

The background is a complex collage of vertical strips. From left to right, the strips include: a purple and green textured strip; a strip with a small label that reads 'DO WE CARE?'; a strip with a yellow and brown abstract face; a black and white spiral pattern; a solid grey strip; a yellow and green patterned strip; a brown and orange patterned strip; a green and yellow patterned strip; and a dark blue and black patterned strip.

passager

WINTER 2024

FIRES

He lays and lights the fires
easily, this new man in my house.
All the kindling collected
by my husband has waited
since his death
to be burned.
He split the wood and stacked
it near the porch door.
A step outside –
logs near at hand.

This new man takes pride in his fires.
They burn with concentrated grace,
flaring and sparking
into flames so hot
we retreat, push our chairs apart
to make space for its breath.
The heat moves in, settles
between us, and I realize my husband
is back, claiming his place.

Nikia Leopold

NOTES TO MYSELF

Ignore dust mites in the bed clothes
and frying pans heaped in the sink.
Throw out every lonesome sock
you've saved, hoping to uncover partners.
No more boned bras that scrape your ribs.
Overlook mountains of files
muddling your office.
Get rid of locks on doors and hopes you cling to.
Open every window.
So what if your T-shirt has stains
from Nonpareils warmed in your hands
and cherries dropped
when you nibbled them in the car.
Lose the date book so the hygienist won't plunk
that bite wing thing under your tongue
and the gynecologist won't say that line
they all memorize the first day of training.
You know – *Scoot down a little.*
Give up wanting to be beautiful next time;
there may be no next time.
Memorize the woods; watch long enough
to see fern fronds unfurl.
Encourage the night to have its way with you.
Darkness, too, longs to be held.

Linda Goodman Robiner

SCRIPT IN HAND

Margarita Meyendorff

When I told my mother that I was leaving home to become an actress in NYC, she threw a pot of hot potato soup at me. She couldn't understand my need to escape the tiny dark apartment in Nyack, NY with the camphor-scented claustrophobia, the sickness and sadness that permeated the walls. I had to leave, and I did – with potato soup on my shoes.

I was only 19 and determined to “make it” in New York. I moved in with my cousin, began attending dance, acting and singing classes. I answered the cattle call auditions where, usually, after hours of waiting, the director with one swift gesture of his hand, would dismiss an entire group of five-foot-three-inch blondes, of which I was one . . .

For nourishment, I ate 25 cent hot dogs with sauerkraut and made free hot water and ketchup “soup” at the Automat.

There was an almost instant descent down to the dregs of show business. I began go-go dancing in bars to make ends meet – men leered as I danced in cages with my fringe, fishnet stockings and red high heels.

Then, a break . . . I was hired not as a star or even in a small part. And not in NY, but in Philadelphia. I was backstage as wardrobe mistress for the nude musical *Oh! Calcutta* . . . But backstage was magical, and I breathed in the perfumed whiff of glamour – actors rushing past in costume or naked, and I felt a thrill in the reflected light and scandalous fame. This *soupçon* of show business glitz stopped when Frank Rizzo, the mayor, closed the show because of the nudity and obscenity. My dreams of stardom vanished . . .

WRITING MY OBITUARY

Forever correcting the details in family members' telling of stories, I was asked to write my own obituary to avoid the trouble I might experience trying to edit it from the grave:

Though obviously neuro-diverse, lying somewhere on the spectrum of colorful behavior, he accomplished much in such a short time on earth, leaving it to those he left behind to fill in the particulars.

Postscript: Please don't mention the time I was in the attic trying on period dresses when the doorbell rang and I scrambled downstairs to greet my son's best friend.

Jim Tilley

FALLING STAR

So here you are. It all comes down to this:
You're not some figure painted on a Grecian urn,
Forever young and playing timbrels turn
By turn. You had your chance, a genesis

As good as any. That breathless urgency
Of youth is gone. Well what did you expect?
So give yourself the time to self-reflect,
Or not, but face your new reality –

Retired. You knew that it was bound to happen,
By choice or fate's design. You've known success
And failure, illness, grief, the loneliness
And pain of unfulfilled desire; but when

Will you accept that this is where you are?
You blaze the western sky, a falling star.

Cheryl A. Corey

YELLOW

Ruth Ann Dandrea

Jake woke to the legless man. The one standing on the street corner in Ho Chi Minh City, not begging, just walking to work on the feet that seemed to be attached to his buttocks. The one who came in the night to remind him, to assure him, to urge him and his two strong legs forward. He let his own legs lift him, carry him to the kitchen to the sound and smell of coffee brewing.

Susan lay in bed longer. Lingered in the heat of sheets tangled with their late-stage lovemaking. She didn't know if Jake had changed after he came home from the war. She did not know him before his war, or the next, or the one after that. She'd only just run into him, quite literally, when the Tastee Freeze opened up again the summer after the pandemic. She'd been licking a dripping Nutella-vanilla twist, the place's specialty cone, not looking, and had walloped her thigh into the side of his motor bike. Not that it was her fault, exactly. Who expected to find a giant yellow tricycle parked at the Tastee Freeze on Friday night, the fifth of July? He'd offered her a ride for her pains and she'd climbed aboard, straddling the bike's back seat, wrapped still-sticky hands around Jake's leather vest and off they went.

Into the sunset, Jake liked to say. Susan took one look at his yellow trike and rode off with him into the sunset.

The two of them sat, then, at the rickety patio table behind Jake's small house two blocks from downtown, two blocks from the grocery store, two blocks from the Tastee Freeze. Two blocks from heaven, Jake liked to say . . .

THE TRAIL OF TEARS

E. Eugene Jones Baldwin

“Are we by that river?”
My grandmother Olive is swathed in white nightgown and bedclothes, her cheap brown wig – the family calls it the helmet – askew. The skin of her face is loose and corrugated. Photos of grandchildren and folks long dead and one framed print hang over the bed. The twin bed catty-cornered from hers is empty; the occupant died this morning.

I assume she means the Mississippi River, a mere two miles from the nursing home here in Alton, on the Illinois side just north of St. Louis. All her 95 years she has had close attachments to rivers: baptized in the Kaskaskia River, fished in the Big Muddy in Southern Illinois, and the river-like Shoal Creek wound like a coiled snake through her father’s farm.

The nursing home is a hundred miles from Mt. Vernon where she had lived on two farms and another house most of her life, the first of which my parents and sister and I lived in for three years. We were very poor, so the story goes, my father making one dollar an hour in a local foundry.

My mother and father had met in Mt. Vernon, the local bad boy bootlegger and the pretty, redheaded, freckled girl from Oklahoma, whose father was an oil derrick worker for hire, and Southern Illinois was rich with oil in those days. My mother got pregnant with me at age 16, and it was downhill from there.

When I was four, my parents – we had moved to Alton by then – headed for a no-children vacation, would drop us kids off at Grandma’s

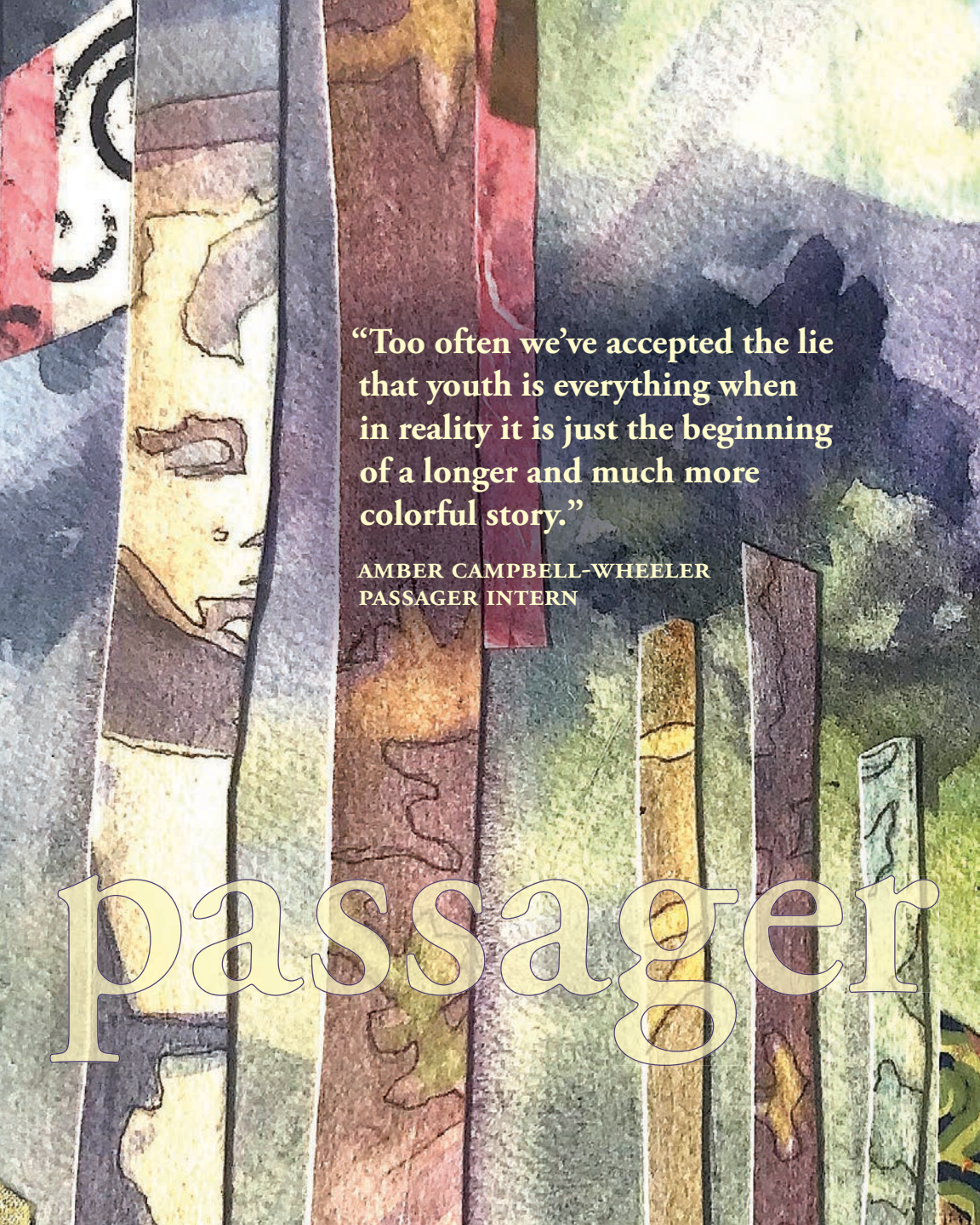
farm. She took us to her Holy Roller church, and we watched and listened as parishioners spoke in tongues and fell to the floor, and attendants draped towels over the ladies to protect their modesty.

Olive and Grandpa Floyd lived west of town in what was called “the colored section.” My sister and I, in rare moments when we weren’t being indoctrinated with religion, had black playmates. I romped around the fields with a light-skinned older boy, Georgie. He would carry me on his shoulders, and in winter, we would slide in our shoes across the ice of Georgie’s aunt’s pond.

In August 1970, I read a *Time* magazine article about George Jackson, founding member of the Black Panther party and author of *Letters from Soledad*, who had been shot to death by prison guards. The article said that Jackson had been buried in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, his casket carried on the shoulders of Black Panthers through the main street. Was this Georgie?

My sister and I used to play in Shoal Creek, chase crawdads and pick up small mussel shells and flint arrowheads. In the late summer, the banks of the creek were like walls of a fort, the walls made of corn. Olive would walk us to the edge of the yard, corn in every direction in September, tall and green and rustling in the breeze, no view of neighbor’s houses or the road beyond. Cicada choruses, a sure sign of winter, came in waves. She told us we lived on the ocean; the farm was an island. “When people say, ‘where did your granny live,’ you tell them the ocean. You-all been to the ocean.”

“I’m a-take a willow switch to your heinie,” Grandma says, a phrase I have heard all my life. “You ain’t too big to whup. Answer my question.” . . .



“Too often we’ve accepted the lie
that youth is everything when
in reality it is just the beginning
of a longer and much more
colorful story.”

AMBER CAMPBELL-WHEELER
PASSAGER INTERN

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