

journal

VOLUME THREE

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EDITORS NOTE

When Mason Jar accepted a story of mine for their first volume of *The Jarnal*, I had no idea where it would lead. All I knew is that those stories were a series of small enchantments, and I was proud to play my little role in the formation of that magical journal.

Fast forward to 2023, and we're now celebrating Volume III. This book in your hands tells a wide range of real and unreal stories. The poetry, prose, and art in these pages contain a mixture of darkness and light, telling of love and rage and grace. This volume will take you on a journey, from a beginning in a garden, through time and space, from birth to death and beyond.

But above all else, from my introduction to the last poem in the collection, we begin and end with gratitude. I'd like to express my sincerest thanks to Michael, Maya, and all the amazing writers and creators who contributed to this publication.

And, of course, to all of you who are about to embark on the journey: thank you, and enjoy!

Tara Campbell

Guest Editor, *The Jarnal Volume III: Transitions*

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BEGINNING WITH EVE

Karen Kilcup

In the beginning, we float in space.

The infant finds its mother's hazy face
a pale moon, a bronze sun, a dark lake

of light. But edges harden. We fall.

More than once I crayoned past the black
edges of coloring book figures,

invented purple clouds because my mother had
forbidden me a purple dress.

Grass was red and water yellow.

But it was good, like the difficult and timely
perfection of a peach. Obedience

to life's geometry yields singular proofs,

like globes of tulip bulbs planted just so deep. How
do yellow daylilies, summer's lightning bolts
grounded, know to pause,

recharge? Let there be

perfect words in perfect order, and see
what happens: as summer shades toward

fall, Queen Anne's lace froths an August field;
at the shore, a wave lifts
a lip, then drops.

Let us give thanks that even
the greatest lights must recreate
themselves like the sun,

that they have spots and cannot
rest on every seventh day. That evening
comes like Eve herself
alone.

CATHEDRAL

Travis Dahlke

1.

As I slipped from the glass bottom boat I could feel you diving in with me. Only one of us resurfaced. The boat was named for the actress who played Murphy Brown. Its window to the infinite marine life below was clouded by our sandal prints and the sandal prints of other tourists. Our captain kept standing up to point out dolphin pods. Whenever he sat down, through his shorts we could see his genitals collect into a mass that resembled a sleeping fox, head resting over its tail. Another couple on the boat had also noticed this and were motioning to us about it. The captain said, 'Nobody is the same after bathing in this lagoon. The gods created this lagoon with healing properties.' A mother dolphin, pregnant and sluggish with her calves, carved semicircles in the jacuzzi froth of our boat. Right before I had leaned over the side to get a better photo, you swallowed your vodka drink down to the ice and asked who Murphy Brown was and why she was revered as a God.

On the shore, a man from resort security wrapped my shoulders in a beach towel while consoling me with statistics. Fifty-six percent of drownings are someone going in after someone else. About ten percent of saltwater drownings do not result in a body.

2.

The funeral is held in an air-conditioned church. Your grandmother lays her hand and its rings against an empty casket. They play this camcorder

home video of you as a child, singing Christina Aguilera into a TV remote. I swallow chicken parm/chardonnay/mescun salad with your family afterward, but I don't tell them about what really happened on the glass bottom boat. After that, even after your parents hug me and say we should keep in touch, I don't see them again.

It is not until that gray afternoon in March that I find you. I am drinking alone in the Mystic Aquarium to escape the rain. You're in the Shark Lagoon exhibit. I know from the tattoo, a star drawn on your 27th birthday by that yellow-toothed girl in Las Olas, morphed now by saltwater. You've become marine debris. Sea meat blotted by lesions, nursed back to life by Eurasian minnows. An anemone studying its habitat through a single human eyebulb. I rest my hands against the glass even though there's a sign that says not to. Women with large purses linger by you while kids move on toward the next tank.

The aquarium's management ensures me they source specimens from all over to wholly represent the grand biodiversity of planet Earth's vast oceans. I repeat this verbatim for guests after I get a job at the gift shop. I do this so I can take care of you. I sneak in all your favorite foods. I brush your remaining eyebulb with your old toothbrush which I never threw out. I will kill the grouper that is bothering you. When I save enough money, I'll rescue you and transport us somewhere with an indoor pool. I'll pour vodka in the water and I'm telling you right now, wherever we live the sky there is going to be see-through all the way up.

The gift shop is where the aquarium vets all their new hires. Every night, I'm supposed to study a handbook of basic fish facts so that I can better understand our guest's needs, but it's only narc, suck-ups who actu-

ally do that. Kara, who arranges manatee beanie babies into a pyramid every day, tells me the aquarium is haunted by the spirit of a moray eel named Caroline. According to Kara, sixty-five percent of interior spaces are haunted by some sort of animal. Kara does this thing where her bangs flutter whenever she blinks. She has a voice like Elmer's glue boiling on a stove pot. Behind the register we keep a fossil whale tooth inside of a shadow box frame. It costs over three thousand dollars. Every couple of months a staff member has to take it down and dust it.

On Thursdays after work some people from the aquarium meet at the Dakota Grille for wings and trivia. They have that Thai Chili kind you always loved. Greg, who dives for items the guests drop into the outdoor exhibits, knows everything about American history. This woman Janice, who performs with the sea lions, gets so drunk she sits next to everyone at the same time. Janice got so drunk once she lifted her *Protect Our Oceans* polo to show us the moon stud in her nipple where the vein lightnings across a mole shaped exactly like Nebraska. Greg has a picture of this on his phone.

I'm sorry they moved you to the touch tank. I'll try my best to smuggle Zinc into your shrimp pellets, so you don't catch this flu that's been going around. I don't mind brushing your eyebulb every day, but sometimes it would be nice if you could use your tentacle arms to do it. Did I tell you there's a tank the aquarium keeps empty? Save for the water and a single light that makes the water glow green. It's super eerie. There's an apartment closer to work with a great view of the sound. Utilities are even included. If I can find a few roommates, it'll be too affordable to pass up.

3.

I found out that Janice, the sea lion trainer, pretends she loves Greg but she's always staring at the throat of the guy who feeds the tiger sharks. Kara and I make fun of them all the time using a special whale mating language we learned from the gift shop CDs. Remind me to teach you how it goes. Someone bought the fossil whale tooth we keep behind the register. The guy who bought it looked exactly like Rory Gilmore's second boyfriend. I looked the actor up on IMDb and he absolutely could have a house in Mystic.

All the apartments near the aquarium are getting turned into rentals for summer tourists. The Dakota Grille is being turned into a farm to table restaurant. I've had to start working at the mall to make rent. Also, I heard the epaulette shark in your tank took a kid's thumb off. You didn't tell him to do that right? I know you wouldn't do that.

Also, I'm sorry I haven't had time to visit or brush your eyebulb. I've been so busy. I've been promoted to in-house educator, which means I wear a headset and guide field trips through the reef exhibit. You wouldn't believe how many species of coral there are! One of our sun polyps swallowed someone's car keys the other day. Sun polyps are highly aggressive. The keys won't be fully digested for five-hundred years, isn't that something? I really miss you a lot and it's going to be Christmas in a couple months. Whenever I hear the Colbie Caillat song we used to be obsessed with, I still imagine it's you singing it.

Kara and me and some other people from work have started sharing a better condo, closer to the mall. We all have second jobs, except Greg. He's studying for his Praxis. I'm working three shifts a week at Yankee Candle.

You'd like our new place. It has this whirlpool bath where you could stay. There's a rumor at the aquarium that management is preparing something big for the empty tank. Janice thinks it'll be a leatherback turtle to replace the one that got cancer, or maybe even a cuttlefish. Isn't that exciting?

4.

No surprise, but Janice got engaged to the shark feeder. They've moved out of Connecticut entirely. Greg, the treasure diver, still lives with Kara and me. Greg is addicted to whippets. His puke-stained wetsuits are always hanging in the shower. He is so annoying. The three of us are going to cut down a real tree next weekend. We're going to watch one of those cheesy Hallmark movies while we decorate it. Kara told me that the aquarium's vacant tank has never actually been vacant.

5.

Kara and I are considering putting down some savings for our own place. Somewhere without Greg. That is if these interest rates stay low. But it's weird not being at the aquarium every day. Kara thinks touristy places like that will start opening to the public again by summer. Is it peaceful there now? I still have all these useless facts in my head, like how sun corals feed using bait pheromones and how they can live for years without sunlight. I don't think I could ever live without sunlight. I think I'd go crazy.

VIRGINIA CITY HONEYMOON

Leah Mueller

I lived with you for two years before we decided to marry. Supposedly, the second marriage is a triumph of hope over experience. We'd both been married before, to spouses who required a great deal of maintenance. Your ex-wife used to pound her head against the wall. My previous husband drank until he passed out. You and I were no longer young, so we didn't expect much. Just someone who would tolerate our shit.

We strolled through a Virginia City graveyard, pointing at tombstones. Two hours past sunset, a half-moon hung in the sky. We'd flown to Reno for our honeymoon and stayed in a hotel with heart-shaped beds. It was corny, of course, but both of us were suckers for kitsch. Besides, the place offered cheap weekend rates.

Since we operated on a tight budget, we avoided the slot machines. This proved difficult because the goddamned things constantly leered at us. Garish money-suckers lurked everywhere—inside rest rooms and mini-marts, beside restaurant tables. A shimmering line of one-armed bandits beckoned as we disembarked from the plane.

After a few days of glitz, we decided to drive our rental car to Virginia City. The town was an odd place for newlyweds, but we needed a respite from the ceaseless clanging.

The graveyard was probably the only place in Nevada that didn't have a slot machine. Instead, it sported upright slabs, each inscribed with a name. Some of them belonged to important landowners, others to paupers with crude, wooden headstones. Good citizens of Storey County lay side by side beneath the flinty earth, irrespective of social rank. Death was the great equalizer.

A few babies' graves peppered the landscape. Most had died of childhood diseases like dysentery and diphtheria. Fragile infants, born to hardy, fatalistic pioneer families, only to expire a few days later. I imagined the mothers as heartbroken yet determined, stoic in the face of grief. In the 1800s, women gave birth every year. A new baby was always on the way.

We stopped in front of a headstone that read, "Darling Joe, July 1—August 4, 1885." Crumbling angel wings adorned the granite's edge. Joe hadn't even lived on the planet for six weeks. Life had already proven too rough for him, and he couldn't stick around. Poor kid.

You stood with clasped hands, staring hard at the dates. Perhaps your gaze could make them disappear. Your face always radiated a sweet concern, like you wanted to fix everything but were never sure how. When I first saw that expression, I knew you would be a good stepfather for my two children. They hadn't lucked out in the dad department.

"I don't understand why kids die," you finally said. "It always makes me think of Pam."

Pam was your older sister. She died at sixteen from a childhood leukemia that consumed her body like candy. You idolized her because she had a guitar in her bedroom. Pam never had time for the guitar. She just liked having it in the corner.

It wasn't hard to talk her into giving up the instrument. One day she shrugged and said, "Sure, take it. I'm never going to learn to play."

You scurried back to your room, cradling your prize like a piece of fragile pottery. Then you spent the next eight years teaching yourself, until you learned all the songs on the radio. A sixties kid, your heroes were musicians and astronauts. Striving to emulate them, you built spaceships from boxes and formed garage bands with your friends.

Despite your love of outer space and rock and roll, you wound up working as a software tester. At least it paid the bills. Mostly. The Pacific

Northwest threatened to swallow us whole, with its congested highways and high cost of living. It was the land of your birth, not mine. As a transplanted Midwesterner, I always felt irritated by the secretive, passive-aggressive manner of Washington locals. On top of that, I loathed rain. Your low-paying tech job was the glue that held us in place.

We both loved graveyards and visited them whenever possible. Our pastime had the odd effect of easing your fear of death, at least for a little while. Today, however, our mojo didn't seem to be working. Any mention of Pam always brought you to tears, followed by a weighty pondering of your own mortality.

"Death sucks," I said in the most soothing tone I could muster. "Especially when it's a young person. Doesn't make any sense. Maybe it would if we were religious." I took your hand and squeezed it. "Probably not, though."

"I wish we had two hundred years. Even one hundred isn't enough." Despite the rigors of life, you always wanted more time. I felt astonished by your desire to live forever, amidst constantly diminishing expectations.

You shook your head at the tombstone. "I mean, there's no telling when you're going to die, or how. Life is challenging enough without being terrified of death."

"People say they aren't afraid of dying. I think they're bluffing, mostly. It makes them sound badass, or something." I squeezed your hand again. It felt clammy, like it did when we took flights together. The take-offs and landings were always an ordeal for you. In between, you pointed at clouds through the bite-sized windows, while I read flight magazines and counted the minutes until touchdown.

We turned away from Darling Joe and wandered towards the opposite end of the graveyard. "I'm definitely in the mood for a beer," you said. "How about you?"

“Let’s head back to that bar underneath the hotel. I think it’s the only place open now.” Sunday night in Virginia City was dead, to say the least. We’d checked into our hundred-year-old hotel shortly before all the tourists left. No one else registered for the night, so we had the place to ourselves. The desk clerk put us on the top floor, accessible only by a dusty, creaking stairwell. We hadn’t seen any ghosts yet, but we’d double-checked the corners just to make sure.

After passing the perimeter of the graveyard, we secured the gate behind us. Though the hotel was only three blocks away, we walked slowly, admiring the landscape. Brick Victorian buildings loomed above us like sentries. Their beveled glass windows looked gray and dingy. How many people had lived in those rooms? What did they feel as they gazed at the street? Which unfulfilled aspirations kept them awake at night?

Tavern lights flickered on the cobblestoned street. Neon signs advertised various beers—Budweiser, Sierra Nevada, Fat Tire. Not surprisingly, the joint was empty. An elderly bartender sat behind the counter, engrossed in a paperback. The poor guy startled when he saw us. Finally, he put aside the book and approached the bar. “What can I get you?”

You and I both ordered pints of Sierra Nevada. We settled into our barstools and smiled at the bartender. He reminded me of a goblin—petite in stature, with a gray, pointed beard. After setting the glasses down carefully, he scooped up our cash and stared at us. “Where do you live? Everyone comes here from somewhere else.”

“Washington state,” I replied. “The two of us are in Nevada for our honeymoon. Virginia City tonight, then we’re heading back to Reno tomorrow.”

The bartender’s face became thoughtful. “Well, isn’t that lovely. I remember my honeymoon. Of course, it was a while ago.” He turned away, retrieved his book, and held it in midair. “Sorry I didn’t see you come in. I can’t put this down. I used to be afraid of death, but the author

Thich Nhat Hanh says it's just a natural transition. That is, IF we manage to live our lives with purpose and dignity."

I gaped at the book, astonished. Its title read, "No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life." The cover was plain—black letters etched against a white background, surrounded by a circle that looked as if it had been drawn by a child.

You shook your head. "How weird. My wife and I were just talking about mortality. I've never accepted death as an inevitable passage. I'm scared to let go because I don't know what's next. Everything happens so fast, and before we know it, our lives are almost gone."

The bartender smiled. "You're still young. But I know what you mean. I felt the same way." He picked up a damp rag, then began to swirl it across the counter in slow, rhythmic circles. "Martin Luther King thought a lot of Hanh. The man is a Vietnamese monk and a Zen master, after all. Been around a long time. I figure he must know what he's talking about."

"It's uncanny that we should meet you tonight. But fortuitous. I'll try to get ahold of the book." I took a gulp of my beer and savored its fizzy descent. Nothing like a cold brew after a graveyard stroll on an unseasonably warm autumn night. "Synchronicity is pretty cool, huh?"

"It's never an accident. I'm sure Hanh would agree." The bartender dropped his rag into the sink. "You want another beer? I'm getting ready to close for the night."

The two of us glanced at each other, then turned towards the bartender and shook our heads. "Nah, one is enough," I said. "We're going to bed early. Big day tomorrow." I looked forward to climbing the dusty stairwell towards our four-poster bed. We'd fall asleep with our limbs entwined, as we'd done every night since the start of our relationship.

Perhaps we'd have the energy for lovemaking. You were still shy in bed after two years of cohabitation, because your first wife hated sex.

Graveyards could be seductive, though. I hoped the weird eroticism would work in our favor.

A few sips later, we rose to our feet and thanked the bartender. “I’m Joseph, by the way,” he said. “When you’re back in Reno, be sure to look up my friend Dan. He tends bar at Clary’s Pub on Virginia. It’s right by the Atlantis. You can’t miss it. Tell him I said hello.”

Once we reached the sidewalk, you chuckled. “I feel like I’m in a sort of indie-gothic Wild West movie. First, we have a heavy discussion about death. Then we enter a tavern, and the bartender happens to bring up the same topic. Afterwards, he tells us to visit his friend at Clary’s Pub. So, we go there and ask about the guy. But all the patrons flinch and say, ‘Joseph from Virginia City? JOSEPH? Impossible! That man’s been dead for twenty years!’”

That’s what I loved most about you—despite your habitual melancholy, you always managed to find a kernel of comic absurdity. You possessed a certain freshness that no amount of trauma could eradicate. Though I hoped your humor would keep you going for years, I suspected your life would be shorter than mine. Before we met, you subsisted on deep-fried foods and Marie Callender dinners. I still couldn’t convince you to take care of yourself. Frustrating, since you wanted to live two hundred years.

“Weirder shit has happened,” I said. “Come on, let’s go upstairs and enjoy our room.”

You reached into your pocket, withdrew the hotel key. Three fumbling attempts later, you found your way into the keyhole. When the door finally swung open, you smiled, looking immensely relieved. “The ghosts are waiting. Step inside, sweetheart.”

Puffing from exertion, we ascended the stairs. Our door loomed at the end of the third floor. Room 313. Perfect. The bartender didn’t lie when he said that synchronicity was real. That is, if the fellow ever existed.

It was hard to know in Virginia City. Especially when you spend your honeymoon obsessing over death.

I could hardly wait to curl up beside you in our rented bed. We were still alive, at least for now. The two of us had a lot of catching up to do.