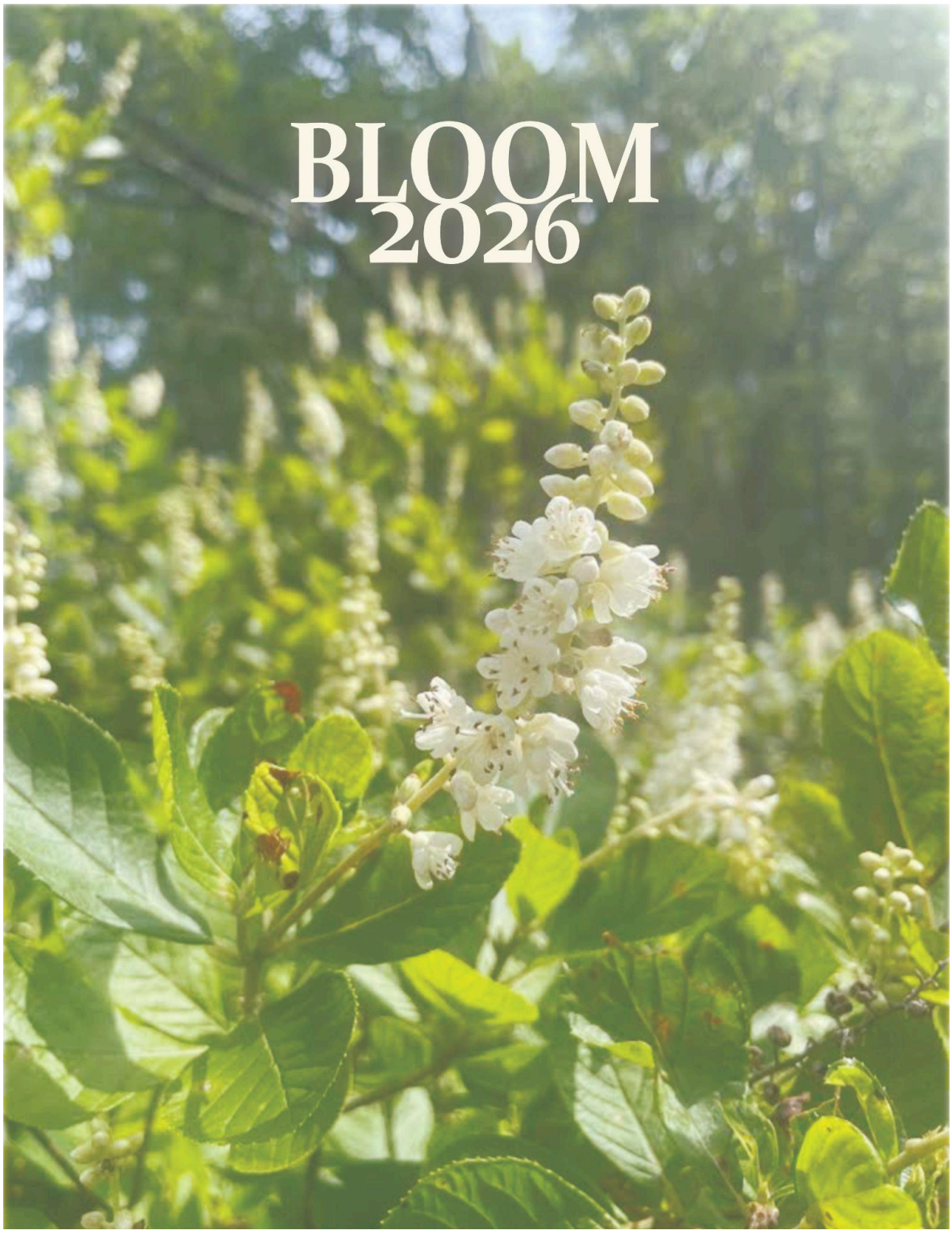

BLOOM
2026

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Dan Chelotti

Oh, You Know

I stepped in a pothole
of pudding. I mean,
the pothole couldn't
help itself - but the
pudding? Madness.
And my interview is soon.
No, wait, it's begun.

Adam Grabowski

Delivery

Mercy Hospital
Springfield, MA January 2005

You were flood-lit, bare from the waist down, your legs propped up
& triangled back, neck soaked through the back of my hand,
screaming you were going to die.
You never looked so young.

Our daughter first met the world
as a pulse of black, matted hair
& left the room nameless in a havoc of voices — the concern, the
lights—
all the wires & instruments of delivery, gone.

Even the door seemed to close itself.
I helped you out of bed.
I walked you to the bathroom.
I stepped you under the showerhead & slid closed the frosted glass.
& because we were still lovers back then,

when we're told a short time later
that she is down the hall, healthy & ready to be held — it doesn't
feel miraculous. Not in the same way I'd just seen
your full, rounded belly begin to blur & melt away. Your IV wound
around the metal frame &

for the briefest of moments, right into my hands.

Yeukai Chiroodza-Imeh

[Untitled]



Sav Switzer

Illegal Stoplight

Waiting at a red light,

I say stop; you blow the light.

My no left behind.

Dylan Holubowich

Mourning Roadkill

My brother buried roadkill —

Screeching to roadside stops,
Churning even frostbitten earth
With Dollar Store shovels –
When I asked him why he'd say,

"I don't know much in this life
But I do know such as these were made
For more than splayed limbs and cracking concrete —

That they were made to be loved,
If not by man then by
The nosetwitch spring
The dawn dewstep —
Fur in the wind

This way they may feed tomorrow's flowers
And their death may bear the beauty

They were robbed of in life."

Stephen Walsh

Waves



Adam Grabowski

Orpheus Waits in the ICU

How you've made me miraculous and mute.
How all I do is dance inside this tongue,
study your mouth, the curve of your back.
I remember everything,

engagement over ham and cheese. Cancer
with a lemon twist.
What I'd doubted, I'd always doubted — medicine, mileage, and would my own
throat ever unraw itself

long enough to sing your name, your watery goodnights, my promise to
never look back.

First, it was my lute, then a phone charger. *Metamorphoses* dog-eared and
dozing in the back of the car.
I keep leaving things behind
and I hate to turn around again.

It's a big hospital, a vast parking lot.

It takes a while.

Josh Barron

Toum of the Unknown Soldier

The Grim Reaper with a 180 mm payload hungrily watches his enemies

He licks his chops thinking of feeding more meat to the grinder

Under his hungry eyes young soldiers gather in a camp

They are enjoying a well-armed lunch packed by their loved ones

Hellfire rains down from the sky and their lives are consumed

The reaper only leaves morsels of existence behind

But a grunt with an AR licks the plate clean, leaving not even a crumb

Their squad is unfazed by the bloody mess left behind by the reaper’s feast

Life is cheaper than a packet of ramen on the battlefield

They are only taken aback by white streaks that smell vaguely of herbs

The streaks coat the bombed-out site and make their mouths water

A 17-year-old martyr had a jar of homemade sauce his mother packed for him

The toum of the unknown soldier is splattered across this crater of a campsite

The war machine has a way of chewing up men and women and spitting them out

At least he was properly seasoned, despite not seeing many himself

With how many of the young are sent to die you'd think they must taste better

Or perhaps the leaders are too cowardly to risk their own bacon

Only thinking of their insatiable appetite for more land

Manifesting their destiny, from the river to the sea, from sea to shining sea

Only thinking of their limitless craving for power

And no amount of lambs sent to slaughter will fill their black hole of a stomach

Still they're served charred veal on a gunmetal green platter

Well done! They've fed their massive egos, waging wars to not look weak

They’re peaches, their pride bruising at the slightest whiff of criticism

So distract the masses with a war, bread and circuses are no more

See that would require feeding the poor

And they don't see starving mouths, they see bags of gore

Who, at the slightest provocation, will burst, nourishing foreign soil

So what's it all for? It's all for one, it's all for the bloviating bastard at the top

The chickenshit in chief who sends others to do their Dirty Work

Commissioning heinous acts that would make Steely Dan blush

Hiding away in an ivory tower while the unwashed masses suffer below

Lining their pockets with cash and stuffing their fat faces with caviar

Partaking in the finest of dining and dining on the finest china

While their soldiers are ground into the finest of powders and bombed to the finest of mists

Their finest hour spent on petty bullshit

What a fucking waste

Stephanie Afonso

no

November’s
leaves
can
console
my
Heart

Stephen Walsh

Reflection



Dan Chelotti

Walk Challenge

Tell me, friend, what shapes
have you managed to fit in the bottles
you have thrown at the sea?
Sometimes, I feel the minivan
slider is our most appropriate
approximation of fate. Dottie
you say the dead wish they could
feel the way I can't hold on
to the things I love, but I'm not
dead, and I should feel what I feel -
So how do I feel? I feel a walk.

A long long walk with you.

Winifred Martin

Through the Canopy

The trees hold their breath. Dark hands spread wide against a sky that doesn't ask to be witnessed, only seen. And somewhere in that looking, something in you loosens.

Between the branches and the blue, clouds rest like forgotten thoughts, soft and unashamed. They do not hurry. They do not explain themselves. They drift without destination, unbothered by the weight of where they've been or what the wind might ask of them next. There is a lesson in this that cannot be taught, only absorbed slowly, the way light moves through a canopy at the end of a long day.

And the light. It doesn't announce itself. It arrives at the edges of leaves and traces what it loves in gold, gilding the silhouettes of pine and ash until the ordinary becomes something that catches your throat before your mind has time to name it. This is what beauty does when we stop defending ourselves against it: it slips through the cracks of our busyness and lands somewhere tender we forgot we had.

Stillness is not silence. It is not the absence of wind or birdsong or the low hum of a world that never fully stops. Stillness is fullness without demand. It is the moment everything agrees to simply *be* the leaf, the cloud, the darkening branch, the small breath you finally release after holding it longer than you knew.

The sky above. The roots below. And in between, a quiet cathedral we keep walking through without stopping, its vaulted ceiling made of branches, its stained glass made of sky, its hymn the sound of wind moving through leaves like something holy, still trying to reach us.

Until now. You looked up. And for once, you listened.

Alexa Pajak

Rainy Day



Ryann Anderson

Reminders

Every time you feel the wind blow
it's my love, my love
Every time a flower blooms under light
it’s my heart, my heart
Every time a rainbow cuts the clouds
it’s my smile, my smile
In the wilderness where you
ran rampant as a child
In the rain that cleans your tears
a young adult calling
I’m still here when leaves dance
the snow flurries
The stars twinkle
I never left
I didn’t mean to go
you must know
you must know

Josh Barron

Smooth Operator

Do I fall for people too easily
Or is it just easy to fall for you
Because my heart flutters as I write this, somewhat cheesily
I just like you more and more each day, no matter what you do

You make me happier, more fulfilled, more at ease
Your words a verbal Lexapro for my anxious mind
Everything comes naturally from deep conversation to a playful tease
You're smart, funny, beautiful, and kind

I'd keep going on, but there aren't enough stanzas to describe your multitudes
But I'm so glad I met you
Every day I thank God, my lucky stars, or wherever my good fortune exudes
I just hope you feel the same way, too

Sadie Santaniello

Enemy Floor

When I feel above the ground,
I am glued to its surface

When I feel skin melt through warped wood,
The cool stiffness of separation is beneath me

When I feel the mind moving past time,
The floor opposes my reality

When I feel blotches of blues and blacks envelop the body,
The flat cage takes responsibility

When every ache I know
Feeling the weight of dreamless moments
Clashing
Halting
Hardening
Under the soul who is refusing,

For the gratefulness of your presence below my feet

Ryann Anderson

Skógafoss



Josh Barron

RE: Early Closure

Ice and Slush the perfect companion to closing early
The snow shimmers and shines rather pearly
An excuse with a nice view
The highway at 3 a surprisingly long queue

But I ain't sweatin' one flake
I'd rather be stuck in traffic, than in Excel
My heart warms in the cold, a feeling I can't shake
What will I do with the extra 2 hours, only time will tell

I'm playing with house time and enjoying every second
My joy a force to be reckoned with
And I reckon that ain't changing
My weekend fueled by electronic messaging

Now I can laze about and watch the snow fall
In a fugue of smoke and mist
My phone silent, avoiding shattered peace via an errant call
I'll get back to 'em, nothing important will be missed

The only thing that matters is now
My heart rate dropping like the Dow
The calm during the storm
Praying with every iota of my being this is the new norm

Sadly, the storm will clear, unlike my schedule
Free time a distant memory long gone
But a memory all the same, one that heals my soul
I find solace in what was and think "Right on"

Until that blizzard comes again I'll enjoy the extra day
and let the cards fall where they may
I'll build snowmen when I can
Content with memories and puddles, dreaming of a parking ban

Dan Chelotti

Due Diligence

1. How did we get here?

This question can identify
necessary chronology.
Yes, distraction rains
given the patchwork
of consciousness,
so, please, be consistent.

2. What do I know?

Facts. If you do not
believe in facts, use
via negativa as yeast
for them to rise. Keep
in mind, in three generations
your descendents will know,
at best, the kaput of your
existence.

3. What documents do we have?

Do you remember what
they meant, and why
you've kept them? Opposing
council will place them
as a feather on the scale.

4. What policy has been implicated?

Things fall apart.

5. With whom should I speak?

A tree grows through the roof
of the courthouse. Climb it.
Breathe out 'angel' from the base
of your spine. You cannot
will not be able to do this alone.

6. Next steps

The nature of what is discoverable
depends on the big red frames
the forms of your life emit.
So standardize your templates
before walking into the mist.

Antoannet Estevez

The Last Wish



Kiara Harvey

The Cycle of Fate

Marie-Anne believed in one thing: fate. Fate was what her mother whispered to her in the dark of night, underneath piles of thin cloth. Fate was what teachers frequently lamented as she sat behind a desk so small that her knees brushed against the surface. It was fate that led her here, to this cage. She didn't know whether to rejoice or despise it. She had seen these cages when she was young. She had walked along the rows and rows of cramped, barred entrapments. Women chained to a wall, all of whom looked up at her with emotions she could not yet perceive.

Now she understood the despair in their eyes. She knew her time had grown near and missed the times that came before: childhood, innocence, hands that covered her eyes from the weight of the world.

The men standing guard outside did not look at her reverently as they were supposed to; they didn't look at her at all. They faced away from the cold iron bars and the woman confined within. The only movement they made was their flinches at the noises Marie-Anne would make, her giggles, or whispers of anticipation.

Marie-Anne knew men like them—those who expected the women of this place to be pliant, soft, and malleable. Someone to shape, to be less than human. A lamb to the slaughter. A pig in a sty. A chick with their neck on the chopping block. All so the men would feel less like murderers and more like butchers.

Marie-Anne did not want to be pleasant, and she did not want to be soft. When the guards stumbled too close to the bars of her cage, she raged at them, laughed at their terror, screamed about her fate. Her fate. Formed by these men's hands.

These men were not doing what they were intended to do. They were supposed to look at her like one would look at a goddess. She was, after all, saving this place from its doom. She was meant to be revered. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. But, over and over and over again, the cycle would continue; she was just another cog in the machine. The fuel that kept it going, and so these men grew lazy in their roles. They made themselves into the Gods and kept the women under their thumbs.

No, they didn't look at her in reverence at all. Simply in a morbid fascination, a small light of disgust whenever their gaze caught her own.

Chanting was heard distantly. It echoed off the dark walls. The dungeon she remained in was horrific in its appearance—cracks in the concrete of the walls and roaches running beneath the feet of everyone who entered.

The closer the chanting drew, the closer time grew near. Marie-Anne licked her lips for what was to come. She stood from her corner, stretched her head towards the bars of her cage, and peered out. There the group came, in cloth of silk, and fires of gold that gleamed across their pale blue-veined faces. They walked in a slow, controlled pace, eyes that never strayed from the path ahead, that never looked towards Marie-Anne or the filth to which her cage had become.

The chants were in a language she had never learned. It unsettled her. The words were clipped, staggered syllables that tumbled out of their mouths in a seamless fashion. It was obviously practiced, with no conviction in their voices or passion in their eyes.

As they moved past her cage, the man who led the charge spared a singular glance towards the two guards, nodded once, then marched forth. She smelled the perfume off their bodies as they went on, a mix of berries and wood, sweet and powerful.

This march was a signal, an announcement to be ready. The guards straightened their spines, looked at each other with eyes that gleamed, and moved their hands toward the cage door.

Once the chants were only distant sounds, the stomps of their feet became muffled, and the lights of their fires were little specks, drumming was soon heard. Another group of men marched into the opening of the enclosure, dressed in the same silk with the same perfume and the same fires. The only difference was the man that led the procession held a drum, beating a consistent, dull rhythm.

The guards opened the door in a fluid fashion, one on either side, heads turned to the side. The guard on the left with hair so dark it glimmered blue in the light, made brisk steps towards Marie-Anne. She shifted away, bared her teeth, and stomach churned as the ritual began in full.

He ignored her actions, stiffly went on to release her cuffs from her hands, and grabbed her by the upper meat of her arm. A tight grip, one that would leave bruises on her pale arm for quite some time. He marched her out, dragged her with him as she huffed and pulled, bit and spat– he ignored her once more.

The guards stepped in unison, the man on the left was still dragging her from behind, eyes still ahead, never swayed from his duties. Their pace matched the pace of the two groups that went before them; steady, consistent, practiced.

She listened to the drums as she stumbled down the tunnel. Her eyes followed the brown cracks on the wall, watched as they climbed, web-like, down onto the floor, splitting until it formed a deep, long yawning rift she had to jump over before her toes would get caught in it.

The tunnel was long, lasting for so long her feet began to ache and blister against the small pebbles that would wedge into her skin. She tripped more often than she walked, crying out each time.

As the tunnel opened into a wide cave, light bloomed, blinding her. She looked around her, spotted the men in their clothes, and the little girls who hid behind them and peered up at her in awe and wonder. The men pushed the girls back until their mothers picked them up and left the cave; their part of the ritual was done.

She thought about those little girls as she was pulled towards the crowd, wondering who would be the ones chosen to take part of the ritual and who would be the ones to watch. She turned her gaze away from the spot where they stood, drinking in the sight of the people that were now before her.

They looked at her, chanting, swaying with the rhythm. She tried to pay them very little mind, eyes closed to block their stares, humming to distract from the noise that surrounded her. They had their ritual to follow, she had her own.

The guards guided her to the middle, and the crowd opened to welcome her through. A woman would be laid out before her; she knew it and didn't have to open her eyes to see it. She licked her lips, hummed louder as the crowd circled her. The guard let her arm fall free and stepped back until he, too, became one with the crowd.

A throat was cleared somewhere behind her, impatient and annoyed when she made no move to change her stance. Someone jabbed her back with something pointed, trying to make her flinch or stumble. She still paid them no heed. She continued to hum, squeezed her eyes shut, and began to sway to the rhythm she made up. When the chants finally quieted and a stilted silence filled the air, her hums petered out, trailing off into a soft sigh.

She lifted her eyes, took in the body that lay before her. She went for the heart, as poetic as it should sound. Lifted the beating thing to her lips. Opened her jaw. Pushed the organ in. Bit with the canine teeth. Marie-Anne could hear it now: high-pitched wails of years, decades, centuries of suffering that preceded her. She knew that soon she, too, would become part of the suffering. In the year that followed, she would be the body on the table, and her heart would be the one pushed into the mouth of another.

That's how it went.

She prayed as she ate, ate as she prayed, over and over the cycle will go, wheel of time-fortune-life, a bundle tucked into this pocket of time.

Antoannet Estevez

Forbid She Shows Emotions



Stephanie Afonso

enjoy

the pieces of me
left behind
because your attitude is as smooth as burnt caramel
on habanero peppers
scornful,
honestly—
dare i wish for something else?
hazel eyes? april? a lullaby?
dreadful—

i must apologize.

Ryann Anderson

Sweet, Sweet Pepperbush



Ryann Anderson

In the Wind

It’s not that I never loved you

It was the fleetingness that caught my lungs and made my days lighter

It was the wind that pushed against my mouth and suffocated

It wasn’t because I never loved you

It was because I did

The way the flowers love the sun, but still wither

The way the one sacrifices for the many

I loved you desperately

Infinitely craving the day the ground would level out

But I’d already fallen through the ice

And how could I possibly take you down with me?

There is a grace in admitting defeat so the other can live

In passing food along the chain without a bite missing

Laying morning glories and forget-me-nots upon a newly built tomb

You walk away from our sad procession; still, I loved you

We had the right now and maybe not forever, but still, I love you

Editor's Note

A huge shoutout to our contributors! Thank you for the creativity that you imparted to this year's edition of BLOOM. It's your submissions and support that make this magazine possible! The world needs work like yours, so please, continue to grace it with your wonder and craft.

A special thank you to the entire BLOOM editorial staff. Your efforts and contributions make the issue fun, interactive, and meaningful:

Makayla Alvarado
Antoannet Estevez
Kiara Harvey

And to the Editor-in-Chief:
Ryann Anderson

And thank you to Prof. Nicole Braden-Johnson *for dotting our i's and crossing our t's this edition! Every great magazine has a great proofreader!*

Lastly, we acknowledge you, our readers, who made this possible with your interest and support. Thank you for seeking wonder in the world. We hope you enjoyed this issue of BLOOM just as much as we enjoyed making it!