

ISSUE II | JUL. 2026

SPONTANEITY

& ASH

AMPERSAND QUARTERLY

PRESENTING *SPONTANEITY & ASH*

Within the curling tendrils of the sun, hydrogen cations fuse to form helium, releasing a storm of energy that fuels our star for millennia. At *Ampersand Quarterly*, we believe that the fusion of the written word has equal potential in fueling human innovation. *Ampersand* was founded to unearth the the tender navigations within the fabric of the world, and the liminalities present in the in-between. Coming into the second issue, we are excited to present more literature produced by various talented writers and artists.

"every atom on earth
has arced through time and space

to culminate in this, the unlikely event
of your specific and particular existence,

even ever so briefly, one chance
to live your singular, careening life."

Rae McMinn's "Singular" ends with a portrayal of life as the intersection between luck and the cosmos. Like this piece, *Ampersand*'s Issue II is an ode to fortune, ephemerality, and the obtuse.

In "Moonshine," John Pier captures the spark of social connection and Abby Houston's "Wilt" points at the fleetingness of our bodies by painting the human body as a flower. While

reading these stories, we find ourselves imagining our days spent alone in rainy parking lots, or in a bustling market with an elder, or amidst memories that mix jubilation, sadness, regret, and delusion, and grapple with the fact that our time on Earth is finite.

"I would lift the sun
and drop it into your mojito
if you told me
to surprise you—"

Issue II journeys paints spontaneity as quickened heartbeats and wide-open eyes. In "THIS IS A TEST OF THE EMERGENCY BROADCAST SYSTEM," Alexandra Ledford begins with the traditional script of a drill and soon evolves the story into a critique of human fear and an exploration of the disturbing and unnatural. Greg Lehman's "Love, Poetry," on the other hand, captures the ups and downs of romance, admiration, and attachment both with its form and lyricism.

From fragmented explosions in Quentin Lobenstine's photography, to the never-ending loops of Adda Farcus' "Crow Call," the creation of Issue 2 throughout the past months has endowed us, editors, with a wonderful opportunity to re-approach our relation with the unplanned and

fleeting moments of life. We are awed at the novel theme interpretations from a diverse group of writers and encourage you, the reader, to dwell on each word as if it is alive, working in symbiosis with sentences and punctuation to construct this ashen and neon world waiting for your inhabitance.

We are proud to present *Spontaneity & Ash*, the sequel to *Bubble & Fancy*.

—EICs

CONTENTS

Stacy R. Nigliazzo	3	Untitled	Kimberly Gibson-Tran	14	Game of Thrones in the Year of the Fire Horse
Rae McMinn	4	Singular	Ashley Mangtani	15-20	Daylight
Rae McMinn	4	The Next World	Alexandra Legford	21	Birch Forest
Allison Riechman-Bennett	5-6	Wilt	Alexandra Legford	22	This is a Test of the Emergency Broadcast System
Kimberly Gibson-Tran	7	The Moon Got a Massive New Crater			
Frank Miele	7	Afterwards			
Greg Lehman	8-9	Love, Poetry			
B.R Dionysius	10	Canary Island Black Bees			
Mart Fisher	10	Bugbear Green			
Adda Farcus	11	Crow Call			
Louis Bourgeois	12	Water			
Greg Lehman	13	Sideliners			
Brooke Johnpier	13	Moonshine			
Quentin Lobenstine	14	Explosion #5			



Explosion #5

Quentin Lobenstine

blackberry thorn

scissored

sky

front porch

light

rustling pitch pine

flower beetle

in the crawl space

blood

moon

I

wear

you

like

a

glove

ghost

in

the

funhouse

mirror

my eyes

fly

into flame

UNTITLED

STACY R. NIGLIAZZO

RAE MCMINN

SINGULAR

You ask me
and I adore to say yes to you,

so we are floating the river again,
the last time we did this tucked in our pockets

like a worry stone, the time you got a call
on the drive home that lasted two weeks and ended

with metaplastic cancer, a door
slamming shut.

You ask me
if I hear voices chanting in the canyon.

You say
you feel like a visitor.

You say
you are excited to see what's on the other side.

You are talking about the river
but all I hear is the soft opening of doors.

We approach a colony of cliff swallows
building nests like round anemones

in the orderly stems of columnar basalt.
They swoop low across the water

to nab the good dark mud on the far shore.

On return, they veer so high and fast and free, it's reckless.

I'd been talking about reincarnation.
I can't say if it was for your benefit or mine.

We are quiet as a hundred birds undulate around us.

You break the silence to say it comforts you
to believe that your soul will die with your body,

because it follows then, that every atom on earth
has arced through time and space

to culminate in this, the unlikely event
of your specific and particular existence,

even ever so briefly, one chance
to live your singular, careening life.

THE NEXT WORLD

After we managed to do ourselves in
and our city was reborn as a coral reef,
towers of jade and moss
brimming with emergent life,

as the planet folded in our ruins
like egg whites and that old orange sun
rose over Wy'east, new voices
swelling to greet the light

—can you see it?—
the world was so beautiful
it would've made you cry.

RAE MCMINN

ALLISON RIECHMAN-BENNET

WILT

1

I always wonder how the wildflowers
under the highway don't
snap when the semi's wisp by and
crush when deer trample soft earth to imprint and
wilt when the rain floods in

April is a girl with curls
and narrow shoulders that still wrap in her pastry skin and
she tells me to come in from the mosquito heat and
escape the rain and she tells me that her parents would collect it in

Drums sit out by the dumpster and they've been torn for a while, unable to make sound but
they're pretty to look at when the sun finally peaks through, though not yet through to the drum's
host of dandelion greens and wild rhubarb, that in the dark and cursed downpour,

Shoot that faggot
by Sunday evening, and
before the sailor skies come out and don't
snap the twigs through the brush in the wooded pasture beneath the highway or
crush the black walnuts so their maggots and rot stain up your white white shoes and
wilt a flower on his grave so if so if someone wondering stumbles upon it, they will know that the
person cared enough to spit on

His name escapes me, though his narrow shoulders always gave him away and
I've found a wilted flower now.

2

A gentle cancer wrapped my aunt the way
a frost envelops the last green tomato and hibernates
the last aster before it fully blooms next to my
butter lettuce and marigolds that blazes fire
and shakes the cold. The frost didn't catch nobody.

Wake to hear the cancer speaking, hushed.
EMT's softly clattering and trampling the carpet
when the cold floods in and they would wrap their broad shoulders in a blanket
and dream of drip bags,

and racing through the wild overgrowth,
which frames the door,
the stretcher had to be shimied out of.
With whom did they expect to dream of drip bags with,
on a cold New Year's Eve?

ALLISON RIECHMAN-BENNETT

3

And wasn't it time for the foliage and the sweet dark winter greens to go anyway?

Wasn't the wilt due any second and wasn't my bringing them in pots in the warm inside, wasn't that, delaying the inevitable?

Cutting the roots, wiring tails that attached to the earth's flank, wasn't that the wrong thing to do, considering the roots were rotten too?

Couldn't I have been here before? I've seen you here, I swear, and
didn't the rain stop that day,

didn't I right that wrong,
did I not write that wrong?

Did I not wipe and wrung the towel left in the back of my car, catching rainwater from bunches
of flowers I took home from the graveyard that had been rotted for months?

How could I ever forget?

I won't believe you that I did and that you've told me I'm living because the last time I saw a
living flower was the winter green,

Was the canola blooming on the rolling wheat hills that bosomed from the earth
and fed by volcano ash grow from
healthy roots.

KIMBERLY GIBSON-TRAN

THE MOON GOT A MASSIVE NEW CRATER

two years ago, though we just found
out. A bright blanket of ejecta, layers
of post-blast planet dust surround
the 225-meter radius. What else
did we miss, worrying at terranean
events? So many hits this celestial
goddess has and will have taken
by the time we set up base. Let's face
it, only a few of us will get to leave
an imprint. Each morning I trace
the strangled bits of bark that reach
like dark hands from the manmade lake.
The April rains left only fingertips.
Last year some kayaking mistake
drowned one of my neighbors. His
name escapes me, but I heard he was
a firefighter. The world takes turns.
Texas bluebells shake their antebellum
ruffles in the wind. If the moon weren't
still, maybe we'd have seen the hole
of it sooner. The last leg of my commute's
over the long bridge. I'm almost home.
The lapping laser of moonlight is mute,
its pulse of distant fire, shattered white.
Somewhere a new canyon, a lesser lesser light

AFTERWARDS

The concrete white sky dries & hardens, thick
with birds caught in mid-flight. We run for cover,
the nearest roof or mountain, uncertain
if the experience has fully jelled, or is still
spreading. Afternoon showers on the Greek Islands
were like this, sudden & unforgiving,
so we know the long silence as an old acquaintance.
But this is different. This is not romantic.
We know what we are supposed to do,
husband & wife, cowering, in a sharp-angled barn,
but terror is an isolate sport, not communal.
The blinding whiteness does not stop.
It passes through flesh and bone, through barn door
& stone. We celebrate with ashen faces all night long

FRANK MIELE

GREG LEHMAN

LOVE, *POETRY*

Vivifying, a chill in the wind
on sundown, short
of shiver-inducing with you, leaning
back, head
on my chest, between
my arms
and the book
I'm reading to you,
under a tree
I'd call ours,
except,
love,
love might
have to be hard,
or else
everything
would be perfect,
love, our hearts
might only be
so big,

or, that's all fear
ever says, repeats
at a whisper,
a cry,

I can't
know,

know the breeze
plays wonderfully
on the branches
and your curls,

which
I love,

keep reading, words
aren't everything, just
most,

smolder
in our poet, lines
at a low burn, rising,
stanzas surging, fuming
with, against, through the sun's
drawing in of the last hold
our star has on the day,
flaring through cirrus
in marigolds, tawny
undersides
curling
in,

grandeur of a type
that opens
your grin,

which I
also love,

and love when the poem
brings your eyes
up
locks on the locus
of hearing, then,
needing
more of a poem's
sidling

with the intangible's
slipstream,
upends
the space
between words,
pages, a poet and
two poets
under
a
tree,

and starts
to tremble
in my voice,
moves
in,
tightens, closes
my throat,
someone
once said about me
that I'm incapable
of love,

if you hear this
secondhand,
how far away
are you
keeping people?

Evening
arrives, the light
has to leave.

I breathe, lend
and find ease
in slowing cadence
in the dark,
finish the poem,
and we
lean into
the tree,
stay there until
I can't see you,
other trees,
the new moon
baring only
inexhaustible vastness,
perfect blackness absorbing
all visible wavelengths,
every distance
speckled with
scant exceptions, transcendence
as a few stars, effluvium
as brittle
and passing
as it is
brilliant, diving
at a spin,
graceless
or not, expanding
at speeds we cannot
make sense of,
the night
unfurling,
fathomless,
full.

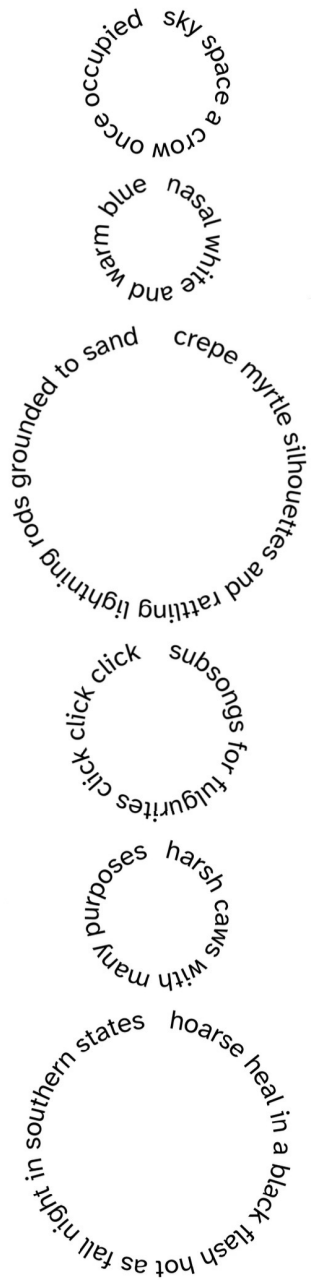
CANARY ISLAND BLACK BEES

The first hive was our coalmine canary.
Taken by surprise our vanguard had no
time to defend hearth nor home; so kept
up their chemical song until the final bee
was silenced; an orchestra playing a sinking
liner. A shower block, or an eternal tomb
for a Pharoah housing its locksmith. Fifty
thousand sacrifices for their volcano god.
That left five towers to prep for doomsday.
A signal was sent. A glue factory was built
in a few minutes. Our workers welded shut
our hexagonal doors & windows with insect
araldite, sealed sublevels with the oxy torches
of our laser tongues. The darkness descended
like a wasp's shadow. A pyroclastic Pompeiian
dolls house. We were buried alive for fifty days;
one body that vibrated on a litany frequency, as
gases tried to prise their way in. But our sealant
was stolid. The vapor kingdom fell to dust & so
we waited it out in our honey-combed bunkers.
We knew we'd won when the earth wiped away
its mourning ash from our white roof with its
imperious hand & the sun gathered in its ticking
light. Like a gold wristwatch a human raises up
to an eye to read its tiny black Roman numerals.

B. R DIONYSIUS

BUGBEAR GREEN

I would lift the sun
and drop it into your mojito
if you told me
to surprise you—
a small star fizzing in mint.
You paint me black,
an oversized horse
with tiger-red eyes—
I see you through
a moss veil,
green static trembling,
laughter sprinkling
over the octaves.
We live as bugbear-green creatures
in our cave,
carving stalactites,
painting mushrooms,
indifferent to
the flood below.
When we steal into moon
and watch the rocks breathe,
bindweed creeping
around our fish-rot feet,
we stand
until morning abandons us.



CROW CALL

Adda Farcus

LOUIS BOURGEOIS

WATER

My first memories are of water; of a lone fishing cabin at the end of a dilapidated wharf that juts off the rocky shore of Lake Ponchartrain that we would pass on the Old Five Mile Bridge and oftentimes an old man would stick his head out the window of the little cabin. He would puff long streams of smoke from his pipe and wave at passers-by; who was this man who spent all his time in this little wharf house and whose sole purpose in life was to smoke from his pipe and wave at the over water traffic?

My dad said he was The Croaker Man, that the old man of the bridge made his living by fishing for bronze backed croakers which he sold to the local fish markets, but for some reason I don't want to believe this. I want the old man to be nothing at all except like we saw him.

Sometimes as we crossed the Old Five Mile Bridge over Lake Ponchartrain it wasn't The Croaker man who caught my attention but the huge flocks of sea ducks flying down into the lake in huge spirals as thick as water tornados. These ducks were called dogres in Acadian French and they are called the Common Scaup in American English. They are impossible to eat unless you are hopelessly desperate. It's been said they taste like strong fish, like mullet or jackfish. My father would tell me stories of railroad bums

who bought dogres from little boys, two ducks for a quarter, and the bums would boil the dogres in old paint cans and somehow eat them. The dogres were shot by Negro poachers who hunted the ducks at night with homemade but powerful spotlights.

It was said that sometimes these Negro outlaws would slaughter as many as 1,000 ducks in one night; a group of twelve men shooting non-stop, each of them using an automatic .22 rifle.

I'm thirty-six years old today, but I'm still crossing the Old Five Mile Bridge across Lake Ponchartrain and am still watching The Croaker Man puffing on his pipe, it's all still there just as plain as day in my little child's mind. The dogres are still filling up the sky; they will die by the score at the hands of the Negro riflemen, and to think at this very moment in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge is attempting to revive the principle stages of the French Revolution just to see if it can be done in Southeast Asia, and America is still fighting a war it will never ever be able to win because no one has ever won a war with bombs, and Nixon is so very scared way down into the very meat in his bones, and somewhere in Tu Fu armless people are trying really hard to be positive, and faceless children are trying even harder to not die too quickly. This year, and this water, is all there will ever be; dogres, The Croaker

Man, and cripples seeking their un-self in blasted trees and in craters the size of football fields, a small child in the back seat is still taking it all in until he becomes whatever it is I am now and will be.

1973

GREG LEHMAN

SIDE-LINERS

Settle, fit in,
push nothing, make light
of American intervention
in 2026, be as snarky
as one can be
in impotence, think
Elon-bashing bumper stickers
on Cybertrucks starting under \$80k,
stay smitten for the indulgence
you find interesting over,
and over, and over,
and never
feels over soon enough
at a reading, let perspective
stay fuzzy, non-sequitur
while Palestine burns,
as ICE prevails,
and Los Angeles
stands on earth forever Tongva, yes,
yes, meet the eyes of the colonist in the mirror,
hold them, keep looking, find the certainty
that there is no love without conflict,
no love not worth giving, be mean
only when it makes it mean more,
ask if there's anything, anyone
that you like at all, obsess,
lose your fucking mind
on this question, leap
in indomitable doubt,
love more, know

that everyone
who hates poetry
loves the poets who don't care
about who could use more poetry, could grow
with more poetry, could love poetry if poetry opened,
sprinted, smoldered, danced well, danced badly, got to
kick
through more doors and plunge on, gorging, questing
in the infallible complexity that shows
every appearance was once, is
still, will always be beneath
another, and has to,
will show
another
very soon.

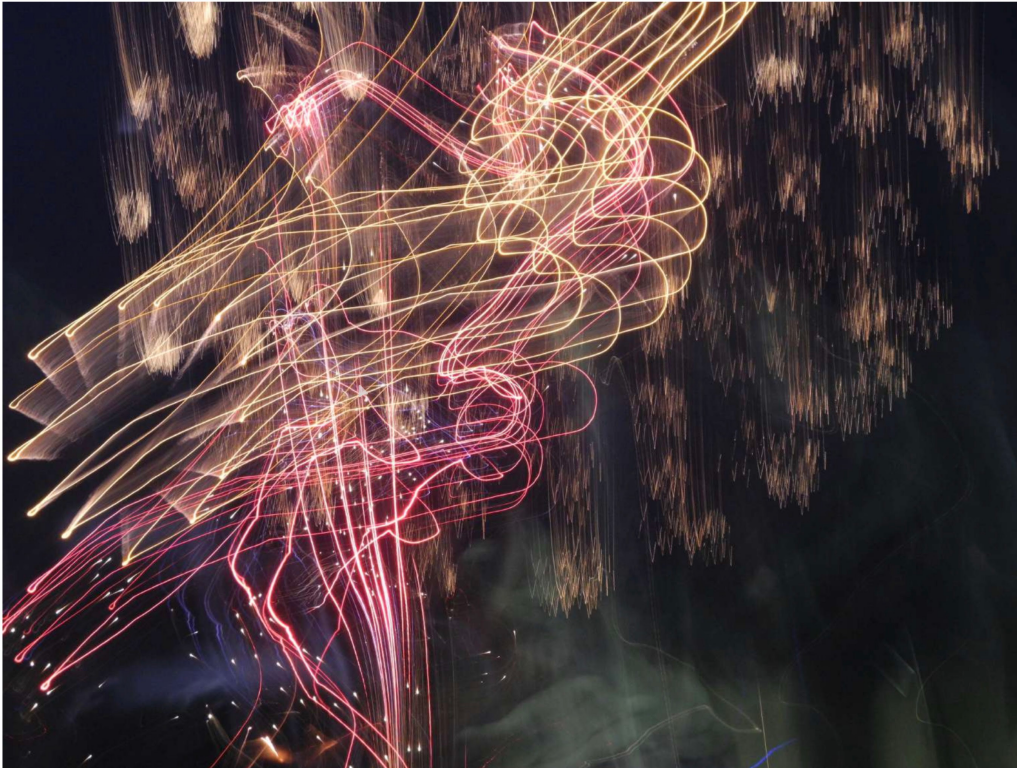
MOONSHINE

Nobody knows each other. Males outrank females ten-fold. But they all
have two commonalities of which they share: a love of dirt track racing and
moonshine.

Someone has a jar of shine they take a swig from. They pass it on.
"Hey, man," a guy says. "Where'd you get this? This tastes great."
The girl on the outskirts of the circle points. "Right there," she says.
They begin talking.

BROOKE JOHNPIER

GAME OF THRONES IN THE YEAR OF THE FIRE HORSE



Explosion #5

Quentin Lobenstine

Let me spoil the ending. It was all there
to begin with—the flames, dragon eggs,
the dress scales, icy eyes of the dead.
There's another force everyone's aware of
but doesn't wrestle with, except maybe
the red-haired woman who's made
mistakes with blood. All have
sacrificed. All have been pawned.
I can't get enough of horses this rewatch—
burning, maimed or otherwise, no less
amazing than computer-made fantasy
beasts. They are works of art.
This year is the third cycle since my start,
a curiosity of placemats reminds me.
Even in my religion, the repeat of three
is supposed to mean completion. Another
millennium, someone will stumble
on the passage that makes sense of living.
It's wrong, but I'm drawn to the scenes
of fire eating faces down to ash. I read
once that in the oldest known tongue
black shares the root with blanch.

KIMBERLY GIBSON-TRAN

DAYLIGHT

Arthur measured the candles on Sunday nights. He stood the week's seven in a row on the dresser, pressed his thumbnail into each one, a notch for every evening, then locked the box away with the coal cellar key and hung the key on his watch chain. On Saturdays, he held the stubs up to the gas mantle and read them. Any candle burned past its notch went into the ledger. The ledger came out at supper. Supper was quiet, and the quiet lasted into church.

On Fridays, he tipped his wage onto the table and counted it twice, slid the housekeeping across the wood, and entered the figure at the front of the book while the coins still held the warmth of his pocket. Then he turned the book to face her and set the pen on the line. Ruth signed for it, money hers to spend and never hers to keep.

She had written the letter by a wax-end saved from the back of the drawer, after the house slept, with the curtain pinned to its frame so no glow would cross the yard. The nib scratched louder than she liked. Twice she stopped and listened for the boards above her, for his weight crossing the room, and heard only the house breathing.

She cupped her hand close around the flame to

keep it small, and a bead of wax ran over her thumb and hardened under the nail. For five days, she carried both the letter buttoned inside her coat and the wax she could not work loose, her hand returning to the place on her ribs where the paper sat.

Monday came up brown. Fog had thickened in the night and hung now at the height of the lamp brackets, so the street kept clear to the knee and everything above the shopfronts blurred away. Ruth raked the range, set the kettle on its hook, and set Arthur's breakfast down.

He had the morning paper folded to the coal prices. She caught the masthead on her way out.

The London Courier. Monday, 9 February 2026.

He turned a page as she shut the door, and that was the whole of his goodbye.

On the step, she wound Tom's scarf twice over his mouth, the red one she'd knitted last winter, and pushed his slate deeper into the satchel. The lamplighter worked back along the kerb toward them, reaching his pole into each lamp and pinching out the flame. Glass by glass, the gas died back into the brown.

"Why's he putting them out?" Tom's voice came through the wool.

"You know why, Tom, you ask the same thing every day."

"It's not light yet, though, Mum."

"Half seven is half seven. The gas company says the day's started."

"What's that mean?"

"You'll learn when you're older."

"When I'm older, I could carry that pole."

"You could." She turned him by the shoulder and faced him up the street.

A woman came down Tanner's Row with a long cane over her shoulder. At the third house, she stopped, reached the cane up, and rattled its tip against a first-floor window until a hand showed behind the glass. Then she moved on to the next window.

"Why does she knock the windows?"

"To wake the people inside for work. They pay

ASHLEY MANGTANI

her a penny a week.”

“Who knocks her window?”

“Nobody. She wakes herself.”

He turned twice to watch her go, working it out.

The coalman’s cart stood outside the Wilsons’. Sacks went down through the hole in the pavement one after another, and every drop landed somewhere under the street with a sound Ruth could price to the penny.

At the fishmonger’s, the iceman swung a block off his cart in iron tongs and chalked what the business owed on the doorpost. Tom held his breath the whole length of the fish smell and let it out in a white burst, then read the marks as they walked, fours and sevens up one side of the street and down the other. The paperboy on the corner had his bundle on his hip.

“Fog on the line! Northern mails delayed!”

Her hand went to her ribs. She bought no paper and walked on. At the iron grate outside the chemist’s, Tom stopped and planted his boots. The pavement trembled. Warm steam pushed up his trouser legs and lifted the scarf off his chin.

“That’s the Baker Street train,” he said.

“How do you know?”

"It shakes for ages." He stood on it until the train had passed, then took two running steps to catch her hand.

"D'you think Aunt Maud'll send chocolates again?"

"She might."

"I hope so. The soft ones were so good last year."

"She's a long way off, love, up in Leeds. But you'll see her soon enough. More chocolates, or something better."

Her hand tightened on his before she could stop it, and he let it stay, busy with a dray horse on the far side. The Despatch office on the High Road sent the city’s letters by air, through iron pipes laid under the streets. Inside, gas burned green-white down the length of the counter. Two dozen iron pipes rose out of the floor and curved over into wire baskets along the end wall.

As Tom pressed himself to the window, a canister shot into its basket with a felt-soft thud. A girl in a grey pinafore had it up before it stopped rocking, read the address on its collar, and slotted it into the correct pipe. The wall exhaled behind her.

“Make another come.”

“They come when they come.”

Thud. A second canister. The girl's hands were already moving.

"How does it know where to go?"

"It doesn't. The operator reads the address and picks the pipe. The air does the rest."

Tom watched her work. "You used to do that."

"Long time ago now."

"Why did you stop?"

She kept her eyes on the window. "The Despatch doesn't keep wives."

"Why not?"

"That's just how it is."

"That's not a reason."

She looked at him then. "No," she said. "It isn't."

He breathed a circle of fog onto the glass and rubbed it off with his sleeve. “Is it old?”

ASHLEY MANGTANI

She nodded at the brass plate beside the doors.

LONDON PNEUMATIC DESPATCH.
ESTABLISHED 1859.

"Over a hundred and fifty years."

"That's before Grandad was even born."

"Before his grandad's grandad."

She had stood six years on the other side of that counter. At fourteen, the Board school gave her a certificate with a red seal, and the Despatch took her on at Holborn. By seventeen, she could route for three districts without looking at the wall charts. Best eye on the floor, the superintendent told her father, in front of the men.

Then Arthur Crane started sending coal. He was a foreman at the Beckton gasworks, and he had managed her mother's account for two years before Ruth ever put a face to the name. Every Friday, a hundredweight went down the cellar hole. Her mother's hands had gone at the mangle, the same mangle her grandmother had worked before her, and at the wedding breakfast she took Ruth's wrist in those ruined hands and said what the street says of every man with extra coin. He keeps a good fire.

The day before, Ruth handed in her brass check at

the workers' gate, and that was that. The rule ran the same in every trade she knew. A wife worked in her husband's house and nowhere else, and no court, no church, no company had ever seen a reason to change it. The superintendent saw her out himself and said the floor lost its best router every June, regular as the wedding season. That was twelve years ago. Something over six hundred Sundays of notches.

The candle marking had begun their first winter, the year coal ran short across London. Thrift, the street called it then. Arthur called it good management. Her mother called it being careful. By the second winter, the candle box had a lock. By the third, Ruth never touched it again.

The collection key was already turning in the lock when Ruth reached the corner of the High Road. Her free hand went to her coat and undid the top button.

The chemist's boy was out with his broom.
"Morning, Tom."

"Morning," Tom said, already past him.

Her hand did the button up again. The postman went by on her left, and Tom talked about trains the rest of the way, and she said yes in the right places.

There was no way to ask and no way to call it back. Once it dropped, it went at the speed of trains, and three days would pass before Maud could answer, three days in his house, at his table, under his candles, waiting for a word that might not come.

She had lain awake five nights running, and it ended the same way each time. Arthur had never once shouted. He would put on his church coat and take the ledger to the magistrate and read from it in his careful voice.

The candle waste.

The tea bought loose instead of by the chest.

Five pounds unaccounted for on the eighth of March.

A wage is a number a court can write down. Twelve years of washing and cooking and mending had no number at all. The magistrate would hear a careful man wronged by a careless woman, and the law would give that man his son. After the court came the church. Separated wives sat in the back pew. If they came at all.

What the ledger did not say was where the pounds went. They lay sewn into the hem of her Sunday coat, two years of Sundays, every gap he had left because it had never occurred to him that

she could count.

She had done the sums on the margin of a flour bag.

Rent (Leeds, furnished)	£18
Coal (quarter sack)	£22
Lamp oil	£14
Food (me + Tom)	£18

Out	£72
my wage + Maud's	£78
Over	£6

Then she had burned the bag in the range and stirred the ash. Between her wage and Maud's, seventy-eight came in a week. Six over. Narrow, but over. She looked up. The wash-house on Friar's Lane was already in front of her.

Steam stood in the doors, and the Monday queue went down the steps, baskets on shoulders, sleeves rolled in the cold. Inside, the coppers boiled and the mangles turned.

High on the wall, a bill had yellowed to the colour of the steam.

VOTES FOR WOMEN

In letters a foot tall, above a meeting date nobody could read any more.

Mrs Finn wrung a sheet in the doorway, her voice carrying across the queue. "Mrs Cole's washing for strangers in Hoxton now. Eight months since the magistrate." Her eyes crossed Ruth's and held half a second longer than they needed to. "He kept the boys, the house, and the piano."

A voice back in the steam said the piano had been her mother's. At the foot of the steps, a young woman held out a letter. Mrs Finn wiped her palms on her apron and read it aloud, a son writing from lodgings, money sent, and a date he'd be home for Christmas, while the woman watched the page and could not follow a word. Ruth pulled her gloves tighter. Her knuckles were turning into her mother's. Under her right thumbnail, the wax sat where it had set, five days ago.

The school on Chandler Street rang the children in at nine. The master's boy stood under the bell arch with the rope wrapped twice round his fist, and mothers crowded the gate, holding on until the last possible moment. Mrs Finn's girl was going into service at Whitsun. Eleven years old, a good place out at Richmond. Her mother had said it three times already this morning. The Hobbs boy would start at the gasworks the day he turned twelve. Coal had gone up a penny a hundredweight.

Across the road, against the railings of the chapel, Mrs Cole stood in last winter's coat with her hands

folded in front of her.

Tom pulled his scarf down to his chin. "Why does Mrs Cole stand over there?"

"She's seeing her boys in."

"From across the road?"

"From where they'll let her."

He filed it with the fog. "Father's showing me the candle marks on Sunday. He says a careful house can tell where every penny goes."

The wool had printed a red line across his cheek. Ruth crouched and tucked the scarf end down into his coat, and she took her time with it. "Learn your letters first."

"I know my letters."

"Learn them better."

He dug into his trouser pocket and brought out an old platform ticket, soft at the corners from a week in his pocket, and posted it into the cuff of her glove. "Keep it safe."

She pressed her lips to his forehead. "I love you, Tom."

The bell swung over their heads, and he ran with the rest.

Two boys stood in the lines by the drainpipe, a tall one and a small one with matching haircuts, and the tall one turned his head toward the chapel railings and turned it back. Across the road, Mrs Cole raised her hand and held it there until the lines moved. Then the cloakroom door took the children in, and the yard emptied to its hopscotch chalk going grey in the damp.

A crossing sweeper had brushed a clean lane through the horse mess at the corner. Ruth crossed by it and came to the railings an arm's length from Mrs Cole. For a while, neither woman spoke. Both faced the empty yard.

"The two by the drainpipe were mine," Mrs Cole said. "They've had their hair cut."

"Tom's third row. Red scarf."

A milk dray went past behind them, churns ringing against each other.

"I went ahead to find a room," Mrs Cole said.

"Three weeks, that was all. The magistrate called it desertion. He got the house. He got the boys. And I came home to a locked door."

The master's boy looped his rope and went inside.

"I'm going to my sister," Ruth said. She had never said it aloud before. "Leeds. Friday."

"Tom as well?"

"Tom as well."

"Hold his hand from your doorstep to her door. Don't put the bag down. Don't go back for anything." She looked at Ruth. "They forgot me the minute I left."

Ruth walked back up the High Road with her hand inside her coat. The post box stood on the corner. The collection plate said the next post went at eleven.

She had addressed it in her sorting hand, the letters tall and plain, the way she'd written addresses on a thousand canisters at Holborn.

Miss M. Hartley, 14 Bridge End, Leeds 2.

Maud had written in October. Ruth knew it by heart.

Bring him. The bindery asks no questions of a woman who can stitch a spine straight, and my room holds two beds.

Two letters had gone into the range before this one

—the first asked permission. The second apologised. The one in her hand said Friday.

Friday, then. The half past nine from King's Cross, a cold pie on her lap, while Arthur stood at the retorts all day with no reason to think she'd gone. One bag. She had packed it twice in her head and not yet once in the world. The certificate with the red seal at the bottom, under Tom's jersey and his tin of tickets. They would walk to the station and spend nothing getting there.

She had carried the map of this city in her head since Holborn, every shortcut and back lane between her door and the platforms, a map she had only ever used to send other people's words across the city. On Friday, she would follow it herself. Tom would name every train they passed by the sound of it, the whole way north, and she would let him.

The iron flap dragged on its hinge and bit cold through her glove. She held the letter half in the mouth of the box.

Fog on the line. The mails delayed.

She opened her fingers. A small sound, far down. Paper finding paper. Her right glove had gone loose at the thumb, and when she drew it off, the wax came with it, the bead she'd carried five

ASHLEY MANGTANI

days, and she flicked it into the gutter and let it go.

Down the street, the fog was thinning off the river.
The sun came through over the gasworks chimney,
a pale coin, then a coin rubbed bright, and the
light reached her where she stood. Nobody had lit
it. Nobody had locked it in a box, or notched it, or
written it down in a ledger. No company owned it,
and no clock told it when to start. It fell on the
post box and the chapel railings and the horse
mess and on her, the same light on all of it, and
not a penny to pay.

She turned her face up. The cold went out of her
hands first, then her cheeks. She stood in it until
she'd had enough, then put her glove back on and
started home, past the wash-house steam and the
dead lamps and the pipes swallowing the city's
words, with Tom's ticket riding in her glove.

By Friday night, the house would hold a locked
box of light, a ledger squared to the penny, and a
dinner going cold under its plate. And no one to
cook the next one, and no boy asleep upstairs.

On Sunday, Arthur would set out seven fresh
candles, notch them, and lock the box.

Let him.

BIRCH FOREST

explosion of sparks

then a gray ghost

you emerge

but you might have lost me

your voice the only echo

ringing in my ears

I'm here,
behind this tree,
behind you.

ALEXANDRA LEGFORD



After Klimt's painting "Birch Forest"

THIS A TEST OF THE EMERGENCY BROADCAST SYSTEM

This is a test of the emergency broadcast system.

This is only a test.

Repeat, this is only a test.

In the event of inclement weather, cease all activity and take shelter immediately. In the event of an air raid from a foreign power, cease all activity and take shelter immediately. In the event of the unleashing of a biological weapon, which may attack the skin, hair follicles, gut biome, or internal organs by being ingested, inhaled, or otherwise consumed, cease all activity and take shelter immediately. In the event that Chef Boyardee Spaghetti-O's rain stinking from the sky, resist the urge to think they are human body parts, cease all activity, and take shelter immediately. In the event that listeners find a tree in the yard they swear was not there before, especially the way the light is hitting it, purple through dewy leaves, even though spouses, family members, and roommates all laugh, insisting it was always there, there is no cause for alarm. Just look again. In the event that listeners see a dark shadow at the end of the hallway and cannot remember it as ever having been that way, there is no cause for alarm. Just look again. In the event that your car won't start, your neighbor's car won't start, your father's car won't start, your co-workers' cars won't start, there may be some disturbance in the Magnetic Field.

In the event that you look at the toes on your left foot, it looks like there are six, you blink, it looks like there are five again, and you are not under the influence of hallucinogenic substances, it may be something in the water. If the water is the color of urine but glows under ultraviolet light, do not drink it. If a statue of the Virgin Mary starts to bleed, if a statue of Pallas Athene starts to bleed, if a large plastic Mickey Mouse starts to bleed, if real animals suddenly have cartoon eyes and cartoon animals suddenly have real eyes, lie down and shut your own eyes until they become cartoons and/or real. If birds start flying the wrong way for the wrong time of year, if birds start flying into closed windows like in a Windex commercial, if birds start falling out of the sky in the thousands, if frogs start falling out of the sky in the thousands, if locusts start falling out of the sky in a cloud from the mouth of another cloud that looks suspiciously like a classical depiction of Zeus and their infernal buzzing sounds suspiciously like a booming voice proclaiming “the gun is good, the penis is evil,” eat more citrus. In the event of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloons gaining sentience, and there is no one around to watch them gain sentience, play out the hollow mechanisms of it all anyway, the show must go on. If the legal name “Daddy Fat Staxx” with 2 x's is not taken, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, color, or creed, every American must now be known as “Daddy Fat Staxx.” If the

color of the sky goes from William Gibson Gray to 90s computer Blue Screen of Death to Test Pattern Stripes, you're too old. If you hear a sound like heavy steel pylons, girders, or scaffolding collapsing,

rest assured that this is only a test.

CONTRIBUTORS

ADDA FARCUS

Adda Farcus is an activist, artist, curator, feminist, organizer, poet, quasi-linguist, teacher, and writer. They received their MFA in visual art from the University of Illinois at Chicago, participate in the Climate Psychological Alliance, organize with their local teacher's union, and curate for the nomadic exhibition project, Lease Agreement. Farcus has exhibited their artwork internationally and published creative writing in a number of publications such as smoke and mold, Funny Looking Dog Quarterly, and Copytext. adamfarcus.com

AL RUSSELL

Al Russell (they/them) is a NC, US based science fiction poet. They are a poetry editor at Outlook Springs Literary Magazine, sometimes. They just quit smoking and are very proud of themself. They don't know but suspect that their kid, their partner, and their dog (3 different ppl, FYI) are proud of them too. Past works include Children of the Anxious City and Lookinglasshouse, both available from Vegetarian Alcoholic Press (& in many fine bookstores nationwide).

ALLISON RIECHNMAN-BENNETT

Allison Lee Riechman-Bennett is a professor, writer, and editor based in the Ozarks. Her debut chapbooks, Of You and For Me and All

the Months in December, were published in 2022 by Bottlecap Press. Her writing has appeared in magazines and journals including Plain China: National Anthology of the Best Undergraduate Writing, Vogue Singapore, The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics, and Show Me Magazine.

She is a Creative Nonfiction Editor for Blood + Honey, Associate Poetry Editor for TABLE//FEAST, is currently reading for Harbor Editions, and was a Managing Editor for Same Faces Collective (2020-2026).

ASHLEY MANGTANI

Ashley Mangtani is a UK writer whose work explores ecological and social collapse, and the roles people inhabit in moments of crisis. Drawing on an M.Sc. in Environmental Science and a background as a civil servant in digital media policy, he crafts stories shaped by inevitability and loss. Blending literary realism with slipstream, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in Litro, Washington Square Review, Boudin, Expat Press, Thieving Magpie, Flash Fiction Online, HAWKEYE, Mobius: The Journal of Social Change, Literary Garage, Neither Fish Nor Foul, Empyrean Magazine, and others. Read more at ashleymangtanifiction.carrd.com

B. R. DIONYSIUS

B. R. Dionysius was founding Director of the Queensland Poetry Festival. He has published four collections of poetry, two chapbooks, an artist's book and a verse novel. His ninth collection, 'Critical State' was published in 2022. He was short-listed in the 2013 and 2017 Montreal International Poetry Prize. His tenth, and eleventh poetry collections – "The Eromanga Sea" (Calanthe Press) and 'Not for Heroics' (Liquid Amber Press) will be published in 2026. His twelfth book, "Extinction Sonnets" will be published in 2027 (Walleah Press).

BROOKE JOHNPIER

Brooke Johnpier is a student at St. Bonaventure University who is studying sports media with a goal to become a motorsports/automotive journalist. When she's not around cars or at the racetrack, you can find her on her 50-acre farm reading a good book, writing a story, playing video games, or shooting her bow. She's also a published author of two juvenile historical fiction books. Brooke lives with her parents and two French Bulldogs.

AMPERSAND QUARTERLY

FRANK MIELE

In the half century since I studied creative writing at the University of Montana and the University of Arizona, I dedicated my writing career to journalism. All writing done with love is valuable. I live in Kalispell, Montana, with my wife and youngest son. I have been published in Kansas Quarterly, Northwest Review, Whitefish Review, Plainsongs and Poet & Critic, among others.

GREG LEHMAN

Greg Lehman earned an MFA in creative writing from Lindenwood University and a BA in journalism from California State University at Fullerton. His poetry has appeared in the Moon Tide Press' Poet of the Month feature series in June 2025, "Like the Wind Magazine," "Dark Winter Lit," "Book of Matches," "aesterion," "Turtle Island Poetry," "The SportScribe," "Wild Roof Journal," "SpecPoVerse," and "HEXFILED," among others. He lives in Los Angeles, California, and all are welcome to follow his Substack "@gregwriting Substack" and Instagram account @bestcoastgreg.

KIMBERLY GIBSON-TRAN

Kimberly Gibson-Tran studied linguistics at Baylor and the University of North Texas. She's written critically about poems with "Lines by Someone Else" and has recent creative writing

appearing in Passages North, 2River, Porter House Review, Third Coast, Rust & Moth, and elsewhere. Raised in Thailand, she now lives north of Dallas, Texas.

She is a Creative Nonfiction Editor for Blood + Honey, Associate Poetry Editor for TABLE//FEAST, is currently reading for Harbor Editions, and was a Managing Editor for Same Faces Collective (2020-2026).

LOUIS BOURGENOIS

Louis Bourgeois was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He is primarily a poet, but he has published translations, fiction, memoirs, poetry and interviews in over two hundred magazines and journals in North America, Europe and Asia. He graduated from Louisiana State University with a BA in English and was the first graduate of The University of Mississippi's MFA program in Creative Writing. He is the Executive Director of VOX PRESS, as well as the Program Director for the Mississippi Prison Writes Initiative.

MARTIN FISHER

Martin Fisher has worked across Africa and Europe and now lives in the UK, where he gardens for a living. His poems have appeared in Antae, JMWV, Ink Sweat & Tears, and other journals.

STACY R. NIGLIAZZO

Stacy R. Nigliazzo is a nurse and the award-winning author of three poetry books. She is a founding member of the Humanities Expression & Arts Lab (HEAL) at Baylor College of Medicine, where she teaches poetry and art to physicians and students.

QUENTIN LOBENSTINE

Quentin Lobenstine loves watching sad movies about mothers and daughters, playing with rusting figurines, and sifting through vast collections of buttons. He lives in Vermont.

STAFF

MINGHAN ZOU	1	Editor in Chief
ALICIA MEDINA	2	Editor in Chief

SUBMIT TO ISSUE 3!
MERCY & BLUE

