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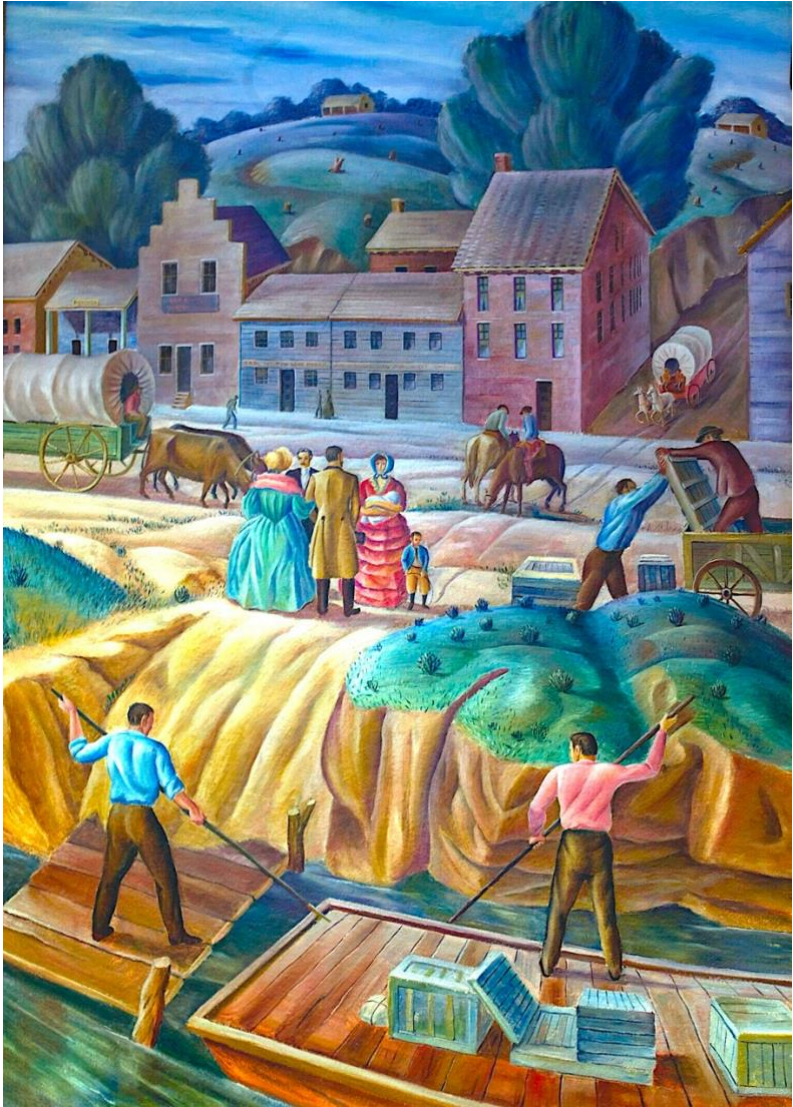
THE O:JA&L 2024 CHAPBOOK SERIES

*A Writer's Portfolio*

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# THERE IS A SEASON

*Haibun & Short Poems*



STEVE GERSON

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BUTTONHOOK PRESS

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THE O:JA&L 2024 CHAPBOOK SERIES  
*A Writer's Portfolio*

THERE IS A SEASON  
*Haibun & Short Poems*

STEVE GERSON

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### PROLOGUE

Gyre

### SPRING

So Much Depends  
Self Portrait as Spring  
End  
Missing  
Remorseful Spring  
Hank in Hospice  
Stars Aching in Distant Skies

### SUMMER

Pale Green and Garnet  
Sepia  
Shell  
Like snakeskin glistening on the beach  
Sunset Diorama  
Gone

### FALL

Played Out  
Calendar Pages Yellowing  
Parkinson's  
When fields bloom dust  
Time spinning shadows  
Path  
Modern Love  
Nothing

WINTER

September in the Dakotas  
Her dress once pink  
And the morning sun trailed her bus in shadows  
A Truck in Snow  
Empty  
Only geese fly straight lines  
The Silence  
Abandoned  
Prophesies

EPILOGUE

Poetry, the land, the road

## PROLOGUE

### GYRE

the gyre turns snow blind  
whiteout ice chill shattering  
and from depths buds break  
sod and green to brown withered  
in heat streets mirage leaves fall

# *SPRING*

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STEVE GERSON

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## SO MUCH DEPENDS

OUR KITCHEN awaits  
the passion of strawberries  
and radishes piled  
into the wheelbarrow while  
robins warm in April's dawn

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## SELF PORTRAIT AS SPRING

### 1. KANSAS PRAIRIELAND—

May's rain streams like wreathed smiles, lark  
song flies in dappled  
skies, tallgrass wends with prairie  
smoke. Bluestem flowers sizzle.

### 2. Winter's memory

burrows under fallow ground,  
dirt deep in milo  
fields. Sheaves of wheat grow yellow.  
Red barn doors heave sighs.

### 3. Dry seedlings sprout hope.

Corn greens on husks, their amber  
tassels trembling in  
Springtime's freshening breezes.  
Swallows whistle warbling songs.

### 4. Tractors scythe to plough

furrows in piebald daisies,  
uplifting the land  
from winter's knell. Peregrine  
hawks wheel, their plumed chests prideful.

### 5. The sky is blue. Whiffs

of powder clouds paint the plains  
like steppingstones, paths  
from a once dark world. I am  
the prairies' maze of distance.

### 6. I've become Spring, wind

weaving through a cottonwood's  
leaves, the nearest sounds  
a windmill's whisper, a cow's  
lowing call to Spring's romance.

END

HE STARTED BALING HAY at 5:00 that morning, the first cutting in the spring when the grass had greened, then he and his boys branded cows at 8:00, breakfast missed, again. He'd heft the heifers and throw them down, while a son hit the cow with the hot iron, The Bar Double B, the hair sizzling, smelling like what his Sunday school teacher must have meant by fires of hell, "mephitis" she called it, in her prim voice, all nose and lavender perfume.

After tending the herd, the latter part of the day was spent stringing barbed wire between the post oaks. No lunch, again. Only one torn thumbnail on his left hand; only one burn on his right palm. Not bad for a day's work. But the sons were off to the city for "real work," they said, in a bank or insurance job. He faced the setting sun, gray clouds heavy on the horizon, the weather uncertain as the farm's future. He rested one heel on the fence, his Nocona boot tip scuffed and torn, his Llano Stetson low, a shadow on his face.

And he thought of generations past, his generation passing like farm loans due, unpaid.

*crows flew like ellipses  
hinting at doubt  
against a darkening sky*

## MISSING

THREE BLACK CROWS perched on the school's wire fence, scoping the fields beyond for prey where the fields bled into the diminishing horizon. Above, a harrier hawk wheeled on the gray March clouds. A windmill nearby turned slowly, one blade missing, the other blades rusted like blooming spores. Its metal lurched, struggling to find a breeze in the drought-ridden sky and whirred like locusts gnawing on dry stalks. The school yard was empty. The playground equipment swung in the dead air, the metal clanging against the sound of a distant siren's knell.

*the bell was muffled*  
*silent cloud cover*  
*black corn stalks moldering*

## REMORSEFUL SPRING

IT'S WINTER this spring. I've frosted the buds like birds flying into glass, and spring's beauty is storm-blown. All you want is calm to sit, to read, to see, to wonder, to feel the hum of a distant plane, clocks ticking quietly, a breath breathed in restorative sleep, yet I disrupt with wintry bursts of chilling air.

But deep within my torrents, there's stillness I can reach, need to reach like a cat napping. I purr for you, yearn for you, learn to find the spring in winter for you, to thaw ice frosts, to feel the bud emerge and bloom roses as silken as your thoughts, silken as your laugh, when I allow laughter, allow you to be spring.

I can embrace your perennial April. Even my winter's gray, the solemn cold of my black sod, is greening for you. I can become the love you need.

*a burst of sunlight through slanting clouds*  
*thawing ice in pails*  
*the promise of a rose in bloom*

## HANK IN HOSPICE

BEDRIDDEN, infected by COPD, coughing spores like spring weed blossoms spewing seedlings, an orchestra of atonal allergens, I'm lighting my Pall Mall Reds, unfiltered, watching the smoke tendrils weave graveside garlands as ashes sift downward in gyres of despair.

"How ya doin', Hank?" my caregiver asked. "Can I bum one of them cigarettes from ya?"

He lit his off mine, the two burning butts meeting in conflagration near the third circle of hell.

I coughed again, my phlegm orchestrating new disharmonies as wheezes crackled through my lattice-worked lungs, my face sallow, the color of parchment soaked in nicotine, the color of cheap rye whiskey, my eyes red-rimmed, looking like a miner's pit glowing ravaged fire.

"How am I doing you ask?" taking a deep drag of tar and terror. "I'm bedridden. My cheeks are sunken like a truck hood, hailstorm-dented, rusting in a used car lot and some fool has put a sign on me saying, 'Barely Runs, Good for Scrap.' I'm dust. I'm sifting toward perdition, and I wish the chariot would hurry up and get here. That answer your question?"

*an egret's broken wing  
bracketed by bloodied feathers  
the moon fractured by leafless trees*

## STARS ACHING IN DISTANT SKIES

2:47 a.m.

Distant skies are aching. A locomotive's lonesome whine weaves between the Cuyahoga hills.

Voles fleeing foxes skitter in the undergrowth outside my bedroom window, then a silenced scream, bones crunching. The spigot in my bathroom drips, its rhythm the beat of a Hank Williams song. I'm lying in bed sipping on a Chivas to numb my ache. The March night weighs on me like stars extinguishing, sizzling as cigarette butts thrown into my near empty liquor glass.

The locomotive will quiet soon to an absent moan, lost in the dark hills, the train heading toward the track's end.

2:47 a.m.

*the silence of an owl's flight*  
*wind stilled*  
*thought hides like scurrying mice*

# *SUMMER*

## PALE GREEN AND GARNET

HER DRESS, once green with hope, now pale as roadside milkweed, was washed daily, worn daily to threadbare. She and Don had no money, he said.

"Trying hard, babe. Get up, drive them 60 miles to the Arkoma oilfields southeast of Tulsa, my truck chugging on fumes, carburetor dang near corroded on sea salt, work on the rigs under 100-degree heat, sweat dripping down my back like cottonmouth venom, and for what? To drive back to you? For what?"

She lived in his rental, one room, hotplate, toaster, bed sprung from his weight, stained from his stain, and looked north out the flyspeck window screen, north toward what might be, could be.

She wondered if he'd get an oil strike, wondered if he'd come back flush, though he never had, wondered if he'd come back at all. Hoping he wouldn't.

She'd left Sioux City for the sun, heading south, away from the plain's wind and snow.

"Hey, girl," her friend Sarah had said. "Give it a chance, Hon. What you got to lose? Stuck here, cleaning people's houses, hiding their dirt so they think better of themselves? Go on. Make a life for yourself."

So, she did. Left one cold home, ending up in another.

The radio next door to his rental was on, set to a country/western station, day and night, always playing too loud, accompanied by the clink of beer bottles and an occasional "damn you!" or "hot enough for you?" or sobs. She could hear "Stand by Your Man" through the walls. Same old mewling her mom had cried to. Generations repeating.

"Enough," she said, rooting through the room, looking for a grocery store paper sack for her makeup and empty wallet. She gave the room one final glance, saw in the window's reflection a glimpse of the red welt beneath her left eye, stepped to the door, and flung it open, her eye cried red, as red as the

glass garnet promise ring he'd given her, the one he called a ruby jewel.

*an opaque jewel*  
*clouded by inclusions*  
*doubt denying clarity*

## SEPIA

THEIR BARN had been nailed tight at right angles, the beams planed, hinges oiled, hay raked. It once rested in a tended field, spring green from the windmill's well water clear and deep. Apple trees in their orchard bloomed fulsome.

Then she was gone.

*rain pelted the land*  
*puddles of mud*  
*worried passage*

In time the barn's beams swayed in decay, his attentions distant, his eyes vacant. Doors hung askew on rusted bolts, stalls echoed emptiness through wormed wood, and mice entered sibilant, filling the void with mischief, their scurrying feet the chatter of thrown bones. The windmill shattered, lightning struck, its blades airless in the farm's dead breeze, and the field's grasses dried like barbed wire, cicadas screaming in the summer heat.

One dusk, he packed his truck: their bedspring with splines spent, a bent rocker, and his guitar, strings sprung, sound hole stuffed with calendar clippings of lost birthdays and anniversaries. He turned the truck onto a rutted road, dusty with a past harvest's wheat chaff, and left his life, once green, now the color of sunset under cloud-worried skies, the color of sepia memories.

## SHELL

IN MY YOUTH, we traveled the back roads from Baton Rouge to Biloxi, Jackson to Monroe, the roads coiling like a nest of snakes, us staying each night in a fleabag motel, paying 31 cents per gallon at one-pump stations, our '57 Olds, 264,000 miles on the odometer, sucking gas like a four-pack-a-day smoker, the junk's hood hooked to the front bumper with baling wire, a proverb painted on the rear window from Matthew's "thrown into the furnace of fire," us eating at drive inns, greasy chicken or fried burgers: "don't spill none of that soda on the upholstery," dad would threaten, "just remember oysters don't spit out pearls all the time, we don't got money to burn" as he'd drive from one revival meeting to the next, preaching the gospel: "oh lord on high, we got sinners among us who better fear, cuz' hellfire's around the bend," but around our bend was the red dust and dirt of another road, another tent, another night in another swaybacked motel with its parking lot of broken cement, weeds sprouting through the cracks like dreams awakening in a nightmare, and him shouting damnation gospel from Revelation 10 or Thessalonians 1, and now, it all in a rearview mirror, my eyes squinting in the glare, my throat summer-scorched from swallowing his perdition, my soul as empty as a closed roadside diner along a bypassed road, I think about how cement is made from crushed shells.

*the snake readied  
its strike timed  
a clock ticking toward midnight*

## LIKE SNAKESKIN GLISTENING ON THE BEACH

WE WERE JUST JOSTLING, you know, kids on the pier's edge trying to impress the girls, they in their bikinis, we in our cutoffs, and the water looked clear, at least I thought, no crags, blue-black depth, so I pushed him, giggling, in the August sun and glanced at Susie in her swimsuit glistening like snakeskin on the beach, her laughter a siren song hissing through the summer sky like the sea nymph Circe in pigtails, and he fell reaching out to me half in fun half in horror and tumbled backwards, so he hit head first his neck the doctor said breaking on impact, I recalled telling his mom, my eyes welling, tears trickling down my face like beads of venom.

*raptors circle  
beneath tornadic skies  
the land accepts darkness*

## SUNSET DIORAMA

IN LATE AUGUST, within the scrub between Terlingua and San Vicente, when sunset stroked the Chisos oak like guitar notes, each leaf flutter glimmering as weak starshine in gray dusk, I'd hold Dad's hand as we walked the land, our feet marking progress like notes on a staff, his step bass to my treble, and he'd hum Vince Gill's "Go rest high on that mountain" in the deep rumble of thunder or quote Shakespeare. He'd stop and wipe his brow with a stained chambray sleeve, torn from his brush against a prickly pear. He looked left at a herd of heifers, as skittish as javelinas, cows staring like a Greek chorus, their mournful lowing a soundtrack to his soliloquy. I saw his amber eyes go pale as Yucca flowers. Our world was a stage along Boot Canyon, his exit cachectic, he as fragile as the rock nettle at our feet drying into airlessness in the summer heat.

*boot heels worn down  
like a stooped old man  
the road's dust settled on dying weeds*

# GONE

## ACT 1: DEAD AIR

The dust on the road  
was still. Dead air. Leaves waiting.  
Truck metal pinging  
in the heat. A lop-eared mutt  
the color of rust dozing.

"I'm breathless in your vacuum," she said.

## ACT 2: COTTONWOOD

The prairie grass moaned  
in the high winds from foothills  
rushing through the fields,  
rushing through me. I'm rock strewn,  
hard clay, soil untillable.

"I'm lost. You're gone," he said.

# *FALL*

## PLAYED OUT

WHEN THE FARM PLAYED OUT, trees growing in the silos untended where mice chewed corn dust, where the rocker on the house's paint-peeled porch screamed ghostly on wormed wood, wind whistling through broken slats, he left, replacing his lame nag, swaybacked and crop weary, with a job in the city driving a truck. He still wore his Stetson Llano cowboy hat, the straw stained the color of time, dried and storm blown, his dungarees patched with baled hay, his work boots gnarled like hands torn on barbed wire. He still drove the truck like a horse at walk gait, broken from a day of pulling plow, throat latch choked, hames heavy, backstrap girded as tight as a candle snuffed without a wish made, and he peered into his rearview mirror fearing the next blue norther looming, his fall becoming the chill of an ice future.

*the mirror cracked  
like shards of fired clay  
willows thirsting*

## CALENDAR PAGES YELLOWING

I CREAKED UP the back porch stairs and opened and slammed the torn screen door and swatted away a buzzing fly the memory of a past day gone with picnics near the fallow fields the whining wail of harmonicas and hand churned ice cream cherry or peach the pits and stones breaking teeth and walked into the kitchen dark from blinds drawn and eyes shut to recent sickness and palsied hands. Mom stood at the farmhouse sink calendar pages yellowing a glass of milky water filled and tilting up to take a swig her other hand holding pills too many for a daily dose. Out the window barely cracked I caught a glimpse of tractors stilled leafless trees and murderous crows.

*the fly buzzed*  
*like pills in a bottle*  
*like teeth in a tightening jaw*

# PARKINSON'S

## ACT 1

circuit breakers wrecked,  
nerve cells shattered, spurting in  
tongue-bitten stutters,  
the static of random waves  
failing to transmit stupor

## ACT 2

fingers, arms, legs, tongue,  
stalled, movement lagging behind  
messages lost, of  
delayed synapses—anger,  
cognitive outbursts, failure

## ACT 3

iced mirror of self,  
blurred through cold lenses,  
a well of darkness,  
fingers stumbling on buttons  
unbuttoned, voice acid tinged

## ACT 4

wishes denied, snuffed  
candles, her body bent as  
a question mark, I  
fed her porridge, gray-beige, the  
color of her tasteless days

ACT 5

spittle slewed like thoughts  
skidding on black ice toward  
an abyss. "Enough,"  
she slurred, her mouth sagging as  
skin sloughing from her corpus

## WHEN FIELDS BLOOM DUST

THE TOWN ONCE HAD A PICTURE SHOW with balcony  
and jujubes and news shorts about some war and cartoons where animals met  
violent ends when life was black and white it maybe cost a dime Rialto or Roxy  
Princess or Palace can't remember the name with velvet curtains and uniformed  
ushers the marquee paint faded in yellow bruises and paper promos blotched  
like mottled skin beneath cataract glass the show moved out when the  
drugstore closed when the doctor died and the Farmers Insurance Co.  
repossessed our farm and sold our tractor for a quarter on the dollar I watched  
them haul away the dining room table and grandma's dresser drawers the two  
mules that pulled our cart gone too with two cows and a calf they left Dad's  
neckerchief once red now pale as platelets our fields bloom dust from withered  
vines and dust covers the town square a stray cat's mew whines like a nail  
hammered into coffin pine.

*a torn "for rent" sign  
gray with desolation  
dead leaves swirling on the ground*

## TIME SPINNING SHADOWS

I CAN'T GROW WIND he said to her as he stood in the field once black from prairie fire once rich in topsoil now the shade of cadavers just dead gone where life had grown his family gone too parents and grandparents and even prior generations like seasons remembering rows of crop and hands turning now what turns is the rows of windmills that loom and lurch metal beasts that whirl like locusts eating not breezes singing within the stalks the bank that repossessed his legacy withered on spent vines suggested wind sell air they said your day's done let the windmills work the land you failed what spins are my hands wringing calloused knuckles grinding skin once tanned and creased and split a map for my children to follow that map useless as dry parchment cracked what can I do he wailed with idle hands sit and watch time spin shadows on our land now the bank's I can't grow wind

*a tractor's flat tires  
fields overgrown in kudzu  
birds nesting in abandoned bedrooms*

## PATH

WHEEL RUTS, scythe rows in a soybean field point pole star north intersecting at right angles with the rim of the earth. From his front porch, mottled hands mapping the land, grasping the pied railing, the sun rising in his periphery, he surveys this path plumbed true, mist on the pasture. But east to west shadows parallel I-80, roughhewn flatland prairie becoming straight-line Pacific. In the distance, the bus's dust plumes, nearing.

*shadows move  
in earth's orbit  
a diary's pages turning*

## MODERN LOVE

I'M DRIVING THE PICKUP, once heart red now fading to muddied  
oxblood like our dun cows and as haggard, the bed beat up from my careless  
throwing of things like fenceposts and accusations, to the end of our road, and  
I'm looking back at the farm through the rearview, late November sky the color  
of excuses weary in the leafless trees, our fields barren so even the sheep can  
barely muzzle blades, our doublewide listing on its tired foundation, a rigged  
tarp flapping at our bedroom, failure to discourage the Fall, all the windows in  
the house and outbuildings as black as a murder of crows, as unharvested  
promises blackening on the vine, and those heifers a Greek chorus their all-  
seeing eyes cow-staring a rebuke. I've stopped the truck.

*the whine of an engine once hot now cold*  
*the moan of a distant plane*  
*contrails dissipating*

## NOTHING

EVERY DAY. For the last month. Or more. I've lost track. The days like blown sand. I've sat on the hard bench outside our house. Enjoying the bench's pain. Like penance. The wooden slats digging into me. Raking as peregrine talons. Each day is gray. To me. I feel the gray shadow heavy in the gray sky. Black clouds smothering the sun. All eclipse. The tornadic clouds like black ellipses against the gray sky. And I slump into the wooden bench weather torn. I feel myself drawn beneath heavy skies. Breathing the eclipse. Inhaling the tornado scream. And think of the last time I saw you. Walking away.

*a storm cloud's empty eye*  
*winds stalled*  
*the breath of a dying swan*

# *WINTER*

## SEPTEMBER IN THE DAKOTAS

I CAN'T THROW no more snow it's heavy with wet and up to my knees  
plus my toes gone numb and spit damn near frozen on my lips split I'm blind  
with white and here it is only late September a cold spell shrieking in from  
Canada I won't incur sin from this cold-hearted neighbor so says Leviticus but  
what's the real winter gonna be in February or March more months of misery  
they say this here weather makes a man strong we got iron in our guts up north  
they say but my back's bent and my hands raw and I don't feel like iron I feel  
like a mule misused and harness broke I can't throw no more snow.

*ice numbing his heart*  
*a child departed*  
*a nest broken on the frozen ground*

## HER DRESS ONCE PINK

A HARRIER HAWK on a snow-mounded fence, a murder of crows on the gray wind, shocks of yellow winter wheat on the periphery, the field bleeding into the horizon, she was surrounded by absence, the air a hole consuming sound, her nearest neighbors only dust plumes conversing. You work the land, she said, feel the soil warm your soles, blacken your fingers coiling around roots to coax growth out of riven sod. The breeze swirls around you in embrace, she said. I'm in your grandpa's house built by prior generations of seekers who left leaving motes. Wearing a dress once pink, now the color of leached corpuscles, my palms etched like drought-baked clay, I'm growing emptiness. The jet flying 50,000 feet above our farmstead, she said, sees the curvature of the earth obscured by the windbreak casting shadows through my window.

*a snow-covered windowsill  
where summer daylilies once thrived  
hot breath steams the cold glass obscuring*

## AND THE MORNING SUN TRAILED HER BUS IN SHADOWS

WHEN SHE TURNED 18, it was time, she thought, to find it, a road, a path, somewhere, anywhere. So, she packed her duds in an overnight, stole what cash she could scrounge from her ma's secret hiding place in the shoebox behind the Christmas wrapping paper on top of the outdated People magazines growing mold in their attic, and set off-5:00 am, on foot, toward the Greyhound bus depot on 2nd and Main, trying to leave the house before her mom woke for a morning shift at the Sip and Suds convenience store slash laundromat slash icehouse. Her dad was long gone, having left for a one-night bender, fifteen years ago. Walking through the still-dark streets with only dogs wailing loneliness, ankle deep in snow drifts, she laid low in the depot's restroom, then boarded the 7:15 am bus to Amarillo, heading north, her line of destiny, she thought, traveling the direct path toward a trade, maybe wealth, or at least something akin to \$7 an hour plus tips, love, who knows, even marriage. Sitting on the bus's back row, alone, on a brown vinyl seat cracked like drought-hard clay, she wrote a note to no one in her diary, decorated with rainbows and hand-penciled hearts. She was charting a life, the morning sun trailing her bus in shadows.

*the lure of distant lights  
through fog-bound mornings  
a path weaves like wishes*

## A TRUCK IN SNOW

HE PARKED THE TRUCK beneath the oak behind the barn across the lake then handed the keys to his younger brother Hank with a backslap and wink, walked to her and said, “Don’t worry, Beth, I’ll be fine, you know me, always careful,” and hugged her, kissed her, and turned toward the road, a bus waiting.

2004, spring, the oaks in bud, starting to leaf out. He was off to Iraq, they said, but who ever really knows. Once on the bus, he waved to the family through fly-speck windows, they waving back, and he was gone, dust pluming on the country road. Beth wrote daily, at first, and waited.

No news, but the family said, “he’s busy, probably, girl. He’ll write when he gets a chance,” and spring became summer. The truck sat beneath the oak, baking in the Kansas heat, the sun radiating off the truck’s red panels, the truck’s hood pinging in the heat, like a heart beating.

She wrote weekly, her time taken up with chores, and she waited, and she was pregnant. No news, but the local paper reported heavy fighting near Al Anbar, where he was maybe stationed, so the family said, “stay calm, Beth. He’s involved. He’ll be fine. You know him, always takes care.” In autumn, the leaves fell, littering the truck with pastels, leaves stuck to the truck’s windows like lost letters. Beth wrote weekly, mostly, but sometimes a month would go by.

No news, and she was 5 months and showing. The house was heavy with quiet. No one in the family talked about the war, anymore. When winter hit, snow covered the truck, covered the oaks, covered the barn, iced the lake, and the farm was iced in fear, like nighttime chills.

The baby was born after that first snow, a boy they named after him, his father gone to war. Another truck stopped by the house later that winter, and a man got out. He tugged down his khaki dress uniform jacket, straightened his tie and hat, and looked toward the house with downcast eyes, eyes that were tired from telling tales before. He plodded through the snow with heavy boots. Before he knocked on the door, Beth opened it, the baby on her hip, her eyes starting to redden like his truck in the snow, buried in cold.

News had finally arrived.

*an iPhone inbox*  
*text messages swarming*  
*red ants disturbed*

## EMPTY

THE BOW-BACKED BARN, shuttered tight, slumps into the barren field drawn down by gravitational pull of generations escaping, the past abandoned like winter cut wheat remnants moldering in the hayless loft, backlit by slanted light prying through planks once planed, now warps with disregarding drafts, silence only marred by creaks, voiceless where children's voices had sung, airless where lovers had breathlessly breathed, emptied of anticipation, empty but for wavering notes.

*sound lives soundlessly  
under the weight of loss  
the graveyard's oak tree bows*

## ONLY GEESE FLY STRAIGHT LINES

THE WHEEL RUTS scribed the prairie snow like meridians on traveler's maps, pathways evolving from now to next, lines curving in impromptu plans. "Where to?" he asked, eyeing the sky as if clouds told tales with trusting advice. "Try right," she answered. "I always veer toward the shadows," earth askew, trees shedding leaves in winter chill, branches bending above the pond, western shorelines pushed randomly by contrary winds. "You think it's there?" he asked again. She breathed in deeply, held a sigh, then weaving her arm in his, said, "Let's try."

*bees thrill toward sweetness  
their flight true to home  
joyous as honeyed dreams*

## THE SILENCE

SHE STOOD AT THE WINDOW, lace drapes half drawn, the sky darkening at dusk, darkening under sullen skies, the sun setting behind the gray hills rising like doubt beyond the blackening snow.

She breathed out a deep sigh that rattled in her chest like mice scurrying in the dark and sucked in smoke from her Pall Mall. Knocking the ashes on the floor, staring at them as they sifted downward in a slow gyre, she whispered to herself, "Used to care. Used to keep the house clean. For them." She had been whispering to herself a lot lately.

*a home's darkness grieves*

There used to be apple pies on the kitchen countertop, shiny in red, glazed with sugar. There used to be stews simmering on the stove, the aroma her life. Now, neither pies nor stew waited in the kitchen. Sweet and savory smells had been replaced by dust and ash.

A bluebottle fly hushed against her window screen, the only sound in her silent house. Her men had gone, the boys off to cities for jobs away from the land, streets replacing silos, to carry briefcases instead of hauling hay.

*winter winds whisper chill*

"Gotta go Mom. Ain't nothing left for us here," her eldest Sam had said, as he waved from his Ford truck, pulling away from his past, plumes of dirt thrown up from the road like exclamation points.

Joe, her husband of 43 years, was heart-stopped dead, the land and farm work whittling him to a nub.

*birds buddle mournfully in ruffled feathers*

Looking up from the ashes, she stared out her window at the emptiness of her snow-cold land, the empty sky punctuated by crows flying away, black ellipses against the gray clouds.

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STEVE GERSON

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"Now what?" she asked the silence seeping into her home like chilled air.

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## ABANDONED

MY ROOM WAS DARK. An unadorned Christmas tree, hospice-delivered but forgotten, leaned against a corner void to my right. No tensile streamers. No string of colorful lights.

Dry needles littered the floor, thirsting. Ambient light like a lost guest seeped in through the window to my left, a dim glow from a wintry gloom, the sun setting behind disturbed clouds reflecting gray snow.

I could hear but not see cars speeding on an overpass, their whoosh the sound of my intubation wheezing, heading rapidly toward a hazy destination. Minutes before, my caregiver had read the chart hanging from my bed like an amputated foot.

"How are you?" he asked, but his phone interrupted. He shook the phone to dislodge a lost message, held up one finger in pause, said "Got to get this. Be back soon," before he left the room not to return.

From my window, I saw a skeletal cell tower, out of service, no reception. An abandoned grocery cart, wheel-deep in snow, sat empty in the cold field, wind whistling through it as a marrowless bone flute to awaken specters in my dark room.

*a lone Joshua tree  
branches mangled by dry soil  
wind whistling moans*

## PROPHESIES

WE'D SIT IN THE DINER for Sunday suppers, surrounded by grease fire and bellowed orders for fried chicken and giblet gravy. Grandpa held court at the head of our table, like Ezekiel, prophesizing about exile. "I've seen it all, boys, and it ain't pretty, believe me All Mighty, but we got us some hope, I tell you," crossing his heart, him in his rolled-up dress shirt, starched as stiff as the gospel, as holey as Palm Sunday.

With his dinner fork held aloft as a scepter, he'd preach forgiveness from Colossians 3:13, saying in hushed tones over his grits, "Bear with each other, boys, and forgive one another, even if you've got some damned grievance, ya hear?"

Or he'd lash out at sinners (forgetting all about forgiveness, I guess). "You remember your Psalms, like 145:20, where the Lord says He'll destroy them wicked ones," and gramps would wipe the waffle syrup off his whiskers.

I'd see travelers in the diner come and go like calendar pages turning, like pilgrims to a shrine. They'd nurse a cup of dime coffee, their heads bowed over the black steam, the steam clouding their dreams deferred, and wear work clothes brown from the land's dirt, as brown as the grease-fire that hung in the air, brown as a sepia photo in a family's discarded album.

Their eyes pooled in their coffee cup's reflection, the diner's harsh light against the night's darkness, their moment of rest in a worn booth, plastic seats torn like a map, each crack a destination sought, a path missed. They might have sought Jeremiah's "good way" and "rest for their souls," but I never saw any rest in their restlessness, their alcohol-stewed disturbance, eyes red.

The diner's gone, shuttered soon after grandpa died, when an overpass was constructed so people could get someplace else, other pilgrims seeking a new gospel. And dust settled on the prophecies of my youth.

*coffee dregs in a yellow cup  
a dog-eared map thrown into the truck's cab  
the dirt road travelled downhill*

## EPILOGUE

### POETRY, THE LAND, THE ROAD

1.

Poetry, the land,  
the road seek distance. Ride a  
highway through high plains,  
air as thin as dissonance.  
Clouds see a road wrought with words.

2.

A poem wends visions  
labyrinthian beyond  
earth's curvature. The  
highway undulates in heat.  
Roadside trees tremble with sound.

3.

The sun parts the clouds  
in slanted rhyme, dappling the  
road with shadowed pen  
strokes. Written in lightning, a  
poem roils in storm song's thunder.

## ABOUT THE WRITER:

STEVE GERSON writes poetry and flash about life's dissonance. He has published in *CafeLit*, *Panophlyzine*, *Crack the Spine*, *Decadent Review*, *Vermilion*, *In Parentheses*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Big Bend Literary Magazine*, *Coffin Bell*, and more, plus his chapbooks *Once Planed Straight*; *Viral*; *And the Land Dreams Darkly*; and *The 13th Floor: Step into Anxiety* from Spartan Press.

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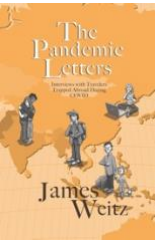
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