang around. Ye need to be back for Sam. He's really excited about this and he'd be gutted if his daddy didn't show his face."

Through a glass door Harry could see Sam in the living room, assaulting their other son Tom with a plastic Viking battleaxe. The blade whacked down on Tom's head. Though it was plastic, the blow must have hurt. Sam didn't look like a budding thespian getting in character to play the hero's father, or surrogate father, in 'The Greatest Story Ever Told'.

Harry reached to his shoulder and rested his hand on Gwen's hand. "No worries. I'll make it." "All right. I trust you." Her other hand crept up to his neck and began caressing the skin there. Middle age, bad posture and relentless job-related stress had made the neck wattled. She was being affectionate, but as her fingertips explored the wrinkled skin, he couldn't help shuddering with embarrassment.

Gwen mistook his embarrassment for tenseness. "Aw dear," she said. "This must be hard for ye. A funeral on top o' everything else."

He wanted to explain the funeral had come too late to upset him. He didn't see it as a portent of his father's approaching death because as far as he was concerned the old man was already dead. Mentally at least, he was already below ground in a box. Even when his father had still been capable of speech, his head hadn't been right. The last time they had a conversation, several months ago, he kept calling Harry 'Mark'.

A commotion came from the living room. Tom screamed, "Leave me alone, ye wee shite, ye!" Then a body crashed down hard on the floor and Sam shrieked. Harry felt no sympathy for him. Younger brothers were a pain in the arse.

The Recovery by Paul McAllister

The hands were snatched from Harry's shoulders, and he suppressed a sigh of relief. His ugly, grooved neck had been left alone.

"I'll deal with them," said Gwen. "You get to yer funeral."

#

A high stone wall enclosed the graveyard. Inside, the surface of the graveyard was two-thirds of the way up the wall and to reach it you had to climb a flight of steps from a gateway on the village's main street. Meanwhile, when you stood on the pavement outside, you were level with the coffins and their cargoes of bones buried in the soil. The surrounding village had been allowed to sprawl across the countryside, with ribbons of new houses along the roads radiating from it, but the graveyard had had to stay within its boundaries. As generation after generation of local people were fed into it, there was no option for it but to go upwards.

Harry entered, and ascended to the graveyard and joined the throng around the grave. It was here, while the minister spoke, that he experienced a frisson of déjà vu. He suddenly connected his memories of childhood visits to County Fermanagh with the place he was in now. Because the graveyard was high up, he could see into the distance, where there were low hills covered with small boggy-looking fields. The sky above the hills was dark and troubled, the air around them hazy and mysterious. This had been the spooky place, so alien to the city suburb where he'd grown up, he remembered going to with his parents. A place he could imagine being populated by fairies and banshees and lonely ghosts that flitted through the twilight.

But then he pivoted around so that he was looking the other way onto the main street. The street today stretched an additional half mile towards Enniskillen, thanks to the adjacent strips of new houses and plots where houses were being built. He lost the sense of déjà vu. Those visits when he'd been a wee lad, exploring the fields, lanes and hedgerows with excited wonderment tinged with faint, superstitious unease, seemed an eternity ago. Between then and now, the soullessly materialistic 21st century, everything had changed.

The minister closed proceedings by announcing, "The family have asked me to tell you there'll be refreshments served shortly in the Methodist Hall on the other side of the street. They'd be delighted to offer you some hospitality before you begin your journeys home." So, his prediction had been right. The reception would be in a church hall. But the December air chilled him, and he welcomed the prospect of a cup of hot, Methodist-hall tea, even if it came without drink, jokes or craic. Besides, Sam's nativity play didn't begin until six o'clock. He had plenty of time.

The dead man's widow and children and their spouses were lined up just inside the entrance of the hall. As he worked his way along the line, shaking hands and expressing condolences, Harry found himself answering questions about his father:

"He's certainly hanging in there. Defying the doctors' expectations, ye know..."

27

"It's hard to tell... Some folks who've seen him recently swear there's been an improvement..."

The Recovery by Paul McAllister

“Ye’ve heard the saying, where there’s life, there’s hope...”

He’d got near the end of the line when someone flung a curveball. He wasn’t asked about his father, but his brother.

“He’s grand. Still working with that outfit in Seattle. I haven’t been out to see him, but I hear he has a decent life. Works his socks off Monday to Friday, o’course, but his weekends are cushy. Barbecues, fishing, hiking, trips up the ski-slopes...”

The person who’d asked was the dead cousin’s daughter-in-law. “Wow,” she said without irony. “Yis must be very proud o’ him.”

“Oh aye, He was a big source o’ pride for me da.” Harry corrected himself. “He is.”

His predictions about the reception weren’t quite accurate. The ladies who staffed it, carrying around big aluminium teapots and trays of ham, tuna and egg sandwiches with straight crust-less edges, weren’t elderly. They looked the age he was - though, he conceded, probably everyone believed he was older than them. This unhappy thought was reinforced when he took a cup and had someone fill it. He noticed his hand, swollen and ugly, holding the dainty little cup-handle. Dark veins wound along the back of the hand like noxious vines on a wall.

He found a chair at the end where the Christmas tree stood, shaggy with ribbons and garlands, crowded with baubles and angels, no doubt decorated by some of the congregation’s over-enthusiastic children. This was a good spot. Other people sat around him, so he didn’t appear unsociable, but those people seemed to be the dead man’s grandkids and were too engrossed in their phones to bother him with conversation. He could just drink his tea and get on his way...

A small man came up to him. He was in his seventies at least and had a slow, furtive way of moving, and his head was so completely hairless that Harry found himself staring at it - until he remembered he was almost as bald himself and had no right to stare. The man put a hand on his shoulder and sat down on the chair beside him. “It’s you,” he said. “It is you, isn’t it?”

He stuck his other hand forward and Harry shook it. The man’s hand looked small and fragile in Harry’s bloated, veined one. “Oh, it’s me all right. How about ye, Johnny?”

He’d recognised the man as a one-time buddy of his father, someone the old man had knocked about with when he was young and living on this side of the province. Harry had met him several times in his childhood, during those family visits to the ‘home territory’, as the old man called it. And he’d heard about him many times. Johnny had featured in at least half of the anecdotes that his father told about his youth, anecdotes where he referred to himself and his Fermanagh friends as ‘us young bucks’ and the events were invariably set in motion by a drinking session in a pub or in somebody’s back parlour or in a farm outhouse containing an illicit still.

The Recovery by Paul McAllister

“It’s a terrible business,” sighed Johnny, “what happened to our Alec. He was a good man. The best. Temperate in his habits, kind to his fellow men, mightily religious in his outlook.” He shuddered. “Not that it saved him in the end. Whatever ye do in life, it comes for ye. The final reckoning. And when it comes, it often isn’t nice.”

No doubt that was a reference to the gastric cancer that’d done for his father’s cousin Alec. Johnny’s voice had a whistling quality. His words had to navigate their way around a few stubs of teeth that survived in his mouth. It reminded Harry of the sound you got when you blew down the neck of an empty bottle. And Johnny’s voice suggested bottles in another way. The breath that accompanied his words smelt of whiskey. Harry imagined the little man sneaking swigs from a hipflask whilst standing in the graveyard, in the chill, behind the other mourners. “Well,” he replied, “that’s what they say are the two sure things in life. Death and taxes.”

The old man, seemingly unfamiliar with the sayings of W.C. Fields, laughed loudly. He kept laughing when a couple of people nearby turned their heads, though he laughed more quietly. “Oh, that’s good. Very good. But hey, listen to me.” He glanced around him. “It’s a wee bit claustrophobic in here. No disrespect to the Methodist wing o’ yer family. Our Alec, God rest him, and his clan have always been fierce decent people. But they take an austere view o’ life. Don’t have much time for its pleasures.”

“What’re ye getting at, Johnny?”

“I’m suggesting it might be easier and more congenial to reminisce about poor Alec if we took a dander out o’ here and across the road into Mrs Mulligan’s Bar.”

“Now that’s a tempting thought,” mused Harry, “but I’m driving this afternoon.”

Johnny was shocked. “Ye’re driving? Ye have a car with ye!”

“O’course I have. Got to get back to Belfast.” He thought old Johnny might be unfamiliar with the modern parenting ritual that was the school nativity play, so he explained, “They’re expecting me home for me dinner.”

Johnny grinned and shook his head. “Christ, you and yer cars. I mind ye drove some awful clapped-out our bangers. Though the state o’ them didn’t stop ye flying at ungodly speeds in them.”

It was over the street in Mrs Mulligan’s, where Harry reluctantly agreed to have one pint of lager with his father’s old friend, that his suspicions were confirmed. Johnny didn’t want just to drink to the late Alec’s memory. He wanted to give thanks for the recovery.

“Funerals,” he declared over a pint of stout and a double chaser of Bushmills’ Malt, “are depressing occasions o’ course, but I’ll walk away from this one feeling a bit encouraged. Cos something I saw today has warmed me heart. Which is meeting you again. Lord, there’d been some bad reports about ye lately, in Belfast. About how poorly ye were. About ye practically being at death’s door. But here ye are, standing beside me with a pint in yer hand.” He punched Harry playfully on the arm.

The Recovery by Paul McAllister

Age had so enfeebled him that the punch felt as light as a ball of crumpled paper that a bored colleague might throw at him in the office. “Aye, plenty o’ life left in you, ye bugger!”

His lager was three-quarters gone. One last big swig and his glass would be empty, and he could make his excuses and leave. Harry stared across the countertop into a mirror in the central section of the pub gantry. Before it stood a plastic Christmas tree sparsely adorned with baubles, on top of which wasn’t a star or fairy, but a Barbie doll dressed and styled as Marilyn Monroe in ‘The Seven Year Itch’. Yet past the tree he could see enough of his reflection.

It wasn’t so surprising. His hair had almost disappeared, his beard was as grey as dishwater, his face was snarled with frown-lines, laughter-lines and crow’s feet. As for Johnny, his eyesight was probably going, and his wits too, and the whiskey wasn’t helping either. And how long had it been since the two old men last met? Five years? A decade?

He decided it was too late to explain who he really was. He’d let Johnny carry on in his delusion for so long, it’d be embarrassing now if he tried to correct the mistake. So, he’d leave Johnny in happy ignorance. He could stay in Mrs Mulligan’s and get drunker than he was already, celebrating the miraculous recovery of his friend who hadn’t actually recovered.

Harry was preparing for the big final swig when suddenly Johnny asked, “And how are the two cubs?”

He set the glass on the counter, still one-quarter full of lager. “Well, the younger one’s in the States. In Seattle.” He gave Johnny the routine spiel about the awesome American Monday-to-Friday work ethic and the barbecues, fishing, hiking and skiing at the weekends. He realised that while he’d been impersonating his father for Johnny, this was the weakest part of his performance. The real old man would’ve chewed Johnny’s ear off for a good half-hour going on about how great Mark was.

Then Johnny asked, “What about that other fellah o’ yers? The Harry boy?”

“Harry,” said Harry uneasily. “Well, Harry’s working in insurance in Belfast.”

“He’s in Belfast. same as you? Never left Northern Ireland? That rare these days.” There was something in Johnny’s intonation that said, ‘tell me more’.

Harry looked down at his near-empty glass. “Just out o’ interest, Johnny. What’re the cops like in this place nowadays?”

The old man rolled his eyes. “Jaisus, ye’ll be lucky if ye find one cop patrol in the county. There’s crime and hooliganism galore. People don’t feel safe in their beds at night. Ever since that peace agreement and that joke o’ a new police service!”

He made it sound like people had slept safely in their beds before the peace agreement.

The Recovery by Paul McAllister

But a smirk appeared on his face. “Still, the lack o’ policing means there’s fewer o’ the buggers around to hassle ye if ye’re driving a few glasses over the limit.”

Harry drained the last of his lager. “Och, well. In that case...”

And he stayed for one more pint in the pub, during which time he spoke non-stop about how proud he was of his eldest son.





Brighton Beach Daydreams

by Maria Rosen

The usually pure solid tones of Deep Forest are adulterated in this 13th floor apartment of the Trump Village projects in Brighton Beach.

The music is polluted, and so are my thoughts. The lyrics of "Martha's Song" are distorted by the cacophonous clattering of a passing D train. I push in earplugs and raise the volume to no avail. I have lost the wonderful feeling this particular song usually gives me. When the train leaves the station below our window, I quickly lower the volume because Papa is sleeping. Papa is always sleeping.

Papa moved with Mama to Brighton Beach right after I left for college. They had entered the lottery for these Trump-built, rent-controlled co-ops years before, and finally their number came up. The choice was between this tiny one-bedroom closet and an even more miniature studio. The rent is very cheap, and because Mama can't work anymore, this is what SS1 buys. There was never going to be a room for me. When I left for college, I was on my own. I consider myself lucky to have a couch to sleep on when I return home on breaks. Where I will be living after college is a problem for the future. No use worrying about tomorrow.

Mama doesn't want me to become a writer. "This is not why we sacrificed everything and left everyone behind to come here," she reminds me. We have relatives to support back home. I have to make money to send them. It is all up to me. There is no chance for me to pursue my dreams. Dreams are not for immigrants. Dreams are only for people who can afford to have them. Immigrants must be practical.

Writing is not practical.

"Mama, I am not practical. I don't want to do anything but write. I can't do anything else. Mama, if I can't write, I ..."

I try to imagine that I'm someplace else, but it's impossible to daydream with so many car alarms going off. Searching for serenity is a hopeless undertaking in this apartment. Coherent thoughts stay long enough for me to sense them, but they quickly vanish. Just when I begin to attain clarity, I lose it in the passing of another D train. Sometimes, I jam the earplugs in just to get away from my own thoughts.

It's amazing how one moment you think you have found the perfect set of words to describe your feelings, but in an instant, they're gone. Kind of like when you're sure you're going to sneeze, but you don't, so you never get relief.

Papa is up and wants to know if I heard that Rasputin, a local supper club he loved, closed. No, I didn't know. He often says, "Americans don't know how to party. They go to a restaurant and gorge themselves until they're sleepy. Where is the show? The dancing? The *wodka*?"

Brighton Beach Daydreams

by Maria Rosen

I head straight for the rocks breaking the waves. Someone is always fishing or sunbathing around Brighton Beach. Temperature is irrelevant. And this is a particularly warm October day which has brought out so many different people.

I lower myself on a deserted island of rocks and meet the gaze of a fisherman stationed a few feet in front. His eyes follow me as I take out my journal and pen. I give him a quick nod. He smiles and turns back to his fishing, not forgetting me because he continuously turns, looking quizzically at my notepad. Probably thinks I'm an artist. Lots of budding artists come here to develop their talents. Poor old bastard-if he only knew that I'm a writer, not an artist.

He turns again and displays a big toothless grin. "Look," I want to say. "Save it! I'm not drawing you." Suddenly, I visualize my mother staring at me over his shoulder: "What are you doing? Get up! You know you can't sit on damp, cold rocks. Do you want to give your ovaries a cold?" Even though I know you can't give your ovaries a cold, I get up anyway. I can't write with Captain Ahab and Mama staring at me. Moving to a boardwalk bench will be more helpful for my writing and healthier for my ovaries, just in case Mama is right.

I came to the beach to be alone, to think. But you can never be alone at Brighton Beach. I approach the boardwalk and grab the first available empty bench. Families with strollers meander behind me. A walker approaches and stares. Maybe he, too, thinks I am an artist and wants to peek at my masterpiece.

"I am not an artist!" I want to scream to the world.

I look out at the water. Sand and ocean beckon me. I oblige, remove my motorcycle boots, and trudge onto the sand. It feels cold and silky as I head for the water. I step in and am pierced by freezing needles. The pain makes me gasp. Despite the frigid water, my body feels as if on fire. It feels good.

I take another step into the ocean looking for a panacea, my daydreams come true. I stare at my numb feet slowly sinking into the sand and wonder if I will be swallowed up by it. I envision tenacious beachcombers, scouring the sand with their mine sweepers, searching for long-buried treasures - like curious astronauts looking for evidence of life on other planets. Their detectors will go crazy over the spot where I will have sunk. They will find my hamsa ring, by then dislodged from my bony finger. Will they ever find me in the waters of Brighton Beach?

Now I have something to write about.





The Christmas Box by Daniel Crépault

The icy wind blew through Werner's bathrobe as he dragged the overflowing garbage can along the frost-covered asphalt. Each breath sent a needling chill into his lungs. He retreated into the warm house and was startled to see his wife, Beverley, standing at the top of the stairs, arms crossed.

"Did you bring the decorations in like I asked?"

"No," he said, brow wrinkled. "When did you ask me that?"

"Unbelievable! You never listen, Werner. I don't know why I even bother." She turned away, footsteps echoing down the hallway toward the kitchen, leaving him alone and brooding. As he mounted the steps to follow her, he could smell bacon frying and hear the low grumble of the coffee machine. He walked into the kitchen and stood a few feet behind her.

She faced the stove with her back to him. He saw a tear roll down her cheek, which she quickly wiped away with the back of her hand, and his chest tightened.

"Why don't you just call them?" he asked.

She waved him away.

"Kim is starting her new job today," he said. "The boys had their first day at the new school. Don't you want to know how it went? I'm sure they'd love to tell you about it."

"Exactly," she said, still facing the stove. "They have busy lives. They don't need to talk to their old Nana." A tremor passed over her from the sobs she was trying and failing to stifle. Werner took a step forward and reached a hand toward her shoulder, and hesitated. He let the hand drop to his side, walked to the table, and sat down.

His eyes roamed over the overflowing shelves in the pantry. Werner wished his daughter had told them about her new work schedule before they'd stocked it for a holiday feast. He exhaled slowly and picked up the newspaper lying on the table. Moments later, Beverley set out their breakfast, and they ate together as they had each day since they retired. Afterward, they fell into step wordlessly and cleaned up with choreographed efficiency. Werner washed the dishes, Beverley dried them and placed them back in the cabinet. Beverley rinsed out their coffee mugs while Werner wiped the table.

"Have you set a reminder?" she asked as he headed to his armchair.

"For what?"

"The decorations," she said, sighing. "I still need the other box from the garage."

He frowned. "No."

"Well, don't you think you should?"

"No. I'm not an idiot."

"We'll see."

The Christmas Box by Daniel Crépault

He glared at her back as she disappeared from the room.

An hour later, as he sipped his second cup of coffee and read the newspaper, she again inquired about the decorations, casually asking whether he needed to set a reminder to get them from the garage. Werner, face turning scarlet, slapped his newspaper on the table and leapt from his chair. He headed to the garage, open bathrobe flapping behind him. As he disappeared into the garage, he heard Beverley's warning that he had better not climb that ladder in his slippers.

The cold air in the garage smelled of pine resin from all the stacked firewood. Werner crossed to the far wall where the ladder hung, cursing under his breath as he remembered their last argument over these same decorations. He'd procrastinated putting them away and, tired of being ignored, Beverley had taken down the Christmas tree and boxed up the decorations herself. She'd left a note asking Werner to tape up the box and put it away in the garage while she was out. But Werner had gotten distracted watching the Jays lose yet another series to the hated Yankees, and the box had stayed on the balcony through an unexpected rain shower. Werner remembered his panic when he rose from the couch to get another beer and spied the wet box through the window. He'd barely managed to hide it on the topmost shelf in the garage before Beverley got home, arms filled with grocery bags.

A tremor shook Werner's legs as he climbed the ladder, silently vowing that this year would be different. He'd spare them both the aggravation and put them away early, like maybe even the 26th. At the top rung, he steadied himself before lifting the box off the shelf. It was warped from water damage and exuded a musty, dirty sock smell. Werner squinted against the glare of the bare lightbulb overhead and thought he could see dark spots of black mould along the edges. He turned his face away and breathed through his mouth, slowly descending the ladder. The sides of the box buckled, and he watched helplessly as its contents spilled out through flaps that hadn't been properly taped.

Bright spheres of blue, green, and red glass fell from the box, shattering into jagged slivers that spread out over the garage floor. After the Christmas balls came a deluge of homemade ornaments made of popsicle sticks, paper plates, and glitter—the faded and torn mementoes of Christmases past. The festive glass shards would prove impossible to vacuum up completely, remaining embedded in the rough carpet where they would haunt the couple for months to come, stabbing any unprotected feet that walked past.

Werner looked down at the pile at the foot of the ladder and swore, hissing the words out and feeling spittle fall onto his chin. He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his bathrobe and lost his balance. He let out a muffled gasp as his foot slipped off the rung, sending him down the ladder into the pile of Christmas trash. Werner swore again, shaken by the sudden descent.

The Christmas Box by Daniel Crépault

“Are you OK?” Beverley called out. The creaking hardwood floor presaged her coming. Werner tried to sit up but found that his body wouldn’t obey him, and the effort sent a bolt of pain through his lower back. The door swung open, and Beverley’s head appeared from behind it.

“Werner!” she said, eyes widening. She ran down the steps and stooped beside him. “What happened?”

“I fell,” he said through gritted teeth. “Damned slippers.”

“I told you not to wear those!”

“I know, I know, dammit! Help me up, Bev.”

She grasped his hands with hers and hoisted him upright with considerable effort. “I told you to be careful!”

Beverley’s eyes turned to the pile of decorations beneath him, and she fell silent. She picked up two small wooden snowmen with twig arms.

“You and the boys made these.”

Werner sighed. “Yeah.”

He looked at his wife and saw her eyes fill with tears. He felt a sudden urge to run, make some excuse, invent a reason to be elsewhere. Beverley slumped down on the steps and buried her face in her hands. The sight made Werner’s stomach tighten, and he braced himself against the ladder, stepping over the pile on the floor.

“Hey, it’s going to be OK,” he said, taking her into his arms, trying to keep his voice steady and convincing.

“I just miss them so much.”

“I know. But we’ll be OK. We can make new memories.”

They hugged for several moments before she turned to look again at the pile on the floor. “We can’t do what we used to do anymore,” she said.

“You’re telling me,” Werner said, grimacing in exaggerated agony and clutching his lower back.

Beverley laughed and smiled up at him. It had been so long since he’d heard her laugh, a high-pitched giggle that bubbled out of nowhere. Hearing it now surprised him. He’d missed that sound. It reminded him of the girl she was, the beautiful nerd who read Isaac Asimov and smoked Gauloise cigarettes. She was still there, underneath the laugh lines and silver hair, but he’d forgotten.

“What do we do now?” she asked, wiping her wet cheek.

Werner looked down at the brightly coloured memories strewn across the floor and tightened his bathrobe.

“Let’s clean up this mess and decorate the tree. The kids aren’t here, but we can make some new traditions.

Something with alcohol, maybe.”

She laughed again.

“Then maybe we can give the kids a call. We can find out how they like their new school.”⁴⁰

The Christmas Box by Daniel Crépault

“I’d like that,” she said, smiling, and pointed to the pile at his feet. “But you’re on your own with this. I’m going inside.”

“Right, sorry I didn’t get this stuff out when you asked. I’ll do better next time,” Werner called after her.

“I know,” Beverley said, closing the door behind her.

He watched her go, then smiled as he stooped down and reached for a handful of memories.





The Truth About Winter Break

by Anthony Brown

After I'd yearned for a break after the tumultuous fall semester—the timing was finally here. I didn't have classes five days a week anymore and I didn't have to continue working three jobs amidst the academic chaos. The start of winter brought quite a strange aura—everybody was gone. All my friends had gone back to their hometowns, my classes had finally stopped, and I didn't have much to do. Additionally, I turned 21 on the 17th of December—timing that'd just never felt right to me. After months of constantly checking Google Calendar for assignments to turn in—the calendar remained empty for most of the month. It's strange that the weather patterns a juxtaposition of a mirror—the result is not what you wanted. Although the frigid cold brought quite a haze of snow and ice mixed together on the roads with cyclical salt trucks—the warm 50-degree temperature quickly melted it away. Winter break for me is defined as the wheel of fortune—you never know what you're going to get. This is also unique in the fact that I landed a grant/technical writing co-op that aligns with my future career goals. I'm also getting paid the highest amount of money I've ever made in my life. I get to have the most financial freedom I've ever faced in my life—but at what cost?

Though I don't have assignments, I still have to report to work almost full-time—which is stressful in itself. I've learned to take more appreciation of the environment around me—despite winter being quite a confusing mess of its own. In Ohio, at least, it's been 55 degrees with the sun omitting the warmth on my skin producing sweat like it'd been summer, then a few days later—the snow would pack the ground with icy slopes that my shoes struggled to conform with. I'd like to say that the Ohio weather in the winter is a perfect representation of my personality—one day I feel jolly, silly, and warm—the other I lose all sense of what it's like to be a normal human being. At the very least, I can appreciate the fact that I no longer have to cut my hair short to “be a man”. Instead, I continue to grow my hair to the longest it's ever been—and it helps when the weather outside replicates my town with no cheer. Oftentimes, I use my hair as the weapon against the very weather trying to take all of us down—or confuse us with the patterns it tries to instill. Winter is the perfect time to get all your thoughts and feelings out—to express yourself without the pressures of the outside world.

During the fall, I felt many daggers pierce my skin—working in a multitude of ways to set myself up for success during a time in the job market where you need to be the best of the best to stay on top. When winter break hit—I lost a lot of my sense of what it meant to be human. At the very least, I get to take very long walks by myself and to have as much reflection time as I need. I smiled towards the air hitting me in my face—and the air smiled back at me by giving the environment a nice dosage of snow on the trees, cold temperatures that made me snuggle with the 5 blankets I went to sleep with, and the time to finally delve into my dictionary and to write. I love writing—and winter brings the poet out in me.

The Truth About Winter Break

by Anthony Brown

At the very least, I try to reflect on what it means to be human—and being human is as messy as Ohio is with its weather. Winter brings a solstice of summer weather that's quickly eradicated with ice on my front-porch being melted just two days later. Winter also makes me recognize all that I've done in the past few months—to yearn for the times I've genuinely enjoyed.

All those parties I went to with my buddies back on-campus—the times we spent together on weekends—I look back and regret not participating as much as I should have. I recognized these thoughts while I was walking on the trail in 40-degree weather. I wore my black jacket and pair of Ray-Banz sunglasses—letting my hair loose as the surrounding environment enhanced my relaxation. I'd done so much for myself this semester—but I didn't take enough time to fully enjoy what I had. The good thing about it is that I still had plenty of time before I graduate. You don't grow as a person without having some earnest reflections about the time you just had—there's always time to improve yourself and the experiences you set up for yourself. The wind had blinded the senses on my rosy, red cheeks when I realized this. Looking out into the creeks—I'd grown a love for wanting to appreciate the people around me more.

I feel that my wishes are ruined by the expectations I set for myself during winter break. After all, Ohio doesn't really have a December—as it feels like the temperature and weather replicates a mixture of spring, summer, and fall all into one classification of juxtaposed confusion. It felt off knowing that a few days ago my car struggled on the non-plowed roads of ice/snow amidst traffic that'd been horrible—then the ice completely disappearing just two days later. I like to think of December of being the typical fraternity cup in the middle of the cup set—one that mixes all the “joys” of the month into one cup, and I have to be the one to drink it. Red solo plastic cups certainly send the message. Oh well, at least I get to have my Webster's unabridged dictionary open in front of me while I find the words to communicate what I want to say in my poetry—something I couldn't do when the semester was raining hail upon all my wishes.

Warmth is defined as the five blankets I'm currently laying on—don't even get me started with the amount of pillows I have on my bed. I'm put in a headlock looking outside of the windows not knowing what to expect with the weather—which can be fun. I've met a lot of incredible people in the past few months, and I've grown such appreciation for all that I have. The front-porch light illuminates a computer screen full of words that I haven't familiarized myself with—a direct opposition of the amount of work I faced the past few months. Everything must pass eventually, even the pockets of white that riddle the streets with a mixture of ice and snow—even the shuffle of them whilst I drive around the countryside and city in one day. I love how confusing the weather can be—it forefronts what it means to be a human and to have your thoughts be perplexing, messy, incohesive, yet honestly earnest thoughts that'll inevitably create the environment around you moving into the new year.





Halfway to Huron by Nancy Hastings

The land changed hands
as the terrain deepened with wear and tear,
and an afternoon poem began to speak
as if this were a place I could have lived
out my life, and never looked back.

The James River takes its time
in its glacial stroll between steep ravines,
as if saving the best for last.

Like a sober friend, the sun is in on this
bending of evening light to beauty.

I must go back one more time
to the James River and walk the bluff beside it,
take in its winding course through prairie.

It quiets the wild river in me.





Winter Storm Warning by Nancy Hastings

The cold months have come in
like a woolly mammoth from the north,
where wind lives. Cold air burns
as you tend livestock, shatter ice
in a stock tank with a pick.
You pound an opening for cows,
birds, and coyotes on the move.
Maple leaves are held in place
against a stubborn wind.
Winter clothes huddle together
in the mud room, dread what's coming.
A lowly woolly caterpillar predicted this.





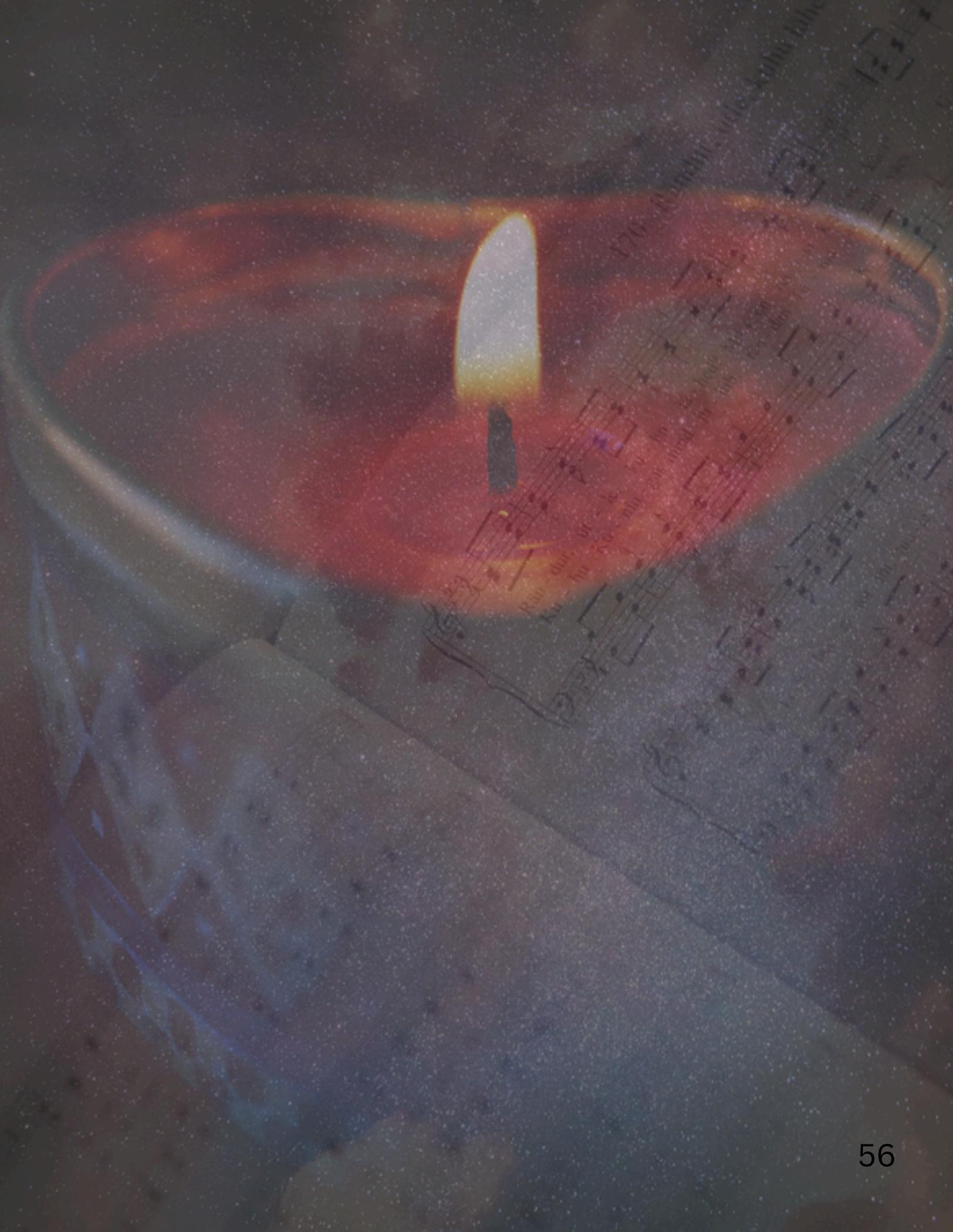
Warm the Cold by Traci Neal

One holiday gift is so heartfelt for any wintery chills to simmer from its fire. Comfort is a cover beside a cozy flame flickering on a snowy day. Sweeter than a cherry pie baking in the oven or sugar cookies soaking the tongue's taste buds. Seen by seasonal lights. They shimmer through the busy streets. A starry sky stays for a song. Draw souls into their show. Hot cocoa, even nutmeg, steams out happiness for the air to make mini clouds.

The moment is right for the world to give this gift again.

Warm the cold with love.





A Winter Wonderland by Traci Neal

B E

K I N D

Wind wanders among coolness.
Footprints pack down the snow.
Children bring chimes of smiles.
The universe feels like a prize
when people want to be peaceful.
Tingly toes touch festive socks.
Play inside icicle playlands.
Hugs can melt the frozen.
Kindness keeps heat in the heart.





12.18 Field Observations at Schmidts Woods, NJ

by Sarah Voight

5 red headed woodpeckers, looking for bugs.

20 orange pumpkins, leftover from fall festivities (now a squirrel buffet).

1 yellow hat, child sized, lost playing in the snow.

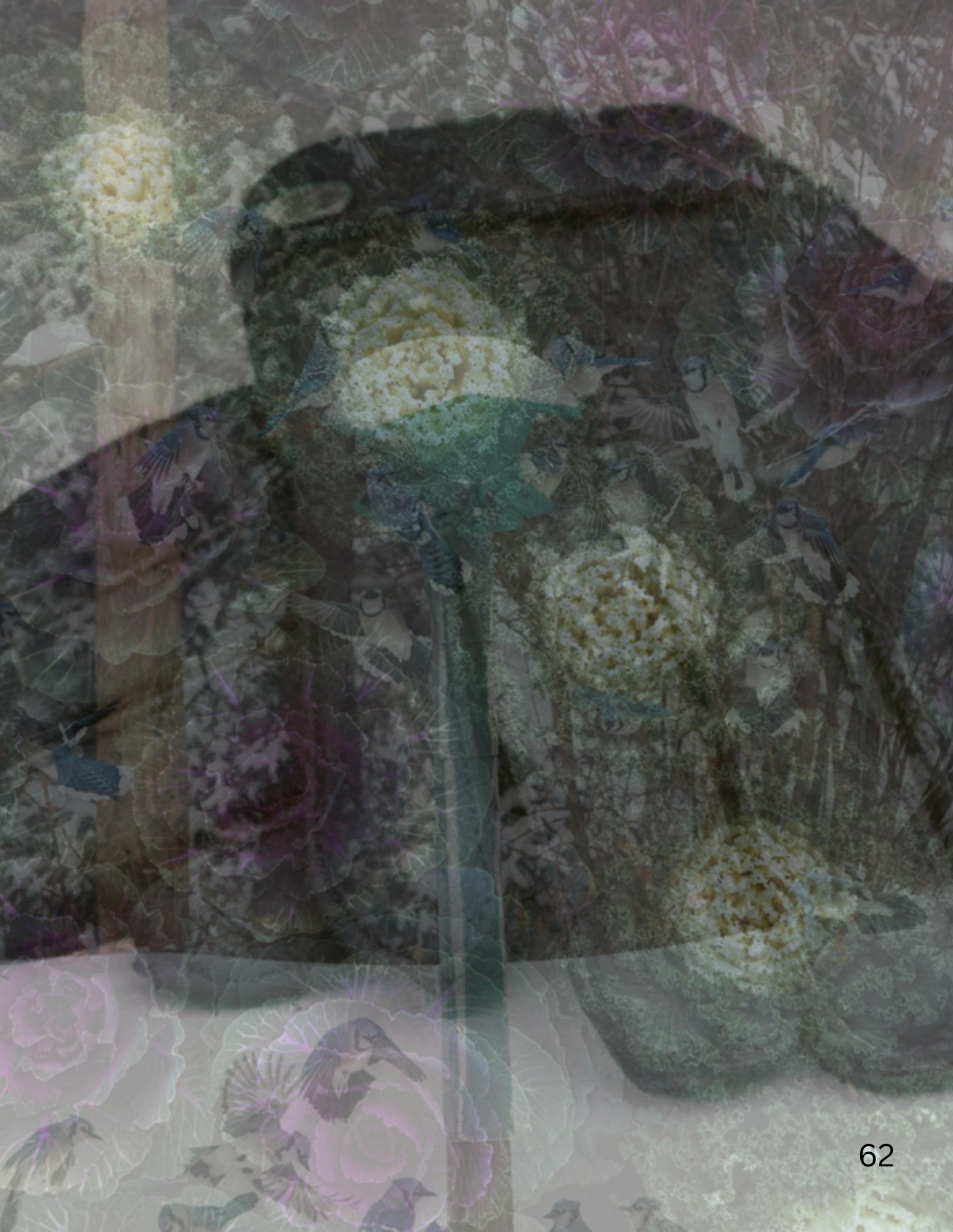
13 green pine trees.

7 blue jays, singing loudly.

2 indigo gloves, warming my hands.

6 violet cabbages, planted by the road.





Squirrel Tracks by Sarah Voight

I press my finger into the squirrel prints,
The snow is cold.
We hold the earth together for a brief moment.

I track her through the icy path,
There's twisted trees and chickadees flittering.

An owl looms above us,
They're looking for lunch.
It's winter, we all need to eat.

There's a flash of red in the brush,
Could it be the owl's aftermath?
No, just a cardinal.

The sun is sinking on the horizon,
It will be dark shortly.
I need to find where this squirrel is hiding,
Soon.

I follow the little hands and find-
An abandoned pumpkin patch!
Discarded from fall's festivities.
There she is face deep in the seeds.

It's winter, we all need to eat.





A Christmas carol with mom by Juniper Gutierrez

staying with nana is fine, but
as christmas grows closer
i miss mom, but
she knows just what to do.

every night, we talk
on my little flip phone.
as the holidays hover near,
she reads to me
a christmas carol.

i can't hear the dyslexia
or the general disdain
for reading aloud
in mom's voice.

instead, her voice brings
phantom scents of
pine from the plastic tree,
burning wood from
the empty fireplace,
baking sugar cookies
from the cold oven.

as marley shakes his chains,
as scrooge learns
the true meaning of christmas,
i can't wait for mine
with my mamasita.





© cadence

Sleeping Hamlet by Keith W. Norris

From high on a hill in the cemetery
On a frosty December night
The stars and full moon gather
With Jupiter and Venus as guest stars.
The light shines on the century old tombstones
Exposing the algae-covered names and dates
I spot a headstone with a name that graces
The main thoroughfare in the city
A name lost in time and dead, uncut weeds.
Thomas Gray wrote in his "Elegy,"
"The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep."
No one else alive is here
At this hour, on this night.
From high on a hill among
The flickering Christmas lights below
I spot lighted yard decorations
Proclaiming "Joy to the World"
And "Peace on Earth."
I turn my engine and headlights off
And smile and exhale
Because I have found both.





Joy by Keith W. Norris

To my ex-wife, Joy Wright

They bake cookies
With her name on them
All the stores
Happily display her name
In big, bright red letters
They wrap presents in paper
Covered in her name
They decorate their trees
With ornaments with her name
She will tell you that Christmas
Is not about her
But when you tell her
That she has the prettiest name
She will simply say,
“I know.”





At Night by Michael Eyre

At night,
I need to be held
like a child.

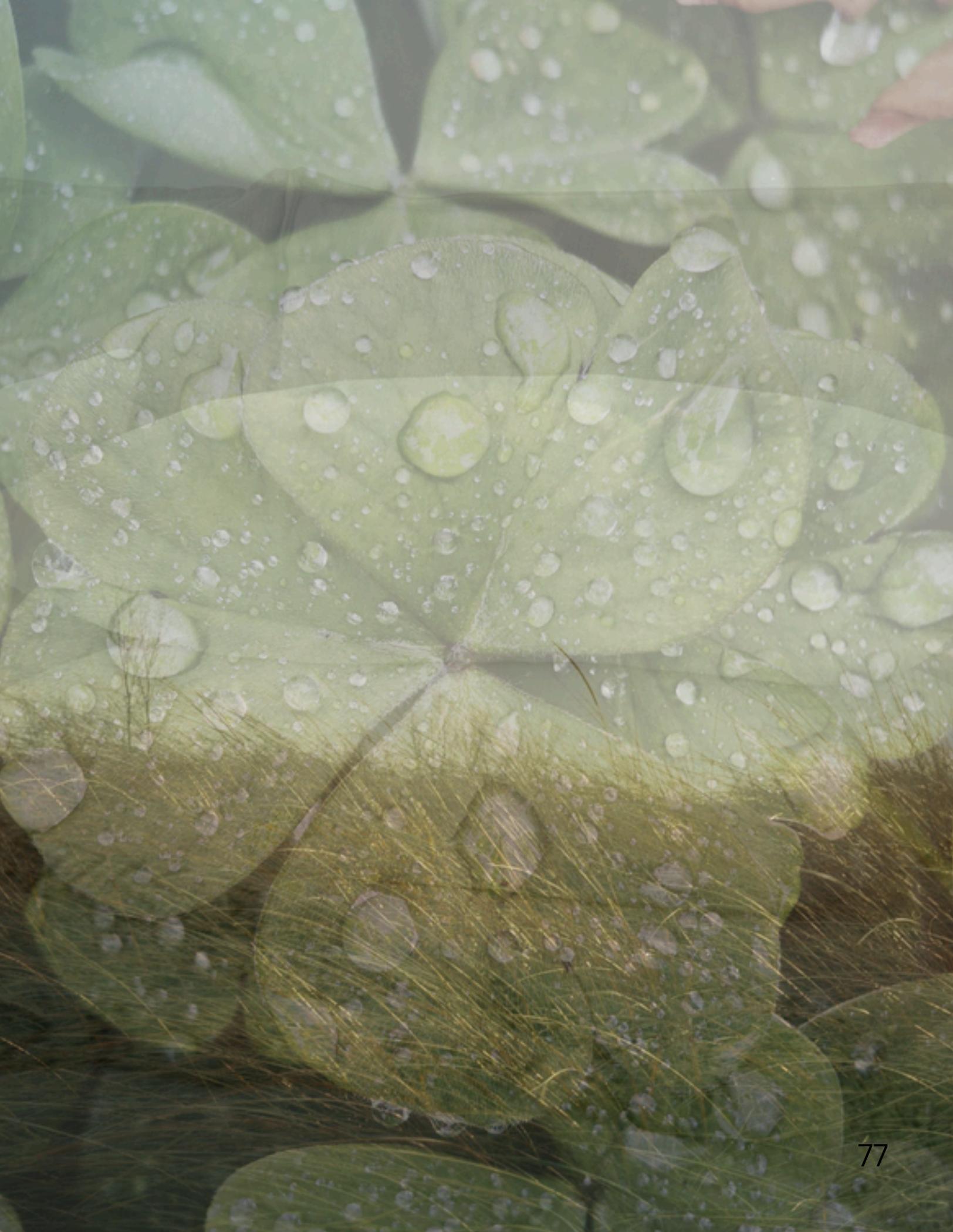
To rest my weary head
on your soothing breast,
catch the soft thrum
of your heart's lub-dub,
and float upon the tide
of your slow breath.

At night,
I need to be held
like a child.

To feel your fingertips
twirl my tangled curls,
stroke the curve of my ear
as gently as the breeze,
and wander down my nape
like raindrops on leaves.

As day breaks,
lit by your smile,
the grown-up returns;
reborn, redeemed.
The child hibernates
for another day.





Layers by Michael Eyre

The Decorator steams the walls,
and strips away tired old paper,
revealing layers of the past,
with each swift stroke of her scraper.

Shards strewn as shrouds upon the floor,
ghost-like remains from long ago:
a witness to those who lived there,
whose stories she will never know.

The shifting tastes of passing years,
height ladders up the wall,
scraps of old yellow newspapers,
a naughty youngster's scrawl.

She fills in all the dints and cracks
as perfect preparation's key.
It's the backdrop to her best life -
these walls must all be blemish free.

Then paint applied of brightest hue:
expel those demons of decay.
Far cry from childhood memories
of woodchip walls all dreary grey.

Now it's time for the big reveal:
the reincarnation.
A new story layered on by
the next generation.



niedrigschwellig
geausbildung
auch Hauptschule

zusammengefasst
Auch die Belastung durch
arbeit in der praktischen
spürbar
desvertretung hat aber
schen intensivpflege
beim Zukunftstag ALTEN

Ausdnung zu verschwinden
hörigen bei sich zu
men und selbst zu pflegen, wer
dafür Geld bekämen
ost Frank Michalak



Embers of Hope by Michael Eyre

I adore Christmas.

The bright tingle of anticipation;
the feasting, the family, the gifts,
the old stories of wise men and angels.

A season steeped in expectation;
wonder, fellowship, hope.

But Christmas is a fleeting dayflower.
All too soon, reality returns;
ruthless, unequal, stark.

The goodwill melts
and its joyous bloom shrivels
like crumpled wrapping paper.

And yet the embers of hope linger on,
packed away in life's attic
waiting to be rekindled.





Survival by Howard Osborne

There is so much at risk of not surviving
Habits, sayings, even friendships or love
And yet the arguments for preservation
Forgotten detail ending up as a variation
New definitions can never fit like a glove
But for answers, it is ever worth striving.

Even if it's captured as the written word
As voice recordings are of limited quality
Sometimes tainted by a poor translation
Then subjected to further interpretation
Mistakes can cause disrespect and jollity
And claims of accuracy become absurd





AUDIO LOGIC LASTER A2222

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I Will Still Be Here by Howard Osborne

I'm not sure you believed me when I said
That I will stay with you until you're dead
Although if a choice, it will be me instead
Yet should you ever go away, have no fear
As when you do return, I will still be here
A promise that I will keep

Always close to you, even if you've blinked
Our souls are somehow permanently linked
The bond we have together is quite distinct
Perhaps something magical it would appear
Whenever you look back, I will still be here
Nothing we have is cheap

When the time comes, and it's near the end
On my being by your side, you can depend
As when left all alone, a message I will send
It is really me, my love, and I do say it clear
You'll never be left alone, I will still be here
Smile for me, never weep





Thanks to the Contributors!

Simon Collinson:

*Christmas Peel, December 26th
, A Seasonal Story*

Simon is a writer from England. He seeks stillness, solitude, shade and shadow. His X handle is @simon_coll87859.



Frank William Finney:

December in the Doldrums

Frank William Finney taught literature in Thailand for 25 years. He is the author of the collections *Birds in a Boneyard* (Bainbridge Island Press, 2025), *The Folding of the Wings* (FLP Books, 2022), and two collections published in Thailand. His poems have appeared widely in international journals including *Blood + Honey*, *Dark Winter Literary Magazine*, *Four Tulips*, and *Novus Literary Arts Journal*. He lives in Massachusetts.

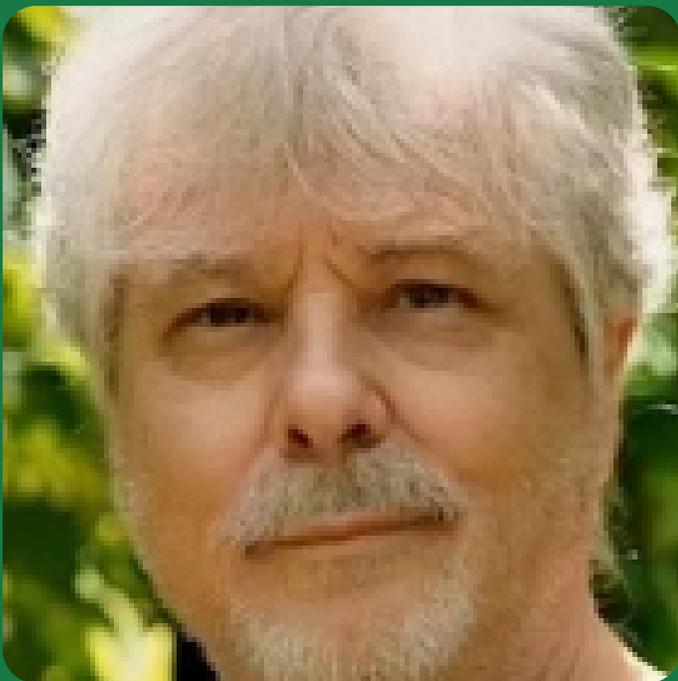
Bluesky: @frankwfinney.bsky.social

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/fwfinney/>

Threads: <https://www.threads.com/@fwfinney>

<https://www.pinterest.com/frankwilliamfinney/>

<https://www.facebook.com/FrankWilliamFinney/>



Thanks to the Contributors!

Karina Ten:

Just For a Moment, Christmas

Karina Ten (she/her) is a queer and neurodivergent poet from Kazakhstan, currently in her fifth year of medicine in Milan, Italy. Drawing from personal experience, her poems explore themes of mental health, grief, and belonging. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in Maudlin House, Call Me [Brackets], and Mouthful of Salt. Karina aspires to become a mental health professional in the future.



Paul McAllister:

The Recovery

Paul McAllister was born in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland, but he has lived and worked in many places since then. He currently resides in Singapore. His fiction has appeared in the *Honest Ulsterman*, the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Bindweed Anthologies: Winter Wonderland* and he blogs regularly at www.bloodandporridge.co.uk/wp/.



Thanks to the Contributors!

Maria Rosen:

Brighton Beach Daydreams

Maria's poems, short stories, and essays have appeared in newspapers and magazines, including the Beyond Words Anthology. She has received writing awards, including the L Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest and the 24-Hour Writing Contest, along with a competitive mentorship in the Gordon Square Review. Her poems, short stories and essays have appeared in Beyond Words Anthology, Gordon Square



Daniel Crépault:

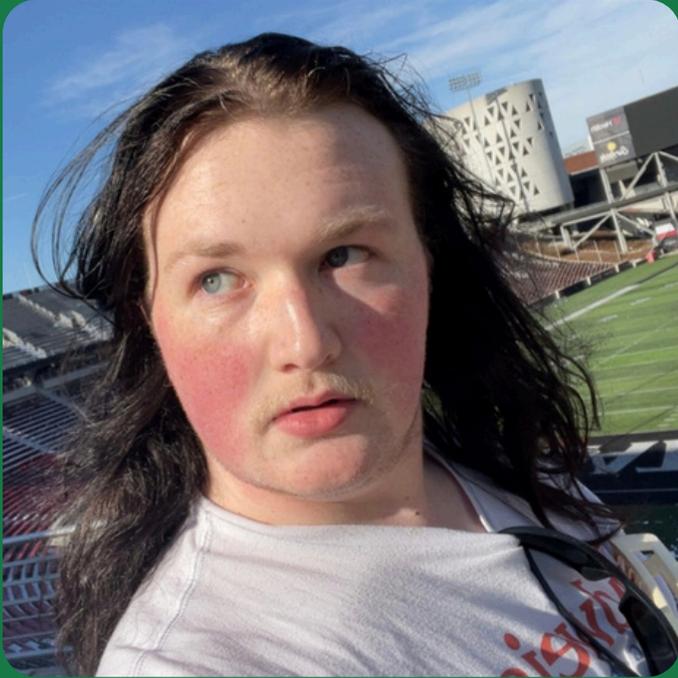
The Christmas Box

Daniel Crépault is a criminologist, addiction treatment provider, and emerging fiction writer. He lives in Embrun, Ontario, with his wife and two beautiful sons.



Thanks to the Contributors!

Anthony Brown:



The Truth About Winter Break

Anthony Brown is a fourth-year student at the University of Cincinnati studying Creative Writing & English Education with a minor in Marketing and three certificates in Copyediting & Publishing, Professional Writing and Literary Journalism. As a gothic and horror writer, he writes tons of poetry, non-fiction, and memoir drafts in his free time. Anthony's work has been published under Short Vine Journal, Fellowship of the Unmoored, Wingless Dreamer, and The Persimmon Review. He is forthcoming under Prism Undergraduate Journal, Queen City Writers, and Hog Creek Hardin.

Nancy Hastings:

Halfway to Huron, Winter Storm Warning



Nancy Hastings' work has appeared in Poetry (Chicago), Commonwealth, Prairie Schooner, Puerto del Sol, The New Land Review, The Connecticut River Review, Poet Lore, Plainsongs, and many other literary publications over the years. She twice received the Leonard Randolph Small Press Award for Whole Notes, a small poetry magazine she founded and edited for fourteen years.

Thanks to the Contributors!

Traci Neal:

Warm the Cold, A Winter Wonderland



Traci Neal is a neurodivergent poet residing in Columbia, South Carolina. Neal has had many poems published in 2025. Topics range from suicide prevention, violence against women, neurodivergence, and acts of service, to name a few. Neal uses poetry as a tool for advocacy and awareness worldwide.

Sarah Voight:

12.18 Field Observations at Schmidts Woods, NJ, Squirrel Tracks



Sarah Voight is a poet who channels nature, ritual, and transformation into her work. She thrives on tension and liminality. Her poetry creates a world where divinity gets caught in your hair and stuck in your teeth. When she isn't writing, she works for her local library and at an environmental non-profit advocating for environmental justice. Her blog can be found here:

<https://thismagicallife.org/>.

Thanks to the Contributors!

Juniper Gutierrez:

A Christmas carol with mom



Juniper Gutierrez is an emerging poet whose work will soon be debuting in Poetry as Promised magazine. Their work focuses mainly on love, loss, the mundane, and their own experiences. Their passion for creative writing started in childhood, and has grown with them.

They hope to use their experiences to inform writing that makes people feel. Her social media is junipero_gin on Instagram.

Keith W. Norris:

Sleeping Hamlet, Joy



Keith W. Norris is an insurance claims professional by day, and a poet and author by night. He is a graduate of Western Kentucky University and attended the Naslund-Mann School of Writing at Spalding University. He is on the autism spectrum and frequently writes about that issue. He lives in Moraine, Ohio.

Thanks to the Contributors!

Michael Eyre:

At Night, Layers, Embers of Hope



Keith W. Norris is an insurance claims professional by day, and a poet and author by night. He is a graduate of Western Kentucky University and attended the Naslund-Mann School of Writing at Spalding University. He is on the autism spectrum and frequently writes about that issue. He lives in Moraine, Ohio.

Howard Osborne:

Survival, I Will Still Be Here



Howard has written poetry and short stories, also a novel and several scripts.

With poems published online and in print, he is a published author of a non-fiction reference book and several scientific papers many years ago.

He is a UK citizen, retired, with interests in writing, music and travel.

Final Note From Still Here:

As we close out this issue and step into a new year, I want to take a moment to thank you. Truly. The support, trust and generosity this community has shown *Still Here* over the past several months has meant more to me than I can put into words. What began as an idea has grown into something real because of the writers, artists and readers who continue to show up.

I hope the coming year brings you rest where you need it, courage where you hesitate, and progress toward the goals you hold close. I'm deeply proud of what we've created together so far, and even more excited for what lies ahead as we continue to build, grow and take up space in our own ways.

If there's one thing I've learned this year, it's that staying – with the work, with the feeling, with ourselves – matters more than perfection ever will.

Here's to another year of *Still Here*.

