

Foreword

The trope of rugged individualism is intimately knitted into the fabric of Americana. Dig a bit deeper, though, and this ideal is often revealed as a convenient fantasy to prop up the sense of self. The reality is that nearly everything we do is caught up in a tight web of connections that begins—and usually ends—with family.

The Fall 2017 issue of the *Bellevue Literary Review* is devoted to the theme of family. For better or for worse, family is the original social network. Many of us spend years trying to escape the tendrils of family, and just as many of us are racing to knit them together as fast as we can. In this issue of the *BLR*, we explore families of all types—ones we're born with, ones we create, ones we destroy, ones that are thrust upon us, and ones we can only dream of. Woven through these stories, essays, and poems is the idea of “finding home,” through the connections we make and break over the years.

The family theme is highlighted by the cover art of father and son artists Paul Caponigro and John Paul Caponigro. On the front cover is John Paul's work, “Alignment XXXIII, 2017,” and on the back is Paul's photo, “Cloud and Tree, New Mexico, 1980.” We are excited that this issue of the *BLR* also contains an insert featuring additional work by these captivating artists. Please see page 84 for artwork and commentary.

We are pleased to offer an introduction to this special issue of the *BLR* from KJ Dell'Antonia, who describes her years reading family stories—both tragic and prosaic—submitted to the Motherlode blog of the *New York Times*. “The sad reality,” she writes, “is that some of us will always be buying coffins while others are buying car seats.”

The narrator in Stephanie Wrobel's story, “The Tribulations of Uncle Ned,” faces a bit of both these situations when he suddenly becomes a parent to his young nephew after the death of his sister. “When you become a parent, they say instinct kicks in, that you know what to do when it comes to your children,” Uncle Ned

observes in this story that is both humorous and poignant. “That’s why I never had kids.”

BLR board member Perri Klass explores the role reversals that doctors experience when they become a patient, or (worse!) the hovering family member of a patient. In her essay, “I’m Not Talking to Anybody,” she wonders whether the newfound perspective illuminates, frustrates, or simply melts into the existential morass of life.

Our call for submissions for this issue did not specify anything about geography, but we ended up with a veritable world-tour of family stories. “Call Ladies” by MK Malik is a wonderful story set in London that explores how we piece together families of sorts, even in the seediest of settings. Moving east, we watch a charming if hapless agent of the Czech secret police attempting to spy on a banned writer of detective novels in René Georg Vasicek’s story, “Vera Musilova.”

Thirty-five hundred miles directly south of the Czech Republic is Gabon. In the essay “The Funeral,” Alexander Schuhr had recently moved from Germany to his wife’s homeland. When her uncle dies he is plunged into intense mourning rituals. He is both fascinated and disturbed, as the honored uncle, Tonton Charles, “had not led an inspirational life.”

Moving northeast we come to Pakistan, where the story “Exit for the Faithful” takes place. Farah Ali’s narrator is a hospital aide in Karachi who witnesses the strained interaction between a psychiatric patient and his visiting sister while juggling the challenges of his own marriage.

Continuing east to Korea, we come to the setting of Bora Lee Reed’s story “Folktale.” A twelve-year-old boy is being readied for a 5,000-mile solo trip to California, where he will study English and have a precious chance at an American college. His mixed emotions become entwined with his mother’s folktales, to wrenching effect.

The poems in this issue offer potent observations about the creation and dissolution of families. In “Step-,” Jenny Molberg

describes joining a pre-existing family: “The year before I became a stepmother,/ I climbed the levee stairs, fed/ the rest of my old self to the river.”

In “Pub Crawls,” Peter Marcus observes his family as they surround his dying mother. He compares them to “Himalayan mountaineers who’d come to realize/ dying is also an ascent.”

Grief is given almost palpable form in “january sixteenth” by Thomas Nguyen: “it has been eight years/ since your body fell/ apart, and I still/ find myself trying to find you/ everywhere.”

Other poems approach the idea of home and connections from different angles, including Ted Kooser’s poem “Luggage,” which contemplates how aging brings on the end of a peripatetic life. “I’ve...given my suitcase away, but I’ve kept one/out-of-date suit for the funerals of colleagues,/ some of them still on the road to the last.”

The *Bellevue Literary Review* is beginning its 17th year of publication. We have marked the occasion by expanding our editorial board to accommodate the ever-growing interest in creative literature that explores how we grapple with illness and health. We are pleased to welcome Janis Graham as our new assistant nonfiction editor. We are also delighted that we now have two assistant fiction editors—Lauralee Leonard and Barbara Daddino. Janis, Lauralee, and Barbara bring diverse experiences and wonderful energy to the *BLR* enterprise.

We hope you enjoy exploring the many permutations of family in this special theme issue. And a big thank-you to all the writers who contributed their work—you are now officially part of the *BLR* family.

Danielle Ofri
Editor-in-Chief