

DAY ONE

ISSUE 36



Fiction by **Kevin Skiena**
Poetry by **Chloe Martinez**
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In This Issue

Dear Reader,

I find myself standing in line at CVS (or Rite Aid, or Duane Reade) at least once a week. And I think to myself, *Wasn't I just here? How have I been in this store for twenty minutes, and why is my shopping basket full again?*

This week's story, by Kevin Skiena, made me smile with recognition. Jeff is a burned-out CVS employee, who has been working at the store a little too long, and over the course of one shift, we see his frustration and bitterness play out. By the end of the day, we learn much about him, his dreams, and the universal ways we all relate to others. I'll never argue the fine points of a coupon with an employee, that's for sure.

Our poem this week, by Chloe Martinez, also captures everyday thoughts (“devise grand plans; lofty aspirations; / imagine accomplishments; do dishes.”), but organizes it in a syllabus. Inspired while planning for a class, Chloe wanted to experiment with this fixed form—not unlike the form of a sonnet—and try it as a poem. It worked wonderfully.

As always, we want to hear from you, and there are several ways to get in touch. You can leave a review on the *Day One* page or on the story's individual page on Amazon. *Day One* stories are available to buy à la carte one week after the issue is released.

E-mail me at dayone-editor@amazon.com with any comments or questions.

Happy reading!
Carmen Johnson

Of Equal or Lesser Value

By Kevin Skiena

Tracy is late, again, so far by thirteen minutes. Jeff recognizes the ugliness of his feelings—how he wishes that when she *did* come in late, she were more ashamed of it. What she'll do is fast-walk past the counter to the break room to put away her purse and get her red CVS vest, look at Jeff, smile in her sweet way (it really is a sweet smile, the kind that makes most people forget their bitterness), mouth an apology, and then she's done. How much penance Jeff would like from her he is not sure. On the few occasions when he, himself, is late, he feels a flutter in his heart, something like a hand closing on his heart. He will sweat a little, apologize to everyone, one by one, like a child before a classroom, and feel low for an hour or two.

The door to the manager's office opens, and Alice, the assistant manager, appears with a freshly counted till. She maneuvers between Jeff and the cigarettes to get to Register 1, keys it open, inserts the till.

"Has she called?" Jeff asks, ringing and bagging a box of Kotex pads.

"Nope," Alice says. She opens Register 2's cash drop, the coupon drop, and then the register drawer.

"Have we called her?" he asks.

Alice pretends not to hear him above the jangle of coins. She sighs. "I'll give you a break in forty," she says as the counter door swings closed behind her.

Saying thank you feels too generous, so he says, "Okay." What he thinks is, *Other people get away with things for which I would be more sternly punished.*

It's not that the work is hard. The work is ridiculously easy, and this is part of the problem. It's so easy that he has time to think these things as he goes, about the inadequacy and disappointment of the work itself. (He nudges open a plastic bag, rings up shampoo, mascara, lipstick, and totals them.) They've had part-timers who've struggled with manually entering ten-digit UPC codes. It's an important and rudimentary skill, the ability to accurately type ten digits into a keypad when a bar code fails to scan, and yet . . .

Jeff can even argue the finer points of a coupon's terms with an unhappy customer, which seems like a judo master skill compared to what some of his coworkers do, which is punch in the discount manually to avoid any disagreement. Though there are few things as degrading to Jeff as arguing with a customer about a dollar or fifty cents as if he wants it.

What happens often are things like: Register makes angry beep at coupon. Jeff reads coupon. Before he has even finished, Customer says, "That's for the

paper towels,” as if Jeff can’t read the print or doesn’t understand the prominent, glossy picture of paper towels. He continues reading. Customer, who had been standing sort of at ease, comes to attention somewhat, cocking a hip, as if about to argue with someone very dim.

“This is one per customer,” Jeff says.

“I have three of them.” This is said like it’s an argument *in support of*. Jeff thinks, *Do not engage*.

“The first one went through, but I can’t accept more than one.”

Customer slouches, mouth agape. Posture says either, *Come on* or *Are you serious?* Sometimes, these things are said aloud. “Are you serious?”

This question never fails to sink Jeff’s mood, because he is both completely serious and so far removed from his own value-appraisal apparatus that he doesn’t recognize what’s driving his actions. He cannot say, “Yes, I am serious,” which would come across as sarcastic (read, combative), so he softens further.

“It’s our policy. I’m sorry.”

Customer either folds here or, more often, says, “I could leave right now and come back in a half hour or tomorrow and use the same damn coupon over and over as many times as I want, right? So, save me the trip. It’s fifty cents.”

Customer is right. It’s a logistical and logical fault in the system, but there’s no way around it. Manually entering three fifty-cent discounts would trigger follow-ups from the store’s manager, Ron, which happened the first time Jeff was won over by such logic. Jeff couldn’t say to Ron, “I don’t remember,” because who wouldn’t remember the monotony of manually typing in a fifty-cent discount three times? Ron would surely point to the abundance of paper-towel coupons in the coupon drop as well as the single transaction consisting of three paper-towel rolls and the discounts in question. Jeff had explained the customer’s argument to Ron, which was awkward—justifying someone else’s dollar-fifty policy violation as if the cause were his own.

“The coupon says,” Ron had started, pausing to read the coupon. “A coupon is a contract. We’ve got to go by what the contract says. Someone could walk in with a hundred of these.”

“How effective can these paper towels be if you need to buy a hundred of them?” Jeff asked.

Ron guffawed so hard and loud that Jeff nixed the delivery of future one-liners.

So, to Customer, Jeff cannot point again at the coupon language, which, because it would be repetition, could be interpreted as condescension. He cannot say, “You are right, but . . .” because it is both a concession and a denial. He can only stick to the blank, the vacuous. “I’m very sorry.”

Sometimes Customer will ask for a manager, which is a relief. Always, Customer, their brow knit in frustration, will take a moment to glare at Jeff with a look that indicates how beneath them he is.

There are now nine people in line. The mundanity of the job also lets Jeff see more easily when there is a line, which makes him feel like he needs to be faster. He goes plenty fast as it is, but he can see the people—each one of them—waiting. They look at him, and he knows some think he could be going faster, or the store (represented by him in that moment) is negligent in not assigning more cashiers. He can see that some will be grumpy by the time they reach him. They won't even look at him. That is, unless something goes wrong, in which case they won't take their eyes from him.

A figure fast-walks through the store's entrance, and Jeff looks to see Tracy. He turns to the register clock (she's thirty-four minutes late) and then back to her. When their eyes lock, instead of mouthing an apology, she looks down and grits her teeth. He's not even sure what sort of consolation this expression is supposed to be. Her shoes make a bristly scraping sound against the carpet as she moves past Cosmetics to the break room.

Tracy is a high school student, a part-timer. In a few weeks it will be summer, and her hours per week will jump from eighteen to thirty-two, and then, in August, she'll vanish into college. Jeff finds relief in the notion. He can't help but pay attention to what she's doing when she's nearby, and often what she's doing is wrong. Jeff can hear her engage with customers and see every bad move she makes as things escalate. Does she shout at them? Does she curse? No, but when a difficult situation could be defused through some show of comportment, she is more likely to stand back, cross her arms, and reflect back the same energy given to her. No good. The customer might ask for a manager, but because Jeff is there and five years older than Tracy, they will turn to him as if *he* is the manager. First, through mollification, he will need to undo the hostility she's brought about. Then he'll need to repeat the conversation they just had, substituting his own deference for Tracy's sass.

Tracy stocks shelves incorrectly (right product, wrong size, or right brand, wrong color). Alice or Ron will notice and point out to her that when in doubt she can be sure by double-checking the UPC code on the item against the shelf tag. She'll say, "Oh, thanks. Nobody told me that," which is annoying, because Jeff told her that. He trained five people before her, and he tells *all* of them that. It's like she's trying to incriminate him through the Transitive Property of Screwup.

When Tracy is on register, her cell phone is in her hand or beside the till. She plays games, or texts. Her vision angles down at the phone, so when Jeff and Tracy are both on register and a customer stands five feet back waiting for a signal, they never get it from her. (Jeff has played chicken a few times by keeping his eyes

averted, but the act of noticing customers and pretending not to is too unnatural for him to maintain with any regularity.)

Tracy's boyfriend sometimes meets her for lunch breaks or smoke breaks. He wears loose-fitting tank tops (even in winter, under a worn down coat), and a white-and-green ball cap, the brim flat and turned askew. The boyfriend (Alex? Andrew?) smiles and nods and touches Jeff's shoulder as if the two of them are great buddies, as if any minute Alex/Andrew will invite Jeff to get high with them, or go to McDonald's, or hang out with the other kids after hours in the Regent Center parking lot until asked to disperse by the police.

For a person who dresses and walks like he's some antiestablishment street kid who can't afford T-shirts with sleeves, Alex/Andrew is kind of good-looking. He has a practiced smile, teeth in a lovely, pearly row. His skin is so clear it's like he bathed for weeks in high-end Aisle 9 products before stepping out, even though Jeff knows Alex/Andrew just turned seventeen, which means his face should be inflamed and erupting with acne. Jeff knows that one day Alex/Andrew will ditch the cap and puffy coat in favor of business casual, which he will look equally at home in as he maneuvers himself up through the ranks of middle management toward the American Dream.

Jeff has seen Tracy sell Alex/Andrew packs of Parliaments, even though everyone assessed to be younger than twenty-seven must be carded in order to buy cigarettes. Ron says that police will ask minors to come in on occasion and try to purchase, and if they are allowed to, the store is fined and the cashier is fired. Tracy always asks for Alex/Andrew's ID for the benefit of the security cameras. One time Jeff was stocking diapers in Aisle 3 when he heard Alex/Andrew behind him.

"What's up, brother? Can you sell me a pack of cigarettes?"

Jeff kept his focus on the shelves.

"Please, man. Could you do this for me?"

At the same time, the bell sounded from the counter, a checker asking for another cashier to open. Jeff left the diapers and signed back into his register. The line of five people went down quickly, and Alex/Andrew had the luck of filtering to Jeff when his turn came. Jeff asked for his ID (seventeen in two months) and rang up the Parliaments. Alex/Andrew smiled his charmed smile and left.

Why had Jeff done it? Why had he given in to someone he didn't even like? But . . . he *did* like him, without knowing why, and he *hated* that he liked him. The world provided for Alex/Andrew whatever he needed (good looks, pretty girlfriend, cigarettes). He seemed so happy, so friendly. He was friendlier with Jeff than Tracy had ever been. Jeff could easily imagine Alex/Andrew's incredulity over any disappointment. Someone ought to say no to him so he'd have practice with it, but it was too much work to say no to people like him. They always fought

back, and they were always right on some level. If Jeff had said no, he would have been acting out of spite. That was another thing about Alex/Andrew—his ability to make a “right” action feel like a small, petty one.

Tracy had been in the break room for six minutes now. How long does it take to lock away a purse and don a vest?

“These are five for four dollars,” an unhappy-looking woman says, dropping a mess of king-size peanut M&M’s on the counter. When Jeff scans them, they come up full price.

“Your circular has them at five for four dollars,” she says.

Jeff picks up his copy of the circular. A man in line a few spaces back adjusts his posture.

“This says it’s for the plain M&M’s, not the peanut.” Jeff shows her the ad.

“So what? What’s the difference?”

Peanuts. “The sale doesn’t apply to these. Would you still—?” Before he finishes, she’s walked off. He picks up the discarded M&M’s and drops them in the return basket behind him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Beige Trench Coat enter and walk with determination down the greeting card aisle. *Fuck.* Jeff apologizes to the next person in line and dials the manager’s office. Alice doesn’t answer. *Fuck. Oh well. But fuck.* She must have gone to the stockroom or bathroom. He debates calling over the store’s PA for manager assistance, but the whole store would hear, including Beige Trench Coat, which would defeat the purpose. Jeff starts ringing the next customer.

“How’s your day going?” the next customer says with too much enthusiasm.

“Okay.”

“Long shift?”

“Yeah.”

“Almost there, right?”

Why is she making conversation? “Almost.”

“Then what?”

Jeff takes her in—she’s maybe forty-five, with wavy brown hair, wire-frame glasses, a brown mole on the underside of her right cheek. She has an easy smile, the sort of smile you imagine being on her all day. The register makes an unhappy noise. Invalid UPC. Jeff has scanned the shipping bar code instead of the store code. He flips over the box of hair dye. “Uh . . . nothing.”

“Quiet night at home, then?”

She could be his mother—happy to see him, curious about his life, empathetic to the point of selflessness—but he’d like her to stop talking. He ignores her last question and finishes scanning.

“Forty-seven eighty-two,” he says.

She reaches into her purse, still smiling, and runs a credit card through the reader to her side.

“That one’s not working,” Jeff says, extending his hand.

“Thank you.”

He swipes the card through his register, and they stand there as it processes. She won’t meet his eyes now, but she still smiles—at the counter, the cigarette racks, the batteries. He knows she was only trying to be nice. She seems nice—the sort of person he could tell things to, who’d forgive him, who wouldn’t judge him. How can it be that he no longer has the patience for a person like this? He smiles at her as best he can for the rest of the transaction. The smile feels strange on his face, like it must not look right, but she returns it as she takes her bag. “Enjoy your night,” she says, and he thanks her.

Beige Trench Coat stands sixth in line. The coat is no longer draped over his right shoulder. He’s wearing it. Such a prick. Jeff tells himself that he doesn’t care. It’s not his money, not his store. But people shouldn’t be allowed to get away with shit, and Jeff shouldn’t have to give in to people getting away with shit just because he can’t *prove* it, even though he is sure that shit is being gotten away with.

Why the fuck isn’t Tracy out here yet? He doesn’t know why she hasn’t been fired. Perhaps it’s because he picks up her slack. Perhaps it’s because Ron and Alice aren’t on the ground with her like he is, so they don’t know how bad things are. He’ll say something to her. She knows she’s late, so he’ll just be repeating what she knows, what Alice or Ron will say and have said before. But he wants to say *something* no matter how small it makes him, so as not to just absorb it. She’ll toss out an “I’m sorry,” which has basically become her catchphrase, but he wants to make her mean it.

“Returns,” Beige Trench Coat says, placing on the counter a breast pump, Pedialyte, Desitin, and a receipt that has clearly been run over by car tires in the parking lot several times. This is a good score for Beige Trench Coat. Probably his biggest take yet. Jeff asks him questions, knowing the answers.

“Anything wrong with them?”

“No.”

“Would you like an exchange, or store credit?”

“Cash.”

“Can I see ID?”

“Not carrying right now.”

Jeff circles the items on the receipt, writes “returned,” and punches them into the register. He hands over almost ninety-four dollars. Ninety-four dollars! As if Beige Trench Coat could have possibly had a breast pump and jug of Pedialyte under his coat when he came in instead of reverse-shopping up and down the aisles

until he finished the Easter egg hunt for the items on his found receipt. Beige Trench Coat exits the store a few moments before Alice emerges from the bathroom and returns to the manager's office. Of course. Jeff will tell her later so she can check the security tape, but Beige Trench Coat is something of a savant with camera angles.

Jeff hadn't felt this unhappy when he came in today. The feeling will last through tomorrow morning, possibly later, and even if it lifts by his next shift, it will surely barrel back toward him for another go. He used to have more patience, but these days he's like a raw nerve. Even the neutral shit—someone dropping cash on the counter instead of handing it to him, someone saying “Hi, um” instead of just “Hi” when he answers the phone—sets him off. Things had been kind of fun when he started at CVS two years ago as an unemployment stop-loss. Remembering those times is like watching home movies of his parents as children—these things happened, but these things could not possibly have ever happened.

Jeff once scaled the box pile in the stockroom to get the last pack of Charmin. “Get down from there!” Alice said, laughing.

“I promise not to sue,” he said.

“That's not stable. Get down.”

“Why would you stack your boxes in an unstable formation?”

“I'm serious. Come down right now.”

“I will. I just need the Charmin as a ballast for the descent.”

Then there was the night of the snowstorm a few days before Valentine's, when it was just Jeff and Ron on closing. No one had come in for over an hour, and Ron suggested they organize the seasonal aisle, which was a mess. Ron caught Jeff staring at the shimmering cleavage and glossy pectorals on the romance novel display. “Want me to . . . uh . . . put one of those aside for you?” Ron asked.

Jeff didn't know what made him do it. He opened one of the books and started reading. “*She clutched his powerful shoulders through the soft linen. ‘He'll be back at nine thirty,’ she said, possessed. ‘Always nine thirty. Please.’ ‘I can't,’ Raul said.*”

“Put that down,” Ron said.

“*I hate him, but he's my brother.*” “*He's a monster,*” she said back to him, her lips so near his neck. *She wanted to taste him.*”

“Put it down, Jeff.”

“Don't we need to be familiar with our merch? What if someone comes in asking for the best one?”

Ron shoved a pack of chocolates on the rack and stepped to the display. Jeff wondered for a moment if he was about to get reprimanded, but Ron picked up a

different book, flipped it open, and pointed at the text: *Ride me, you fucking stallion! Ride me all the way to town and back!*

“Holy shit!” Jeff said.

“Beat that.”

“Beat it?”

“Find something more stupid than that, okay? More ridiculous than that and you can go home early.” Jeff and Ron spent another twenty minutes reading to each other and laughing until their stomachs hurt. Although some passages came close, nothing was as ridiculous. Ron let him leave early anyway.

They're all gone, those feelings, and it takes too much energy to fake them. A job he'd imagined as an interim solution to keep him from moving back home has somehow ballooned into what it is now, which is his whole life. When he returns to his apartment, it is only a break. His dreams speak to him in the language and symbols of the store, the beeps of the register, the whir of its cooling fan, the blank looks and aggressions of strangers. He cannot remember the last time he felt playful. He cannot remember the last time he had a crush on someone.

“This didn't work,” a man says. He's over six feet tall, bald, wearing a blue dress shirt, open at the collar, and a black sport coat.

This is a hair and beard trimmer, one of the pricier ones. Jeff opens the box to make sure all the parts are inside.

“Cash, please,” the man says.

“It's missing the charger.”

“Everything it came with is in there.”

“It says it comes with a charger. I'm not seeing it.”

“Too bad for you,” the man says.

“I'll call my manager down.”

“Good move.”

Alice answers the phone. The man stares down on him as he speaks. “I have a gentleman here with a return, but there's a part missing.”

“Nothing's missing!” the man says. “Everything it came with is there!”

“I'll be down in three minutes.”

Jeff hangs up. “She'll be down in a few minutes.”

“Jesus Christ.”

For a moment, the man doesn't move. With his meaty hand resting on the counter, he looks around as if surveying the inadequacy of the store. There are four people behind him.

“Could I have you . . . ?” Jeff falters with his words.

“What?”

“Could I have you step to the side for a moment?”

The man makes an unhappy noise and takes two small steps.

The next few customers are taken in the shadow of the man's displeasure. Some give Jeff sympathetic looks. Others are keen on paying and leaving.

Alice, who seems very small in comparison to this man, steps around the photo development station. "Can I help you?" she asks.

Jeff rings up Gatorade, a Hershey's bar.

"This is everything it fucking came with. I paid eighty dollars for this."

"Can I see the receipt?"

The barcode on a bottle of wine gets an angry beep from the register. Jeff checks a driver's license for the birthday and hands it back.

"I gave it to that guy."

Alice steps up to the counter. When Jeff has finished with his customer, she asks for it.

"He never gave it to me."

Though he has said it quietly, the man hears him.

"Oh, are you fucking kidding me? I gave you the receipt and the box and asked for cash."

Jeff feels his lips shaking. When he speaks, it is almost breathless. "I don't believe you gave me the receipt."

"Are you sure?" Alice asks.

Jeff nods.

"Fuck," the man says, making a big show of checking his pockets. "Well, I had it. I don't know. You must have it."

"I can give you store credit."

"Lady, I'll die before I spend another eighty dollars in this piece-of-shit store. Are you the manager?"

"I'm the assistant manager."

"What's your name?"

"Alice."

"And what's your boss's name?" He crosses his arms.

"Ron."

"Ron what?"

"Ron Wilkes."

"Ron Wilkes. What time is Ron Wilkes in tomorrow?"

"Seven a.m."

"Would you ask Ron Wilkes to expect a call from me, sweetie?"

"I'll let him know."

She hands him his box, and he marches out.

"Alice . . ." Jeff says.

She has already turned to go back upstairs, and she wheels around, eyes wide with undischarged fury.

“It can wait,” he says.

She almost runs up to the manager’s office.

Tonight has been awful. Maybe the worst, but the worsts all bleed into each other. After five or six people, there’s an entirely new group of customers in line, and none of them has any idea what just happened. They only want their stuff. Jeff rings. He bags. He wipes his brow on his forearm. When he notices his right hand has clenched, he relaxes it, but when he notices it again a few moments later, it has re-clenched. He wants to quit. He wants to quit so bad, but he’s afraid that working this job for so long has condemned him to other jobs like it. The break room door opens.

Tracy wears her vest open. It puffs out a bit as she walks, and her hair flutters around her face. She steps behind the counter. Alice probably won’t say anything to her, not now. Aside from the missed pay, there will be no punishment. Jeff feels his own misery pushing at him, about to burst. Tracy’s a selfish, immature, unreliable fuckup who doesn’t take her job—his job—seriously, and her behavior is unacceptable. It’s not right. Jeff hasn’t even finished with a customer when he spits her name out.

She jumps at his voice and turns. He’s never seen her without makeup, and he can tell from the redness of her eyes that she’s been crying. *What happened?* He doesn’t know her well enough to ask. Something about tragedy, about sadness, about *her* sadness—something drains from him. It’s as if the rest of the store has gone quiet. If she were a friend, he would know how to behave, but Tracy is not his friend. There is no scenario in which they’d be more to each other than what they are. He’d never imagined it bothering him.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

She nods in a way that says *Thanks for asking* and nothing else before turning back to her work.

He needs to go on break, but the line seems smaller now, more manageable, and he can wait until it is gone. They ring together in silence. He feels Tracy in the space beside him, and the weight of his own curiosity. As he rings, he keeps his attention not on his own customers, but on hers, listening to what they say, how they say it. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if one goes off on her, but then he does. He’ll step beside her, insinuate himself, and look the customer in the eye until they look away from her. “Can I help you?” he’ll say.

Syllabus

By Chloe Martinez

Week 1: devise grand plans; lofty aspirations; imagine accomplishments; do dishes.

Week 2: why are we here? what is this place? where are you going with that

yellow balloon? Week 3: I was going to tell you but then thought better of it. Are you upset?

Week 4: worry about whether or not you fed the fish; feed the fish again, just in case.

Week 5: the big questions; emptiness and panic; television. Week 6: how to properly

fry a whole fish (even the fins can be eaten, they crunch like crackers). Week 7: they simply

curl up together, throughout the winter months. Week 8: in which we will consider methods of

attack and retreat; strategies of flight. Week 9: the gray ones are herons, the white ones

snowy egrets. Week 10: you have startled them: they rise in great beautiful labor upward forth.

Under the Influence: Kevin While Writing *Of Equal or Lesser Value*

Frustration. I was making my third attempt at a novel last year and was determined not to quit too soon. I had done research and had a realistic writing schedule and an accountability buddy who was working on his own project. One night I sat down to work and knew it would be terrible. I was beginning to sense that I'd chosen the wrong setting and that the research had been useless for this particular project. I gave myself a pass that night to journal instead and wrote what became the first page or two of this story.

George Saunders. Saunders has easily become one of my favorite writers and humans in the last few years. His stories are inventive, hilarious, and heart-wrenching. The worlds he creates are grotesque and familiar. What happens in them is often very grim, though he infuses them with this incredible humor and sincerity. I'm fascinated by writing that turns the dark or violent into something funny or sublime. The two stories I wrote before this one border on impersonation, and there are some things in this one that I doubt would have come out the way they did if not for Saunders.

Experience. I worked at a retail pharmacy in high school, and Jeff's inability to enjoy the work or break out of a bad mood very much mirrors my own at the time. It was a very sad and startling moment when I realized I had begun to experience neutral or pleasant things negatively. Occupying a space in which everyone around me had a very limited view of me as a person had crept into my sense of self. Retail and customer service people bear the brunt of so much frustration. Restraining themselves in the face of it time after time is a pretty incredible thing when you think about it.

Mindfulness. Struggling with stress and anxiety turned me onto mindfulness a few years ago. One of the tenets of mindfulness is learning to identify with others and root for them rather than judge them or seek vengeance. I once experienced a turn like Jeff does at the end of the story in which my frustration and anger were suddenly transmuted into sympathy and concern. I was lucky not to have lashed out before noticing that the target of my frustration was already in pain.

Time. It sometimes takes me a long time to process my feelings. Writing about retail had been in the back of my mind for a while, but I couldn't find a way of

entering it until I experienced many of the same emotions years later. I wouldn't say this story is an attempt to make sense of anything, but the distance certainly helped me understand how my recent experiences could be turned into the journey of this story.

Chloe While Writing “Syllabus”

The syllabus as a form. I was working on the syllabus for a new course I was teaching, and I began to think about how the syllabus might work as a poetic form. Just like, say, a sonnet, a syllabus has built-in formal requirements, as well as room for creativity. Forms like this challenge you to meet their standards, but they also invite you to push their boundaries.

La Carreta restaurant in Goleta, California. This place closed, or I’d recommend that you go there immediately. When I was in grad school at UC Santa Barbara, I used to eat here a lot. The owner was always telling me how to eat the crunchiest and messiest parts of *pescado dorado*, whole fried fish.

Kenneth Koch and the Grind. Kenneth Koch’s playfulness with forms influences me always. He was a great poet who wasn’t afraid to experiment. His book *New Addresses* is made up entirely of poems literally addressed to different things: to his heart, to his twenties, to Jewishness. I wrote the first draft of “Syllabus” during the Grind, an amazing month-long poem-a-day event started by an online writing group. The pressure to produce a new poem every day was intense but also freed me to try something new, to turn down my inner editor for a while.

Lists, maps, and schedules. I’m the sort of person whose brain is a little scattered, so I love visual systems of ordering: written lists, charts, maps, daily or weekly or monthly calendars. In this poem I am thinking about the syllabus as another way of organizing time and systematizing knowledge. One can’t help but notice the artifice—useful, but artifice nonetheless—inherent in classroom learning.

National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Region. When I was growing up, my family kept one of these in the glove compartment of the car. Because of this, I can tell at least a few common birds apart from one another. My husband usually thinks I’m making it up when I insist that this one is a heron, that one is an egret, but I’m not, usually.

Kevin Skiena

Kevin Skiena received his MFA in creative writing from the University of Washington in 2006. He is a winner of the A. E. Hotchner Playwriting Competition and the Eugene Van Buren Prize for Fiction. His writing has appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *City Arts*, and *Gay City*. He is a cofounder and instructor of the Seattle-based Smudgy Notebook writers' workshop. He blogs at stilllifewithissues.wordpress.com.

Chloe Martinez

Chloe Martinez graduated from Barnard College, where she was a Mellon Mays Fellow. She holds an MA in creative writing from Boston University, an MFA from Warren Wilson College, and a PhD in religious studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in various journals and magazines, including *Crab Orchard Review*, the *Cortland Review*, the *Normal School*, and the *Collagist*. She teaches courses on South Asian religions, and on religion and poetry, at Haverford College. She is working on her first book of poems, as well as a book on religious autobiography in South Asia. She lives in Haverford, Pennsylvania, with her husband and daughter.

Brooke Weeber

Brooke Weeber, based in Portland, Oregon, finds her inspiration from various natural landscapes, as well as Greek and Native American culture. She has been drawing since she was a young thing but started focusing on it in high school and college. After receiving her BFA in painting from the University of Oregon in 2003, Brooke fled her native Northwest for the big city, where she focused on her other passion—professional baking. She received a degree in professional pastry baking from the French Culinary Institute of New York in 2005 and worked as a high-end cake decorator. Craving more trees and more drawing space, Brooke packed up her apartment and rerooted herself in Portland in 2009. She has been cranking out art pieces ever since and has had shows at Mississippi Studios, The Farm Café, and Tribute Gallery.

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