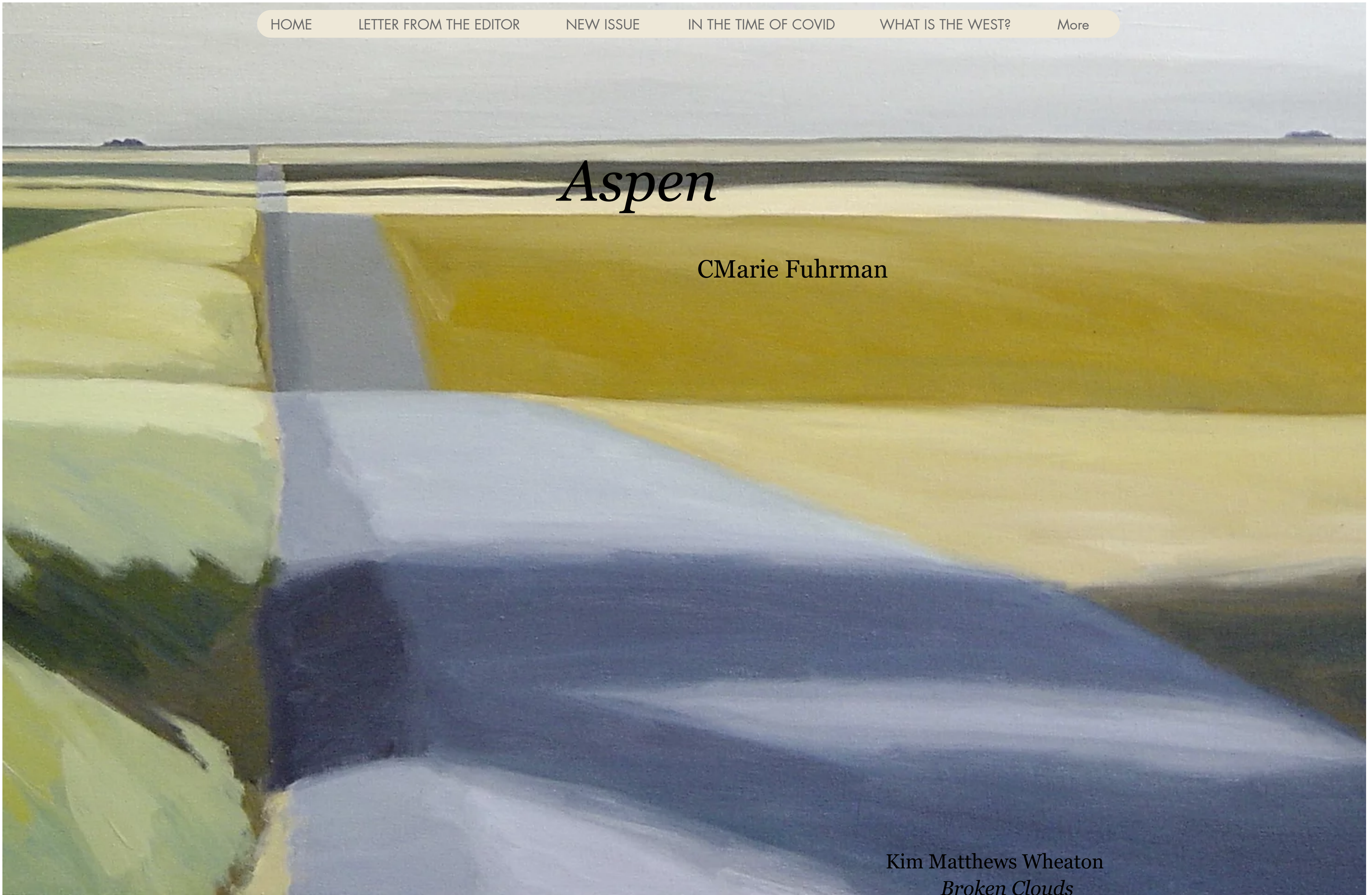

Aspen

CMarie Fuhrman

Kim Matthews Wheaton
Broken Clouds

It is past eight in the evening, but the sun still colors the edge of the horizon. The canted light falls on the aspen that line the road. Spotted black and white like palomino hides, the trees quiver with the anticipation of wild horses and watch with eyes fixed deep in their smooth bark. I am standing in the middle of Boydstun Street in the mountain town of McCall, Idaho. It’s a back road into town frequented mostly by locals. Caleb, my partner of six years, is kneeling before me. We are dressed up. We have just left a wedding.

It had been a warm day, but it is cooling off quickly. I wrap my jean jacket around me and bury my hands in the pockets. I feel the uneven, rocky surface of the asphalt through the thin leather soles of my boots and shift my weight. I wonder if I should call the police. I do not have a gun, but my fingers worry the handle of the knife I’d placed my pocket.

“I thought it was a dog,” the man says as he runs his fingers through his salt and pepper hair. I do not look at him because I am angry at him, because I fear what I might say to him. I look instead at the fawn that lies at my feet. “I hardly felt it.” There are just the four of us: the man, Caleb, myself, and the fawn. The road is quiet. We are standing on the faded centerline. The fawn’s eyes are huge, black, glossy, blinking rapidly. Pain and fear hold her rigid. She pants and bleats softly at the aspen, but there is no reply. She will not live; she cannot survive. I feel this knowledge as pain in my chest, and I bend to stroke the soft fur of her small, pricked ears.

Caleb slides his long arms beneath the fawn’s tiny body. She looks like a toddler being carried to bed. She turns her head, looking again toward the aspen. She does not struggle. He carries her to the graveled side of the road, away from further harm by cars. Caleb is a tall man, over 6’4”, a fisheries biologist who hikes hundreds of miles in the wilderness each year. He can carry ten-foot rounds of dead larch to our pickup for firewood and can pack out all four quarters of an animal. And yet. When he bends to his work with juvenile salmon or kneels to rub the soft fur of our older dog's ears, there is a gentleness that belies his physique.

The sun falls below the mountains now, the only light that of our taillights, which hold the scene in an unnatural carmine. Still, no one drives by. We will not leave the fawn to die alone, nor expect her to live. We are both sensitive to this kind of scene. Guilty even when not complicit. Unable to watch another being suffer. It is a

scene. Guilty even when not complicit. Unable to watch another being suffer. It is a decision made before she was hit, a self-imposed ethic, a ritual enacted before. In my pocket I feel the weight of the knife. It knows its dark purpose. In the cold and strength of that steel, I remember the blood of the doe it was used to kill eleven years earlier.

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There is a moment of thunderous silence when metal meets flesh. Anyone who has ever been in, or witnessed an accident, will tell you that it happens as if projected on a mute screen, each frame in slow motion. First, the arc of the dark blue side mirror as it descends onto and bounces off the pavement. Then, the shower of glass refracting late day light; a thick rain of headlamp and amber turn signal lens drops to the asphalt, each shard jagged, razor-sharp. The metal hood wrinkles like a brow furrowing and blue paint peels from the body to expose the dull metal beneath.

My husband Randy and I watch the scene through the windshield of our pickup. The doe is performing a grotesque ballet; the van throws her into a petite jeté, but she fails the landing, and lands splay-legged on the macadam, the yellow line dividing her broken and unbroken halves. Sound returns and George Strait croons something about Amarillo through the truck's speakers. Words come to my lips, but I do not speak them. I wait for the scream of the minivan's tires against the cool October pavement. It does not come. The vehicle does not stop.

We saw this coming. I like to think that Randy blinked the truck's headlights at the car, a rural warning of deer or patrolmen, but I never asked him. The doe was standing in the aspen, maybe feeding on grass; several others crossed before her. Why she waited so long to cross, I do not know. Seven does now run uninjured and away, across a field, toward the Beartooth Mountains, while this doe lies bleating in the road, calling to their disappearing forms. Her hooves scratch at the rocky pavement. Her front end is trying to pull her back end, trying to move herself off the road, sensing danger too late.

It is 2005, eleven years before Caleb and I will be kneeling at the side of Boydstun Street, in McCall, Idaho. I am in Montana. Between the towns of Roberts and Red Lodge. On a stretch of road notoriously known as deer alley. Highway 212, known for its scenic beauty, cursed by those who have replaced quarter panels, headlamps, or entire vehicles after run-ins with wildlife.

Randy and I are on our way to dinner in Red Lodge. We are dressed up. This is an unexpected stop, and it angers both of us. Not because we will be late, but because the driver of the minivan did not stop. Because the doe is still alive, still scraping the asphalt with her hooves. Randy is pounding the black steering wheel with the square palms of his ranch-calloused hands. “God dammit,” he repeats over and over, “God fucking dammit.”

We are not innocent of these collisions. Only months before, just as we crossed the bridge over Rock Creek, on our way to an early morning appointment at the veterinarian’s office in Billings, a stalwart whitetail buck jumped in front of the same truck we now sit in. Randy could not stop. Could not swerve for the bridge’s edges. By the time I shouted deer, the buck had begun its roll over our truck, its antlers breaking against the windshield, body crushing the hood as both Randy and I ducked in fear of the animal coming through the glass.

Randy was able to drive to the shoulder, radiator steaming, but the truck would go no further. We got out, unharmed, and walked around to the back of the truck to look at the deer. I do not think either of us assumed it would be alive, and it was not. The main body held, but pieces of the buck were strewn about the ditch and near the creek. Blood began to make mud of the dirt. We stood together, Randy and I, looking at the broken life in front of us, neither of us knowing that soon we too would know this sudden lifelessness and the shattering that followed. We called our neighbors and a tow truck. When we got our truck back two weeks later, it had a shiny black bumper welded out of two-inch steel bolted to the front. Randy would never again hit another deer.

On the side of Highway 212, under a blueblack Montana sky, Randy cuts the engine, but leaves the headlights on. I get out and walk around the front of the truck, past the new bumper, and stand with him over the deer. She is alert, in shock, eyes all pupil, mouth open and panting. Her legs are slack, but her eyes are trained on the place her body longed to be. She tries to rise, but every time her charcoal hooves get the slightest purchase on the macadam, she falls again, crudely, to the ground. I thought of the scene from Bambi, the one on the ice, and I am ashamed.

Randy grabs her left front leg, and I take her right. She does not fight as we pull her body to the side of the road. She is heavy and her muscles tense. I had dragged deer before, but never a live one. Randy and I are both hunters, have killed our share of deer. We don’t speak it aloud, but we both know that an animal whose death had

begun, by rifle or car, is our responsibility to see through to the end. It's an ethic we both share, whether in stories passed around at the supper table or watching our father's carry out this same task. We adopted a responsibility to animals both wild and domestic.

My blue Ford F150, at home in our driveway, has a .40 caliber Smith and Wesson in the console, just for times like this. I grew up a ranch kid. I grew up rural. I know the damage vehicles, barbed-wire, and gopher holes do to animals. I know when it is too late to call the vet. I know how fast a pulled trigger could end pain. I know the truck is at home, the gun quiet in the console. We need something else. I go back to Randy's truck for the knife my father had given me. Only a five-inch blade, but sharp. I hand it to Randy who pulls the silver edge open. "I guess it'll have to do," he says and strokes the head of the doe.

When field dressing, or gutting, a deer, the esophagus is cut by reaching both hands in the chest cavity, up the throat and neck, and firmly grasping the incredibly strong cartilage and sawing it free from the back of the mouth. In this manner, the rest of the intestines will follow, spilling out below or beside the animal into blood and hair and dirt and often snow. The knife my father gave me was for this purpose, as well as castrating calves and gutting fish. I kept it sharp for its work not understanding, until years later, that it was not the knife I wanted, but the feeling of being an adult that came with it. I did not understand, until that evening on the side of the road, why my father waited so long to give me the knife. I did not understand, though I was a year past thirty, that the gift was double edged: with the acknowledgment of adulthood came certain freedoms, and with them, choices and pain that could not be avoided.

The headlights reflect from the clean blade. Randy bends to the deer. He asks me to hold her legs, to keep her head back. The sigh of breezes that comes just at day's end moves through the golden aspen leavens. My hands are shaking.

Brown and white ticks run from the fur of the doe and up our arms. I do not move to brush them away. Randy parts the white and brown hair on the side of the doe's neck. He is looking for the carotid artery, cutting the esophagus is not enough. He needs to stop the blood from the heart. He finds the beige skin and inserts the tip swiftly, expertly. Blood tears from the wound. His hand operates independently from his grief or anger. He is a medevac pilot. He served in the Army. He has seen blood before. He has known accidents.

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Randy and I met two years earlier, almost to the day. It was autumn. Red Lodge. A blind date. I spilled my purse when he walked in. I couldn't speak when he said hello. He was tall and humble in his Wranglers and silver Stetson. He had a kind face and a cleft chin. He looked like Buzz Lightyear, and months later, on Valentine's Day, he presented me with a picture of himself dressed up as the Disney astronaut and signed, in black Sharpie, *Cindy, You and Me, To Infinity and Beyond! Love, Randy*.We were married in a private ceremony. Two years later, by the side of the Clarks Fork River near Cody, Wyoming, in the fading light of a late June day, I would lie alone next to his lifeless body, the taste of his vomit and river water on my lips. A widow at the age of 32.

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I have my knee on the doe's legs. She still wants to get up. I hold her head against the earth. It is a position like the one my body has become used to branding calves. The bleat of pain that came from the hot iron hitting their hides is different than the one that escapes her sleek throat. I was doing work then, ranch work, and I had learned that the discomfort of the calves was the lifeblood of the ranch. I knew they would bawl for a while but then return to their mothers for nursing within an hour. For the cattle I never cried, but the sound coming from the deer has begun to take on the tenor of a wail. I try to steel myself, to understand this too as work, but her struggle to live, her wail into the darkness awakened in me a grief I did not know I harbored. Hot tears ran down my cheeks, followed by audible sobs. I hear myself say please. I want it to be over. Why won't she die? What is it taking so long? Please. Please.

Randy did not look away from the doe as he told me to go wait in the truck. I didn't hesitate though failure walked with me as I left. Failure to help him. Failure to stay with the doe through its final moments. And a greater sense that I failed the purpose of the knife, the trust of my father, the ability to do what adults and wives and grown daughters should be able to do: to see a thing out of its suffering and through to the end. I sat in the silent cab unable to see Randy or the deer. Still crying. Pitying myself. Feeling small in the big country and beneath the dark sky that surrounded us.

I watched Randy move into the headlights and brush at the knees of his jeans. I watched him pull the lifeless body off the side of the road and my eyes followed the dark line of blood that followed them into the ditch and then into the waiting aspen. He bent once more to wipe the blade of the knife in the cheat grass, then returned its edge into the handle. There was blood on his good jeans. Blood on his hands. His head and body bent forward as if he had just finished two days' hard work. I watched him walk through one headlight, then the other. He entered the cab and sat for a moment, silent. "I'll put a new edge on it," he said as he handed me the knife, "I had to cut to the bone." He keyed the engine and the truck came to life. We did not go to dinner.

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Months later, by the Clarks Fork, I would recall that October evening and once again feel the shame of leaving Randy to the chore of dying by himself. I had left the river's edge to go for beer and snacks, left him with a friend to paddle their kayaks to the take out. I would meet them there, I told them, meet them at the end of the run. We would go back to our camper, have dinner and everything would be as it was, as we planned it. But it wasn't. Randy had died alone in the water, no witness to what happened or how, his friend crying over and over to me that he had simply lost him. I was as shattered and fragmented as the buck deer we had hit. I had collided with an unseen force. Twice I had let Randy down and the tears I shed into his wetsuit held for a moment and then were taken by the river. My hand pressed against his chest searching for his familiar heartbeat. I felt instead only the cold emptiness of the days and years to come.

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I squeeze the knife with the same ferocity I had held onto Randy the afternoon he died. I am brought back to McCall by the sound of Caleb's voice: "I can feel its heart." His large hand covers nearly all of the fawns' speckled chest. It is almost dark. The air cold. Still. I raise my skirt and put my bare knees in the gravel, hoping for the distraction of physical pain. Caleb and I are side-by-side, the fawn in front of us, the pepper haired man above and beyond us, watching. When he sees me unsheathe the knife, he gets in his car and leaves.

When you have lived long enough, and if you pay attention, you will see patterns that begin to form in your life. Some bear repeating, but others can so drastically destroy

your life that all effort must be taken to avoid the completion of the form. The days and years that followed Randy's death found me in every state of grief and destruction. The pieces of me that his accident scattered along the Clarks Fork I had collected only to break and scatter again along the banks of the next decade of my life. Eight years passed, then I met Caleb. And slowly I began to rebuild myself, to piece back together a life, a future, to feel whole again. As my bones and life knitted together, the pain of growing, of knowing what my father knew when he handed me the knife, became clear. The knife was only a tool. It was the hand that held the knife that mattered. It would have to understand compassion as well as duty and wield both equally. And though Caleb's hand was open, waiting for me to hand him the knife, I had no intention of doing so. It would be my hand that guided the blade. And as I leaned into my work, the threat of tears welled again in my eyes. But they were not for the fawn. They fell out of fear and the strength that it summoned. If handing the knife to Caleb meant that I could lose him, I would find the strength to kill the doe. I will part the hair, I will insert the blade, the blood will be on my hands, and fate can do with me as it pleased. And this sounds selfless, it sounds like I was trying to save Caleb, but the truth is, it is my own misery I fear. I will kill the fawn to end my own suffering.

With the headlights glare nearly blinding me, I steel myself as I do before I pull the trigger on my rifle. Suddenly, killing the fawn is something I am merely watching my hands do. I turn the blade's sharp edge to an angle and in a movement that looks like I am stroking the deer's neck, I begin parting its hair. I do not cry.

Before the tip even pricks the skin, I hear Caleb whisper, "It's gone. I can no longer feel the heart beat." I do not ask if he is sure. The fawn's eyes have gone matte. Its head angled now in the common death repose of its kind: tipped back, throat exposed, mouth open breathing spirit to the sky. I twist the blade back into its handle and release it in my pocket. We sit together for a few moments with the body as we do with the deer we shoot. We let the animal relax, we allow the spirit to calm, and we give thanks. At last, Caleb rolls the fawn again into his arms, the head hanging limp to his side, and walks into the dark aspen.

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I have been told, and come to believe, that life happens in between. On the sides of roads and rivers, just out of the firelight, just off the trail. I have learned that life encompasses, just as wholly, death, and thus life and death are sistered in this

liminal place. I spend much of my time in this space between. My own life somewhat stable, I am yet keenly aware of the lives and deaths that sit with me now, my responsibility to them. From this liminal holding, I have learned to bear witness.

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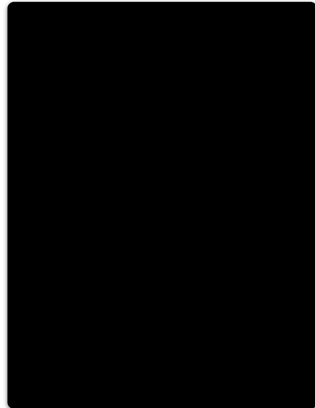
After he lays the fawn in the aspen, Caleb drives us home. At home he stands in front of our cold woodstove and stares out the tall windows into the dark forest that surrounds our cabin. The light from a lamp makes a mirror of our windows, and I watch as he studies his reflection. “I have never felt something die before,” he says without looking away, and then comes to the couch and sits beside me. He lays his open hand atop mine. “Its last heartbeat is in my palm.” Together we look into the deep lines that crossed his broad hand like roads, like rivers. Slowly we relax against one another and fall into a silent reverence that leaves both of us staring into his palm. Staring as if we could see something there, as if what we want to see could be seen at all.



CMarie Fuhrman is the co-editor of the anthology *Native Voices* (Tupelo,2019) and the forthcoming chapbook of poems *Camped Beneath the Dam* (Floodgate,2020). Her poetry has appeared in *The Yellow Medicine Review, Cutthroat a Journal of the Arts, Whitefish Review, High Desert Journal,* and Broadsided Press' *NoDapl Compilation*, as well as many other journals and anthologies. Her nonfiction can be found in *High Desert Journal* and *Sustainable Play*, as well as two anthologies. CMarie is the 2019 recipient of the Grace Paley Fellowship and winner of the Burns Award for poetry. She is a 2019 graduate of the University of Idaho's MFA program where she remains as the Project Coordinator for Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Education Program. CMarie has lived most of her life in the Rocky Mountain West and resides now in West Central Idaho and is of Southern Ute and Italian heritage.