



POTTER

along with **NANCY KOMINSKY**
SELECTED PALETTE
Manufactured by Georgian Oil Colors

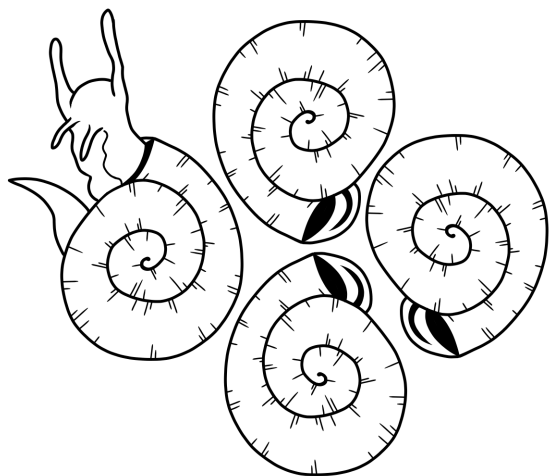
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THE POINTED CIRCLE 2021 XXXVII
Portland Community College
Cascade Campus

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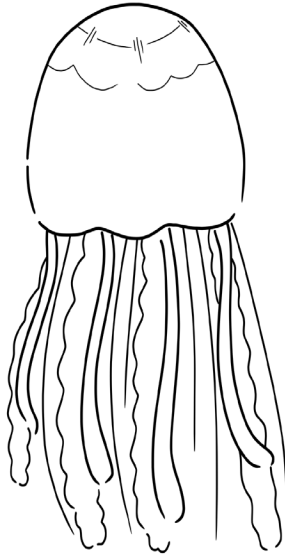
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We would like to start this journal by acknowledging that Portland Community College rests on the traditional village sites of the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, bands of the Chinook, Tualatin Kalapuya, Molalla and many other Tribes who made their homes along the Columbia River. Multnomah is a band of Chinooks that lived in what is now known as Portland, Oregon.

We thank the descendants of these Tribes for being the original stewards and protectors of these lands since time immemorial. We also acknowledge that Portland, Oregon has the 9th largest Urban Native American population in the U.S. with over 380 federally recognized Tribes represented in the Urban Portland Metropolitan area. We also acknowledge the systemic policies of genocide, relocation, and assimilation that still impact many Indigenous/Native American families today.

We are honored by the collective work of many Native Nations, leaders and families who are demonstrating resilience, resistance, revitalization, healing and creativity. We are honored to be guests upon these lands. Thank you, and thanks also to our colleagues at the Portland State University Indigenous Nations Studies Program for crafting this acknowledgement.

The editorial staff of Pointed Circle have made three minor contextual edits to the original statement, which can be found on Portland Community College's website: <https://www.pcc.edu/about/diversity/cascade/index.html>



We, as writers and lovers of the craft, have the responsibility and privilege to shape the literature of our time, to hand select collections of woven words that highlight the resilient and constantly reinvented human mind. As activist and writer Audre Lorde says, “Poetry is not only a dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.”

This journal is our offering to the next generation building a bridge for the future to find beauty in a dark age. We have looked for writing that breathes life into the corners of a death-ridden world, writing that lands on the mind like a midday rainbow after a stormy morning. As we walk together in these tremulous and anxious times, we want our collection to inspire rebirth and renewal.

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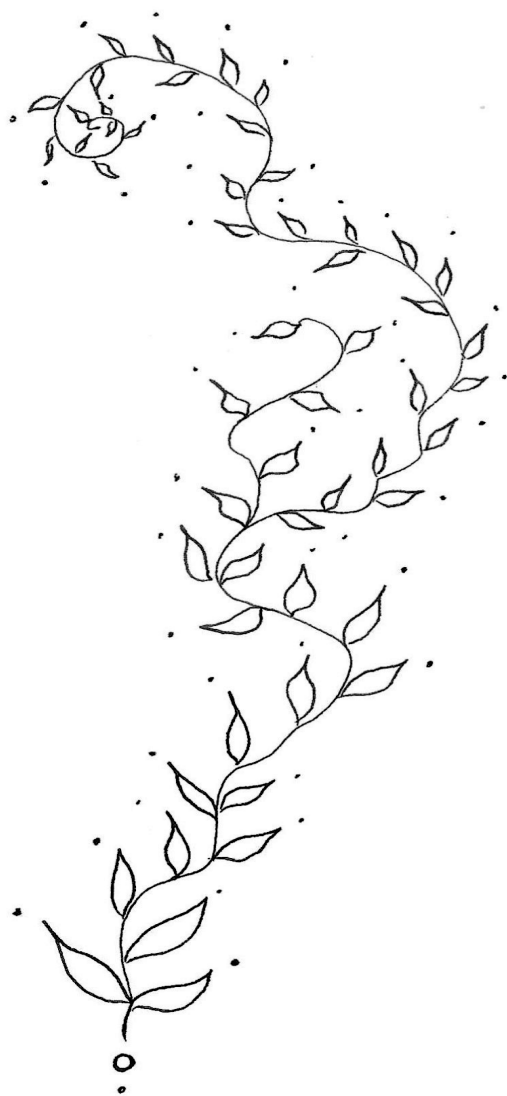
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Gentle Rapture

Samantha Ellis

The earth will not end in a bang
or a whimper,
but rather a chronic dull aching
like a loose tooth that the tongue wraps around
but can never pull free,
until one day it does.
The root twists and tears,
blood pools in the mouth
and pours down the chin.

The midnight rider of the day of reckoning
will be a gentle and familiar one,
just like the dog that sits outside
and scratches its blue-corn claws
against the ancient kitchen door.

Keratin on wood cries out:
“the moon is swallowing the earth
in her holy fire!
come see.”

But sleeping forms merely
whisper their regrets against
the cool side of the pillow
and refuse to rise.

The dog's hushed warning
rests against closed eardrums
as the night water rises outside the window.
Two heavenly bodies become one
and the earth disappears
beneath our dreaming feet.

espera
K Roberts

the necklace of fishbones

desert of salt

her finger plays over

forest of thorns

music box tunes

river of salt

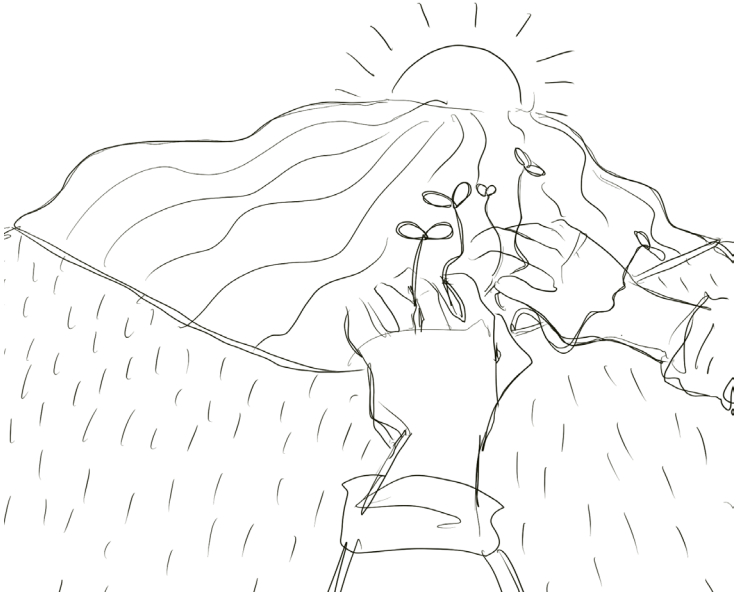
on a kalimba

desert of thorns

the unspoken longings of compass needles
arroyos waiting for rain

this thorn of salt

this salt of thorns



To Atlantic

Stelby Clark

I want to chastise the current for shaking my knees, for burning
the sores behind my nose and down my throat. I'll chew seaweed
to prove I'm not another net of tangled hair bobbing beneath the pier.

My bikini strap snaps against my shoulder, flips inward during the riptide,
hiding from the Atlantic mackerels pelting my ribs. It takes me four years
to open my eyes in four feet of water. Tarot cards and this month's

Coastal Living may know I'm the one legged sandpiper pretending
to walk across the vacuum of homesick waves, but Estelle, self proclaimed
green witch, is delighted to know I lost my virginity beneath the eyes

of the coast's full moon. I am graceless in fumbling for buttons, in donating
my lungs to seagulls, in slathering sunscreen across taut skin. I pluck tarpon
invertebrate from loose coral, offering Cassadaga little, basic wonders

I don't believe in. When Estelle asks, I tell her my hair is only soft underwater.
That I have always been afraid of drowning. That I pray one day, when zoanthids
bloom across my scattered ribs, the hermit crabs turn my skull into a home.

Lunar

Ellen Racklin

How they must have feared you—
to mark your daily path with stones,
over-interpreting apogee and perigee,
equating luck and probability
with size, shape and depth
of whitesmoke shine, personifying:
Nanna, Alignak, Tsukuyomi, Mani,
Su'en, Selene, Chang'e and other god
names lost from the pantheon.

When you slipped out of the visible sky,
some ancients thought you
went to rest in the underworld,
the only place dark enough
to embrace your story,
set on clay then buried under sand.

Between then and tonight,
we've had ample time to
dissect tidal forces and certain waves
yet still not comprehend the dark.
Your crossing to Kur was somewhere
beneath the seaside boardwalk
I stand on now, praying
to no one from planks resting on air.

A Longer Route Would Take Less Time (But Never Stop Checking the Atlas for Other Highways)

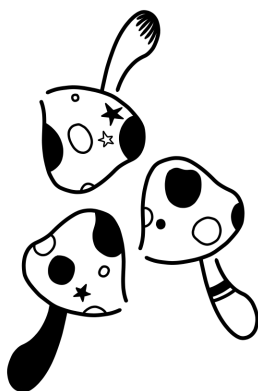
Niko Boskovic

Much can be said about my mother:
that she is impatient
the way a bird might be trying to hatch a chick —
that she is maddening
in a rough example of how Norsemen conquered the English —
that she is loving
the way native people describe how the Sun chases the Moon
always lagging slightly behind.

I prefer her mine
when it's only us in a cheap motel by the ocean
bellies full of fried cod and Dr. Pepper
a drizzly afternoon where phones are forgotten
and she gets me predictable souvenirs from the corner store —
always a treat not to have to share her with anyone else.
Eating Moon Pies on a bench by the ocean
becomes a treasured thought.

Reality waits for us
in a two-story house
that she'll steer her little car through the Tillamook Forest to
announcing the names of little towns listed on little signs
which we'll never see
passing through valleys interlaced with rivers and creeks
over which she sighs about their beauty
never knowing how these waters remind me of her
a force that will leave marks on me as quietly
as a glacier shifts the mountain range.
Happily I will trace every vein
that snakes across her middle-aged hands
if that means we can come back here again.

Tomorrow we'll drive back home
but make that trip linger in her mind
for the rest of the week.
Let's remember the way the tide tried to pull us in
and the taste of salt on our skin.



She Was Not Sweet Bread

N.M. Brownlee

I keep seeing her hands in my hands.
I knead the dough for pogatica at my kitchen counter.
This was her specialty. A sweet, flakey bread roll of walnuts and cinnamon,
sometimes apples.

She was not sweet bread. She was the old, hardened,
tooth-crushing sourdough roll I tossed from the pantry
the weekend we moved her to the nursing home.
More baseball bat than baguette.

Yelling at us in Yugoslavian, cracking my bones with her hugs.
She stung as much as the spikey ball pods
scraping my bare shoulders as they dropped from the trees in her yard
in the fall when the wind gusted.

After Pa died young, she raised her two sons alone.
From a dirt floor one room in New Mexico to three story Potrero Hill flats in SF.
The woman worked graveyard and operated forklifts,
three jobs at a time, my hero.

She saved, bought property all over the Bay Area,
self-made and she took no crap. She called me names, shit bird in our language,
for the way my little brown body flew around her living room
and out the back door at 6 years old.

"Close the screen dammit! How many times I have to tell you, you'll let the
moohaws in!"
She would slam her cane twice against the coffee table
like Moses parting the seas,
her crystal blue eyes flashing.

The day we moved her I stood in the ugly, outdated kitchen the last time.
Her thanksgiving dishes boxed on the counter with a cat figurine on top,

one of many she had kept on the bathroom counter,
God knows why.

My chest weighted and my stomach sick that we had forced her from her home,
though we too were forced. I memorized the flowered orange pillows,
the woven rugs and blankets from New Mexico,
the native pottery she loved.

I thought of the statuette of The Virgin Mary in the guest room
that hung heavy with non-use. The dog toys I played with as a child, still outside,
squeezable plastic porcupines, a momma and a baby,
pink and orange.

Louisiana's (Latest) 'Once in a Lifetime' Incident

Stelby Clark

Snow piles along the neutral ground,
spilled daiquiris flavored with burst pipes
and frostbitten nutria tails. In the summer
we drill plywood boards to our windows.
This winter, spare blankets and pushpins
will have to do. Plaquemine's Parish,
with its graveyards of driftwood and sunken
shrimp boats, discovers a new stone: alligator
snouts frozen and black above iced bayous.
I tie Mardi Gras beads to my tires and cut king
cake with icicles caging strands of spanish moss,
leaving the sharp ends to melt inside the box
alongside purple and gold sprinkles. Power lines
are candle wicks to the electric bolts searching
for two thousand square miles of lost
land and I am lulled to sleep by generators
and accordions, knowing the snow of 2004
impregnated the Gulf with a category five
that ripped apart its mother's womb.
Louisiana's coastline suckles brutality,
so I leave my remaining space heater
between the prosthetics lining St. Roch Chapel,
praying the warmth spreads downriver.

Delayed Nuptials 2020

Elisabetta La Cava

Our wedding disappears
catches me in dreams undone
and breath blown east
as one that conforms to petals
rides on future

Black seashells meet in stead
where young turtles sang
resting on sand
resting on water
under a wall of aquarelle

The world might end today
it might end with
the swoosh of
drowning and
the spin of earthly wings

Maybe if we live longer in
this flesh we can survive
until next year
I have clothed myself in you
in cloth of crimson promises

saturday night feverish

RC deWinter

in the bleakness of shut up tight
metaphorical doors swing wide open

every night is saturday
across bandwidth already crowded with bodies
trying to keep up
keep in touch
keep sane

strangers mingle in the sterility of virtual arenas
flirting
whining
praying
telling jokes
reporting morbidity
deconstructing politics history baseball
classic rock quantum mechanics film noir
the rise of fascism the literature of the romantics
reading poetry
sharing recipes
giving advice on the best way to remove red wine from carpet
where to order great takeout and whatever else is thrown
into the spotlight of a world in solitary confinement

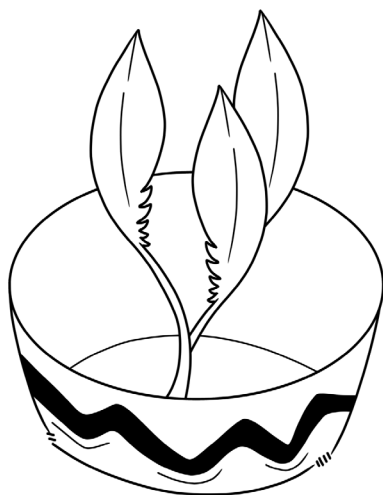
and let's not forget selling
because someone's always selling something
even if it's only wolf tickets
it isn't love that makes the world go round
it's money

and whatever else it is
this is the new theater
the new movie

the new party
the new club
the new corner bar
the new hookup

while i sit
literally
out of sight out of mind out of touch
spending silent nights alone in the dark
eyes closed mind awake
living a life never lived with a lover never touched

the only voice i want to hear long silenced by
the hallelujah chorus of the dead
the only music the whoosh of blood through veins
the ticktock of a broken heart
and the humming of distant moons



*Frost Has No Effect on Seeds Buried
Deep for Those who Know Where to Dig*
Niko Boskovic

In the yard of my mind
the grass is always cut every Tuesday.
The dirt, even when wet, doesn't stick to the bottoms of my feet
but lays like a chalk tapestry.
Silky ribbons of hard lime trail from where the faucet drips down
in a steady pace
beating along with my heart
giving little choice but to move along —
each day a nervous tic on the face of a year.

So far life has not disappointed me in terms of gifts and lemons;
knowledge of how far I have come has not had the desired effect.
Swan diving in the river of my ancestors' blood
disturbs treasures from the silt:
a piece of tile made by my father's grandfather
hand-patterned and fired in a bellowed kiln
laid with engineered care and hidden in plain view.
Far back from the street
history still paves these avenues with Jewish dreams.

My Serbian genes fire up with the thundering notes a brass band lets out
on summer streets thick with people flirting, smoking
among them my father, too young to imagine
how he would later do the same on New Mexican soil
in a language that left his tongue perpetually tired.
Nowhere felt like home's backyard
lined with pear trees and grapes hiding the tiles
now caked with decades of forgotten dust.
Knowing how it split his soul to leave was masked with excitement —
that ache, already arthritic, took its place beside the shed that stored tools
used for his mother's tomatoes.
Gifts of songs and sips of rakija still buttress his lifeline
to a world as old as the largest empire since Rome.

My mother's grandmother, decked in furs from the woods
where pagans kept fires burning for the god Perkūnas
found herself surrounded —

an island of civility between Nazis and Soviets
intent on taking the land for their own —
fleeing after she buried the family silver and three bottles of turkey in brine.
Three years in DP camps made her steely¹
life in New Jersey left her hopeless in seeing Kaunas streets again.

Little wonder that my own mother would become her favorite
by the time she died in Virginia
for that steeliness would thicken
the moment her granddaughter stepped out of a train onto Lithuanian territory
heard the language which had her spending every Saturday in school taught by
other immigrants
preferring the company of those who knew what it was to be raised by people
who dreamt of silver buried in Soviet grasses.

Hallowed by my mother, kept alive through lived words
there remained a piece of iron will
hammered into the shape of a cross
which led my grandmother through life's disappointments
kissed for every miracle
retribution in exchange for land theft was sworn by that cross.

Something about oaths, however, is that not all can be fulfilled.
Neither my father nor mother can fire a kiln
bottle turkey in brine
or live for anything that is not here.
Conception in pride alone
is as good as they can earn in foreign currency —
once you leave that land
you're never really welcomed back.

But I will plow the fields of their memories
tie in sheaves tall stalks of wheat

which I'll bake into bread
to serve with salt and wine on the well-swept yard
the house of our dreams to our backs
flowers on every border
hands deepened by loam and interwoven with steel
not a single grudge remaining.
Make these genes my guiding star when they, too, are gone.

DP = displaced persons

air fern

RC deWinter

it's not yet august yet the lawn is littered with maple planes
almost translucent wings carrying cargoes of hopeful seeds
they'll lie there unburied drying in the arms of helios until
he abandons them to be baptized with rain

these offseason suicides are nature's immigrants denied asylum
caged in neat rectangles where everything is regulated with
an eye to order and volunteers are unwanted interlopers
left to rot without purchase in the soil

i sigh as i walk the perimeter of the yard another immigrant
on foreign soil trapped by poverty and circumstance but unlike
these would-be trees i know there's no nourishment for me here
and choose not to force my roots into this ungiving ground

i am become a different animal
ancient and thin
fernlike antennae waving in the prevailing winds
surviving on air



Levka and the Wolf

Zoe Stanek

Levka Petruchev stood strong at 5'2". She had warm brown eyes which were now focused on the dense forest before her. Silver braids hung at her back, a thick scarf of reds and blues wrapped around her head and over her drooping ears. She wore a blue peacoat two sizes too big. It was held together by patches. In her hands was the last thing her husband ever gave her: a shotgun.

Rest in peace, Misha.

Levka stood atop a small peak. She listened for the crunching of paws against the ground and howling. Nothing.

Behind her was her youngest grandchild, Anya, miniature duplicate of Levka. She was silent; her stomach grumbled and she clinched to hush the sound. In her pockets were seven rounds, which she kept tightly secured in her hands, lest they jingle and alert the wolf.

Levka stepped away, gun held high. Anya made sure to follow her steps exactly, one set of footprints in the snow.

Navigating between the trees, Levka thought of the scene behind her: her cow that would not milk, her farm struggling in malnourished soil, and the body of her last chicken still warm with fresh blood. Her girls, her precious chickens, had been gobbled up. First Lucielle, then Andrée, Martha, until all that remained was Sudds. There were many things in this life that Levka had no power over: being widowed, being poor, sons lost to war, grandchildren she will never see again, Anya's mother lost, but the chickens? Her chickens? Too great a loss to remain silent.

The sun fell as they trekked deeper but Levka was not afraid. She had nothing more to fear. Anya's hands held firm in her pockets, trying to mirror her grandmother's strength.

Crack to their left.

Crunch to their right.

Levka and Anya's heads dashed around until their eyes caught sight of a bolt of black fur. Levka raised the shotgun and fired. The sound exploded and life stopped: the brook did not babble and the birds did not sing. She shot again and life continued: water flowed and birds flew and the creature ran.

Levka followed and Anya tried to keep up. There was no longer one set of footprints in the snow.

The brush became thicker and the sky darker as the canopy of trees grew closer. Levka stopped, the landscape changing before her. She no longer had to slither between trees and under fallen logs. Rock had become sparse and ferns parted to a grassy knoll. She lowered and Anya did the same.

In the center of the knoll stood the wolf, his fur blacker than the night sky. Crisp blue eyes bore through Levka. She did not look away. Instead, she lowered her hand towards Anya. The girl looked at her grandmother's face, the way her eyes sank into her head, how her nose hooked, and how her jowls rolled back when she smiled. But Levka was not smiling now. Now she was waiting for the satisfaction of revenge.

Anya pulled out two rounds and placed them in the old woman's hand. Levka loaded the gun, eyes never leaving the wolf. He licked his mouth and drops of blood fell to the ground. She cocked the gun. Raising it to her right eye, Levka lined up the shot, aiming for his heart.

"Revenge will not make you whole."

Anya jumped at the sound of an unfamiliar voice. She clung to Levka and searched, eyes squinting past the trees. Levka, surprised as well, hadn't moved. One moment's distraction and he could disappear.

"Revenge will not make you whole," the voice said again, this time louder.

Anya saw no one and she'd begun to worry that the voice was one only she could hear as neither her grandmother nor the wolf moved. "Babushka?" She said, fingers holding tightly to Levka's blue coat.

Levka said nothing and did nothing but she heard the voice too. Could it be God? Was he finally answering her prayers? No, God had left her a long time ago. But who then?

"It will only make you less than what you are," the voice spoke once more.

Levka put down her gun, gazing at the wolf with bare eyes. She could see now that his black fur was wet with blood and the blood that dripped from his mouth was his own. "You ate my chickens," she said. "I loved them and you ate them. My cow will not milk and my garden will not grow. What am I to do if I do not take revenge? Nothing? I can do nothing no longer."

There was silence and then the voice spoke again, "I am sorry for eating your chickens. I am very old and very hungry."

Now Anya could see that the origin of the voice was the wolf himself.

"As am I," said Levka, "But I do not take from others, least of all those like me."

“But you would take my life from me?” The wolf said.

“I have nothing left to take,” Levka said.

“Perhaps but this does not have to be so. I have wronged you. Return home with your grandchild and waiting for you will be four chicks. Love them, care for them, and you will never see me again,” the wolf said.

“Chicks?” Anya asked and her grandmother looked at her face for the first time that day. Anya smiled.

“How am I to believe you?” Levka asked but when she looked towards the wolf, he was gone and where his blood had dripped now lived two flowers the color of snow.

When Levka and Anya returned home, there indeed were four chicks waiting for them. The dry cow began to produce milk and the arid Earth grew vegetables and fruits through the snow. The chicks were lively and fruitful and the eggs they would soon lay would fill Levka and Anya until full and they would never feel hunger again.



Daniel
Zoe Stanek

What I Learned About Death While Eating Dark Chocolate

Ed Higgins

85% extra dark cocoa:

biting into bitter darkness

hard-eyed ravens

lurking and noticeable

grooming somber feathers

waiting

calculating my taking another bite.

They Told Me Not To Tell You

Helena Ducusin

Even from behind the curtain,
I know the mirror has clouded by now.
Twenty minutes doused in boiling water
and yet the voices overcrowding my head

seem untouched. An idiotic idea,
thinking the sizzle would catch them alight
and furl into flames down the drain,
for they unrelentingly stick to my skin,

gritty barnacles refusing to budge
even after I scrub and yank and scratch
off the layers of myself, peeling them back,
exposing my core, but the voices dig deeper.

"We're here to stay," they recite.
I had wasted my time stripping myself down
while the parasites burrowed into my lungs,
screeching obscenities at my heart,

rewriting the patterns of my brain
until I believed they had been there all along.
My palm, rubbed raw, stops the water, leaving
a naked body chaperoned and sedated into silence.

A LESSON IN BLUES

Margaret Adams Birth

She shatters cool turquoise as
she slips in, limb by limb,
warming it to her human temperature
where it surrounds her, and she
forces it to accept her form, her heft,
her movement, even when it displaces
some of the space she's in;
feet touch smooth bottom—comforting
solidarity—and when she looks down, she can see
herself wriggle her toes;
she would gladly simply stand quietly in place if
she could, but hears the words “trust me” murmured
close to one ear and feels one arm
beneath her knees, another
beneath her shoulders, lift her
until she's on her back,
lying as if weightlessly, now unaided,
staring into his eyes and wondering
about her choice to trust him, and then
gazing beyond, at a different—a distant—shade of blue.

Our Bodies, Our Tropes

William Dorecki

You claim the body defines us
against a background of hum

and deny that the snowy marsh
overlaps our daily concerns.

Now with new snow laving
additional thickness on objects

we can agree that women need
to remap their territories house

by house, disregarding the scowls
of men who foster a distance

between self and self, enabling
the largest blueprints to unfold.

But haven't we fenced off the forest
for the last few thousand years?

Haven't we suspected mountains
of plotting to stifle our modest

attempts to think ourselves through?
Now the glow of screens darkens

the ego, smelting millions
into a congealed splash of plastic.

You want to evade that fate
until some robot physician

feeds you a polyvinyl pill
you're doomed by rote to take.

I don't blame you but fear
that pornography more clearly

than other forms of the trope
bulks the body against itself

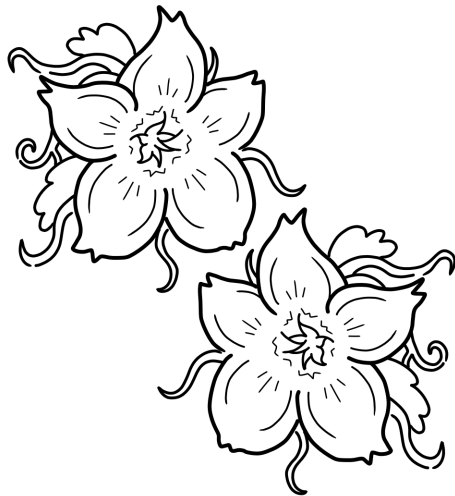
and rebukes the digital sublime
merely by distracting it.

We agree that the chilly mist
of the winter marsh delights us

with flavors not quite of our world.
Why shouldn't we shelve our bodies

and spirit ourselves elsewhere?
The black frozen brooks still flow

in half-light, polishing their stones
brighter than ever before.



Sea Change

Jack Harvey

I had a dream when last I slept;
one of many nights
when, like a lion,
I fought Morpheus
for my rightful fearful sleep.
Go! My lids finally fell
on the battlements of the dream;
the tedium of everyday embroidery
disappeared as hell's own fleet hove in sight,
roiling the divine cerulean sea
in which it was
my honor, my pleasure,
like a plucked flower
to float, fair as the beauty
of Blanche twice-blanced,
fairer than Tristan and Iseult
together in their bower of bliss.

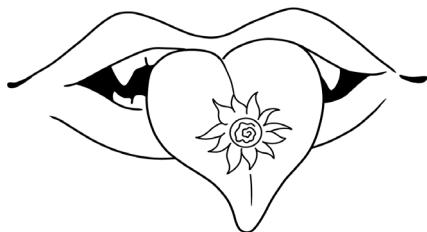
Did sea-maidens, mermen
come frisking
on the bright blue
busied by hell's minions
and the winds
white-whiskered water?
No, no, alone
on blue foaming backs
of barren waves
satisfied, I floated;
a prince in Babylon not finer,
a hermit dreaming beatitudes
not more in solitude.

The able hands of the dream
calmed the water still as glass;
from some far shore
the careful captain
of my proper woe warps my way;
his ship a splendid shadow
against the blissful clouds
of the setting sun.

Vainly, vainly he seeks me
in the coming of the dawn,
in the dying of the dream,
the sly dog, on the scent seeming
and the abiding sun
still beneath the sea's rim;
he seeks in vain
and knows he will never
find his prey, even as
dawn lightens rosily
as Aurora is supposed to,
lightens perceptibly,
a mystic freshening
calling up the goddess
to bless Apollo, the light-bringer;
far off in the west the lonely waters
forced to blush athwart the dawn
all the way to the rising light,
prized beyond all glory,
source of life, of bountiful creation,
blessed warmth.

We are coming alive now,
like Lazarus waking from his fitful death,
we are coming, awakening, returning
to steady indestructible day.

Forget sleep-hedged safe havens,
seen in a dream;
there are none.
Strangers armed to the teeth
walk the roads
in this world of sharp edges,
sticks and stones thrown
by friend and foe alike;
bear it as best you can,
go your ways
and resume.



The Glass Lion

Cassidy Irwin

Precise, pensive,
Spectating one mumbling
Economist of words who thieves thoughts with scalpel
And pen: metering her mind and carving a soul

Whose home is now
The pride of graduates,
The humiliation of a wave-tossed woman,
And the death of the singularly romantic.

There are none so
Mercenary as the
Children of modernity still sucking dry the
Gilded breasts of an alabaster madonna,

Perplexed by the
Properties of emeralds
And the slimly-grasped spectrum of shadow and light.
Extracting “the vastness [from] the particular”

Is no small deed—
You shoulder the burden
Of watching me appropriate your crystal mane
And etch the name “Leo” on the vaulted heavens.

Brickwork

D.S. Maolalai

the buildings
come down.
are rebuilt.
are rebuilt.
I don't
see a god
but I'd like to.

The Fossil

Margaret Adams Birth

The finger poke and probe,
the touch of human skin to petrified stone
as it dislodges the hardness from the ground,
disrupts the item's resting
place, an indentation in soil that had cradled
it for centuries, maybe even millennia;
the palm of a hand
cups the object,
lifts it to the eyes, to study:
a former life form embedded so that it resembles
a line drawing etched into solid mineral,
all that remains
the outline of a once-living thing
captured in an earthen sarcophagus for eternity—
or for as long as it takes to be
discovered in another age, by another creature,
for them to then carry away somewhere like a prize,
or replace in its special spot
and let it await whatever comes next.

Frostwork

Judith Skillman

after Miguel Hernández, 1910 - 1942

Already less in January sun
than when I woke late,
the lineage of every blade of grass,
yet here is Hernandez,
his head at least, dead
twenty times over.

I begin the slow work
of birthing again,
from the pain of labor,
tokens of peace.

Warm thoughts, rice soup,
all the little white flags
any mother knits, ripping out,
as she goes, her mistakes.

Loopholes of melt,
a pair of legs.

Hernandez might I feel my way
into your green body?

At ease, soldier;
be remembered, be embroidered.

No flies suck the bullet wounds
of your eyes.



Stellar Jays

Olivia German

I wake in the buttery light of morning and he is hanging from the trees. He is not dead, just doing his job. Sometimes I have to run out and untangle a rope or two so he can keep up with all of the work. Removing the limbs, trimming the branches, killing English Ivy with white vinegar so it withers to a brownish nothing. When the vine cracks away to dust, the Doug firs are released from its choking pressure, free to stretch towards the sun for the first time in years. I watch. I write. I lay with the dog. I fight sleep. I fend off my own choking pressure, the one inside that wraps me up like ivy. I try to focus on the wet pillowy moss as it sloughs off in fresh sheets through the air, falling gently down, ripping away from behemoth limbs felled in my 5,200 acre backyard.

From my bedroom, the one I have stayed in all day, I see the ropes sway in the gentle East winds like strings sent down from God, attached to our marionette backs. At least that is maybe what the God-fearing believers want us to think - I am missing the key element; belief, so you would think I am immune to the fear. This is not altogether true. I think it is those God-fearing believers who stick the propaganda pamphlets in our mailbox, but I am wrong. The group is anti-Jesus, but "pro-morality". There is only one person in charge, a typical figure (white, middle-aged, do I even have to specify that he is a he?) and I know immediately that we have been solicited by a cult, so I laugh with my head tossed and swear my vibrato shakes some of that lush moss from the trees and draws it to the muddy ground of my yard.

"Your yard?" My mother laughs.

"Your nothing. What kind of bills are you paying?"

Rent, vet visits, my groceries, anything else he asks me for. I think to myself. *All the bills I need to pay.*

"His backyard. Your backyard. That's rich." She snorts, like I've just said something I should be embarrassed of.

I'm sure that my mother wants me to have nice things. A nice life. Comfortability. But only when she thinks I really deserve them.

"You've never suffered." She says.

"Does he still like having you as a *roommate*?" She says.

"I know you better than you think I do." She says.

"What kind of bills are *you* paying?" I press.

She sputters and I can hear her rolling her eyes through the phone. In an instant it's obvious that she is on her way to forgetting this whole exchange ever happened; or at least the version of it in which she is the antagonist. But I still press. Because she doesn't pay bills. My father does. If I ever bring it up again she will say that I am a clinical basket-case with a penchant for compulsive lying.

Anyway.

The heat from his Chevy's engine cuts through the rich, wet-earth smell after the rain. We read through what his ex-girlfriends are posting on Facebook. We laugh at how mortifying it is that we were ever in love with other people. We share a bed. We sleep on opposite sides. It is enough to feel the heat with no touch. In the morning I look to the sky to make sure that God has not been watching. I find Steller's Jays instead, staring me down from the fern-laden branches of the maple above, furious and concerned that I haven't dumped their food and gone away already. So I do their bidding, then watch them rejoice through the big dirty window.

He leaves and drives back. I bus away and walk back, and he tells me he worries about my walking in the dark, he says it only takes one creep to shove me into his car and make me disappear forever when we live off such a busy road, and I look at him and telepathically say, *You think I don't know this? You think thoughts like that don't rule me?* And he says nothing but grabs and holds my thumb gently anyway, and and after some time says,

"I will build you a gate so you can walk to the neighbour's and be hidden from the road, so you don't get stolen, just make sure you have your taser always, and anyway, you know where I keep the gun."

I think back to all the things he's said before, promises he's delivered: *I will carve you a statue, I will make you a table, I will fix you a million birdhouses and I will climb the tallest trees so you can watch the jays feed no matter what room you're in, I will make you breakfast, I will buy you that coffee I know you like, I will teach you how to use a gun, I don't believe in soulmates but you are my favourite person on earth, you are not mine, you are just you, and that is my favourite part.*

At this moment I wonder if my mother knows there is more to life than the money that pays for it.

*when muti took up hydroponics at
age seventy-seven*

Elisabetta La Cava

in the pale green of my butter lettuce
I invent my mother
old canisters hanging vertically
on white walls
leaves growing and nature lifting—
like a plea

a smile can grow out of trinkets
hoarded old bowls set aside
in the humid kitchen
of her stucco home
why, I asked myself, did she have to be
a child of the second world war?

she told me of tins that grew full and
I heard a crack when she spoke
a small puncture in the toughened shell

I hear that a fissure through which
a beam of light can penetrate and
reach in to touch darkness can
never be closed again, only widened
and that the beam cuts in so intensely
it blinds

Save Thy Soul

Kamil Czyz

Oscillation is a movement back and forth.

My nana said it was her first lesson in timekeeping. Each pendulum swing was an equivalent to precisely one second.

That's thirty ticks and thirty tocks in a minute and with sixty minutes in one hour, a total of one thousand and eight hundred ticks

and one thousand and eight hundred tocks.

She counted one and each of them kneeling with her back to the clock

while her pa breakfasted.

Every other Monday was a washing day. Her ma would spend the rest of the week

pressing all garments and linen with charcoal iron. Skin peeled away from her palms as if they were fried tomatoes and a single crease in bed sheets would provoke a swift and eyeless rage. Thunder gods were freely distributing blind justice.

My nana was a light sleeper. Each night

she deposited her body carefully

within the solitary landscape of

duvet and cushions. Sometimes the moon kissed

her goodnight but more often clouds fused

the windowpane with stars and rooftops, slates no longer

red. Barren streets were

bursting with quietude.

She taught me table manners.

Impeccable.

Utensils were like a baton, as if she was conducting

the entire family, all four generations

reaching far into soft expanse of the future still accessible

in her imagination.

‘Watch this knife and fork’,

she would say, ‘mastery, that’s how you get through life’.

Time didn’t yet stop.

Buffy Aakaash

I once refused to love anything more than the love of my life,
enamored I was and wanted nothing to take that away
Sometimes in these moments we are just toys of divine beings
at play.

Springtime Eulogy

Ainsley Berg

— after *Sprig of Flowering Almond in a Glass*, Vincent van Gogh, 1888

There came no warning before Arles froze,
before new seeds were again covered by snow

as white as almond blossoms welcoming spring
one cold snap too early. Buds of cotton on trees

posed to hang there and wither by winter's hand,
all except one curved model of a branch,

taken to a heated room to live one more day
and forever in image by immortalizing paint.

Silken clouds of white from waxy leaves of jade,
reaching and twisting out of the glass as if to escape,

but there is nowhere safe for the almond to grow;
its fate was sealed in the moment Arles froze.

How?

Sandra Hosking

How? I ask Universe.
You ask the wrong question, it replies.
What is the right question?

Silence.

You implied yes, I press.
I saw the path.
But the way was removed.

Wind passes, empty.

I stand at the edge of a great chasm.
I see no way.
You have not told me to leap, to traverse, to fly.
How?

Waves crash.

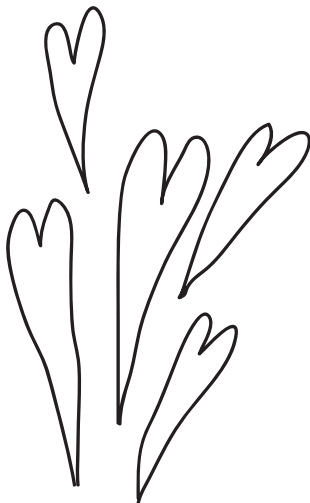
Perhaps that is the answer.
Mine is not to wonder why,
But nor is it to do or die.
To wait, to pine?
A statue amongst the elements
Hardening with the cold
Cracking with the thaw
Until I crumble to dust
Just before the first buds of spring are born.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May.
I do not see them.

Spoils

Bridget Spierri

Between us we have shoveled
An earth's worth of dirt in
Circles from one pile to the
Next getting nowhere and
Caving into our own spoils,
Clawing desperately, mud
Filling up our raw lungs which
Scream "uncle" among other
Expletives.

When a path reveals itself it
Requires blood sacrifice.
I will flatten, carve, open my
Flesh in the pursuit of an
Answer, of finding what's right
About us, while you roll
Your hands into a cup that
Will collect the spills of
My veins and in that dirt hole we
made, you will drink all I can offer.
You will watch me shrivel.



Sipping Sugar

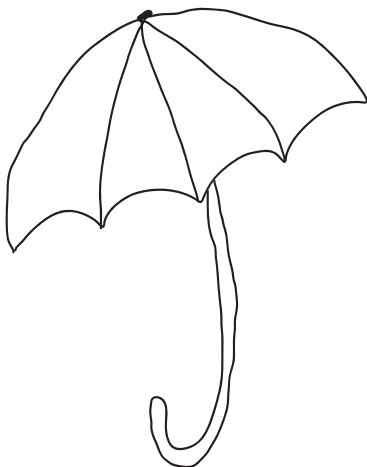
Morgan Boyer

Unpainted nails and amateur eyeshadow
overpiled on sensitive skin, jeans
that suffocated my growing waist.

At fourteen,
I spent Friday nights
sitting cross-legged
in the manga section
of Barnes n Noble,

a green Starbucks straw spinning
around my round lips that had yet
to taste the sweet saliva
of another woman's mouth

Sitting silent, sipping sugar,
waiting for the world to stop,
even if just for a second.



Fractures

Bella Horn

Emma Mcallum lived in a duplex shoehorned between two affluent suburbs. She shared a room with her two little sisters that was too crowded to have any friends sleep over in. She had one older brother that smoked weed and had gone to trade school to work on cars, and another one that got a girl from the Catholic school pregnant when he was 16. Her name was Jasmine. Emma and I were watching TV after school one afternoon when she knocked on the front door, sobbing with all her in things in a big orange Jansport. Emma's dad threw a bowl of lasagna out the back door when he found out what his son had done, but against his better judgement, allowed the *reckless idiots* to live in his spare bedroom. I didn't know much about Emma's dad, except that he sold antique furniture and was never seen without a Brewmeister in his hand. Emma's mom was nice but worn thin. She was a nursing student and had zero time for anyone's bullshit. Their family had recently moved from a trailer park in Las Vegas, where Emma said there was a big community pool and a neighborhood boy taught her how to fire a handgun.

I was fascinated by Emma's family because there was always something happening. My house was comparatively boring. My mom was always home and never taught me how to go couponing or make myself look four years older with makeup. I never had to jump out of a back window in the dead of night to the background noise of broken glass and shouting. No one had ever taught me how to fire a gun. Oftentimes I wished that I could be as self-sufficient and interesting as Emma.

The summer before eighth grade, our favorite pastime was to sit in Emma's driveway and watch the high school boys go by on their skateboards. One blisteringly hot afternoon Emma lent me one of her two prized lace bras and suggested we flash the boys. She said it was a *conversation starter* and would make us more interesting and desirable. I heard the clattering wheels of the skateboards, saw Emma pulling her shirt up and bouncing gleefully. The boys cackled. Afterwards, she asked me with judgement in her voice why I'd kept my shirt down. I couldn't tell her that I wasn't that type of person. It's hard to even find words for a feeling like that when you're 13. So I told her that I'd chickened out, and maybe next time.

You sure do say that a lot, she said, laughing and putting her arm around my shoulders.

I went home and thought about Emma, and how she just did everything she wanted without fear, and how people loved her for it. She was what my mother would've called a *bit much*: brave and loud and unapologetic, and knowledgeable about all kinds of things that I thought only high schoolers knew.

Indica is the one that makes you all calm and sleepy, and sativa is the one that makes you happy and fun.

She wrapped a small bundle of what looked like dirty grass in a pink bandana and stuffed it into her bra.

Can you tell there's something in there?

I shook my head. Emma liked to flatter herself by wearing C-cup bras, but the truth was, there was too much room in there to begin with.

Since the flashing incident, several things had changed in Emma's life. Her brother, Jasmine, and their baby moved out of the duplex and into a shitty apartment on the rough side of the town that Jasmine's parents had signed off on. Emma was thrilled to be getting her own room, and we painted it over three days with the door locked while her dad seethed about his *goddamn failures of sons* and threw beer cans through the broken screen door. Days later he drove his prized Harley Davidson into the side of an Applebees while on a drunken late night ride and ended up hospitalized with both his legs broken. Emma's mom cried for a few weeks and then started spending her days with a bottle of peach schnapps on the porch. Emma acquired a skateboard boy named Connor who taught her everything she knew about indica and sativa and how many inches she needed to trim off her stomach and what parts of a person's body are most interesting to put your mouth on.

I would leave Emma's house in the evenings wondering if maybe her free-spiritedness wasn't really her choice, and how maybe my boring life wasn't so awful. Who's life was better? I didn't know.

The last night I saw Emma, I walked alone to her house. She was sitting in her driveway, arms clutched to her chest, staring into space. She looked so small and tired, and for the first time in our friendship, I realized that Emma was just a girl who was trying so hard to be happy but had never really been taught how. I silently sat down next to

her on the cold driveway, and we watched the sun go down over the roofs of the neighborhood.

We're moving back to Las Vegas, she said at last, without looking at me. My mom thinks it would be best.

There was silence again. I didn't know what to say. I'm sorry? That sucks? I'll miss you? Was that even true? There was only one thing that really seemed true enough to say.

I'll worry about you.

She finally looked at me, eyes red and mascara running. She was the most fragile I'd ever seen her: completely unlike the fearless girl I thought I knew. With a sigh, she leaned her head against my shoulder.

Okay.

The Invention of Dance

Ellen Racklin

We don't know their names—
the ones that discovered
when bathed in notes
pushed through swan
bone flutes that limbs float.

Were they inspired by life
or the sparseness of prayer;
needing a miracle to offer for miracle?

Not only are we here,
but whenever the music
is right we move in our own ways—
owning the gaits—
the threes, fours,
circles, squares, dips,
and breath that can etch
an arc in the spine
even if just balancing in thought

for one may need to find
a reason to dance to
the moon in blackened night—
so, within each is choreo
to pull darkness away
and from soul
a shimmering light until
spirit takes leave,
shimmying with grace.

Praise waders

Jeff Schiff

knock
and knobby kneed herons
jab fishing egrets
moonwalking
through cattail and sedge grass
playing their here and gone
at marsh edge
crosseyed bitterns
stalking bullfrogs
terrorizing garter and water snakes
clacking behind reedy clumps
clacking as if to taunt
as if to give fair warning

The Mountain

Joshua Shepherd

Up your winding, muddy path
And down into your sprawling valley
Your trees are bright green and slim
And your mud is squishy and fragrant
I drink from your river
Clear and blue as the sky

My wood cabin is hidden
Up a cracked stone path on the bank
One hundred square feet
For a brown wooden box
Is all I required

But you gave me peace
With your crisp morning air in my lungs
And you gave me passion
In your bright and starry skies

In Fall you bring golden brown sunsets
In Winter a flurrying white silence
But in Spring a thousand-mile garden blooms

You have given me all your beauties
To hold sacred and admire

You have given me the life I craved

Season High

Sarah Estime

In irriguous, eastern climates, pink plants the shape of decorative hearts sprout from the earth and bloom in white and pink moments before becoming vulnerable to gastropods and sap-sucking insects. Lady-in-a-bath is one nomenclature. Generally speaking, they are called *lamprocapnos spectabilis*, born in Asia and also dubbed Asian bleeding-hearts.

If the climate is too hot, the flowers require less sun. Shade corrects the dehydration like some managed seasonal depression sweating in enclosed cool temperature. Esther's sentiments were the same basking in quarantine with the comfort of her son who sometimes requested the company of his cousins. Websites wanted to claim compliance with regulations but Esther doubted the effectiveness of floor stickers labeled "Please keep your distance at six feet" two steps apart from each other and also disregarded by drooping, stale shoppers with their masks below their noses. So Esther let her son visit the cousins. She casted skepticism on herself about her ability to take care of him alone for a ceaseless unidentified amount of time and, every two weeks, that doubt felt resounding until her son had his sleepover, she missed him, and he returned with stories that actually entertained him.

They both needed entertainment that suited them. For Esther, spiking her Franzia with plastic bottle vodka and dancing to Little Dragon was her favorite form of leisure. Her uncle's fourteen year old daughter would appear at the apartment door representing a vestibule for total and absolute relaxation. And for a nocturnal bout, Esther and her son each decompressed before coming back together again.

"Does it scare you when Mommy drinks?" the cousins asked her son facetiously. "It's fourteen percent proof," Esther claimed.

Esther had mastered a method to flourish indoors but summertime was becoming hotter and drier. After some weeks, she shamefully hosted a guest—a classmate from grade school she once had crush on. And then they ran out of things to talk about having only Mrs. Roberts and obsolete teasing to reference. Esther didn't shy away from ceasing opportunities that disheartened her, seeking resignations out in order to only have the option for bliss.

So Esther dug deeper, finding a one-night-stand from 2018, a man of average height who lived in New Haven and worked in Tribeca and carried himself with a presence like Idris Elba in *Obsessed*. She didn't consider their interaction memorable given the hollow result of their date. But he was sophisticated. He embodied the standard she wanted to strive for. Shortly after his empty-handed entrance, she regretted letting in his failure to compose conversation other than responses to her miscellaneous surveys.

"So how is your daughter?"

"She's fine. She just became VP of Operations."

"That's very impressive."

After one session of adequate intimacy and strenuous silence, Esther stuttered invitations for him to leave met by his oblivion. In the morning, she slipped a Summer Camp sweatshirt on and announced she had laundry to do and he turned a sort of charm on, gently pushing himself back into her notion of romance to grant himself access back into her body. Afterward, she told him again that she had to go and he got dressed immediately and wished her a good day.

The next night, he inquired about a time to return. Esther felt puzzled but she felt as though she should fall into his interest.

Next weekend is better, she responded.

Okay, he said.

Expanding on the feeling that he was interested in her, she asked him what kind of wine he liked.

I don't, he told her, the period to exude his austere way of speaking. *I can try however*.

Esther felt on the brim of adult social interaction. She felt the butterflies of imminent adventure. But the cousins groaned through but a comment about having to clean up bedwetting and that was all the chiding Esther needed.

Tonight's no good, she told him. *I'll let you know when*.

For Esther and her son, the weekend actually opened up into an overcast, reclined Saturday of fair-minded inactivity. Esther thoroughly enjoyed it. She wasn't disappointed about not making the beds. She wasn't particularly vexed with her son's toddler tumbling through the sheets. Like a balanced episode in between hypomania and depression, Esther wanted to stay where she was.

Which day is good? he asked.

Esther conjured up the following night just to do away with having to answer him. She and her son took a nap in between their decidedly unstructured meals. Oatmeal Cream Pies and apples with peanut butter.

Esther awoke at four o'clock, the television glaring the rolling credits of *Hocus Pocus* loudly. As the sun rose, she almost considered her personal happiness and two consecutive days of domestic gaiety a dilemma as if they weren't one in the same.

Monday would be better, she updated him.

Okay, he said simply again.

Would you be able to pick up some cheeses by then?

Esther shook her comforter out, exposing crumbs scattering across the floor. For twenty minutes, her mind centered itself on the therapeutic sound of sweeping. Out into the living room, the sun shone through the blinds pouring in a dull, daylight highlight. After she tossed the particles of the dustpan, she checked her phone.

Won't have time, he told her.

She grimaced a bit.

Okay, she said back, evolved into sophistication herself.

That Monday, she worked from bed for the first half of the morning, folding the sheets back around eleven o'clock after washing the pan she scrambled eggs on and the plates and forks they ate from. With her computer clipped to its docking station, she stuck headphones in and decided to clean the bathroom drain stops. Afterward, she washed her hands and moved to her son's room, starting on stowing away winter clothing before checking her phone again. She grimaced at the stoic period; their apathetic, dormitory correspondence.

Maybe this weekend is better, she updated again.

Okay, he said almost immediately.

And the urge to cancel what she already knew was going to reject her overcame her.

Ya know, I'm reminded how boring this booking up thing is and I have some priorities myself. If ever you'd like to just hang out, let me know.

No thanks. I'm all set, he said.

For that night, the cousins came over and picked her son up. She poured herself a generous amount of Merlot based with bitter distilled ethanol, blasting *Season High* until the stir-craziness and the inadequacies and the mom guilt and parental pressures wore off again.

exhibit x

Lisa Cantwell

the moon smells like weed and unprotected
sex & that's the way he likes it best high

& musky candle wax drips down the nightstand
to the cowhide rug blood red jagged

scatterplot shadows flicker in granite light
he takes a matchbook from the empty

gouache paint tray tries to light his arm hair on fire
says it makes him feel alive again

he says he wants to stretch me like canvas
rub me with charcoal Picasso pastiche me

& then he says he wants to light
another bowl shotgun kiss while he comes

he can't strike the match & then he says he's
tired anyway falls asleep fucking artists

Confession

Rebecca Petchenik

Once I stole a poet's heart
Right out of his chest
Before I skipped town for good
I thought it would be funny
My name is in his book

I told him I loved him
Just to see if I was capable of it
Although i didn't mean to
I salted the earth in places
Bound to be deserts anyway



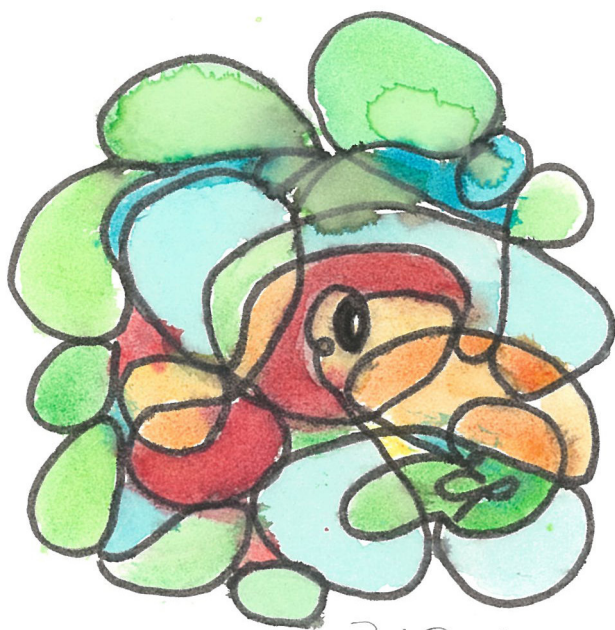
Proverbs 13:13

Rebecca Petchenik

The first great truth, a tragic fact, is you can't lead a horse anywhere, especially to water
But you can lead a needle through fabric and wheat through the violence of a thresher.
Your mother is the first to say it in that way that she does, with a half-smirk of self satisfaction
Her voice will echo through the hollow spots in your memory, the inflection never changing

The second great truth, a metaphor, is that rot and decay both start the moment you're born
It's always a comfort to know your whole body is covered in dead skin cells and dead hair
You have seven years to exist before everything but your bones has dissolved away
Measure your life by the bad luck of broken mirrors, the same if dropped from a step or a cliff

The third great truth, an abstraction, is that you can make a horse drink if you deprive it first
Keep it parched and starved, deprived of truth and water just like you were once deprived.



Red Bird, 2021

Red Bird
Ernst Perndriel

A Girl Remembers

Laine Derr

Under a weeping willow, when the sun is fresh cream
poured into a bowl of favored raspberries, a girl, kept lean
like feral cats, remembers wind-scarred screams, golden heat.



A Willow

Whitnee Pearce

Sylvia was a willow branch,
at 17. Her sunken cheeks matching
her deep-running roots, like her
grandmother had. She was long and thin,
with pliant hips widened from giving birth
at such a young age. She was unwed
with a daughter from a married man,
who would not leave his pursed-lipped wife
or their bed-bound child, who had wisps for legs.

Weeks after giving birth, in her childhood bed,
Sylvia's strong shoulders carried water
deep into the black dusted Magoffin County
coal mines. She followed the sweet songs
of little black-eyed canaries singing and found
light from thirsty miners, black-soot dipped men —
who only had the whites of eyes left.

Then, she was called for.
A Nichols man, tall with
Basswood-brown skin, who came
from Ohio and he needed a wife.
His wife had burned up in their home,
and he was left with seven children,
who needed a mother.

At 18, Sylvia's willow branches bent
and her roots settled in new ground,
as she kissed the foreheads of eight children
before they said their prayers.

The Winner

Beverly Joyce

He loves me.

He loves me not.

Only the sepal knows the answer
to this even or odd question.

My life blooms in my hand
as one by one
the petals pull from their stalk
like brows from lid.

The thinner the fan gets, the harder it is
to pick which one wins
Jackson's lottery next.

My tips flick them
as ash from lighted stick to the grass
like a basket-gripped little veiled girl
down a runnered aisle on Saturday.

When there are few enough left
to jump ahead a few steps,
and thus spoil the end of the game,
do I slow down to figure out
the winner---me, him, or the flower.

A POEM FOR MY HYPOTHETICAL HUSBAND I WROTE WHILE STONED

Ari Lohr

hi. nice to meet you. my name is Ari. better known as the poet, known as the guy who saw you on tinder once, swiped right, wrote three half-assed similes about you and told you that i was a writer over text. when i say i'm a writer, i mean that i'm awkward. when i say that i'm awkward, i mean i will double-text you a love poem.

apparently, i'm not that good at first dates —
turns out
hiding all your flirting in mixed metaphors
because you're too scared to talk to people
is a terrible way to continue a conversation
or establish any sort of human connection.
who knew?

some might say i'm a prick, but i prefer the term rosebush. i'm cute, flowery, and pink, but at the same time i'm not afraid to cut a bitch. i am the type of guy who calls themselves badass, but gets embarrassed when their cat sees them naked after a shower. sometimes, i fantasize about gravity, write some weird metaphor about saturn, or love, or beg for you to dip me in your wedding ring arms like watch this, like listen to this rising pulse reach crescendo, like each heartbeat i give is a manifesto to breathing, like i love you so much i can't breathe without being in your orbit, like sometimes, the difference between cardiac arrest and love is simply how poetic it is to write about. when i tell you that no one can write you like i do, i mean when you comfort me in the middle of an anxiety attack, i thank you by exhaling despite being breathless at your touch, by holding hurricanes in my chest and calling you my storm chaser, by not knowing what else to do but make noise, because indecision is the loudest form of silence i know. in that moment, i will tell you i love you for the first time that is not a poem. but what is this if not a poem? what is love if not the lonely language of ink? what is a poem if not the home of the heart's most violent vocabulary? give me a pen or make me a god — i will love with the same penmanship. when i tell you i love you, i mean that in some stanza, somewhere, we are still sharing our first kiss. that in the space of three lines, our hearts harmonize in 1000 different dialects and swell to the silent song of the same supernova every second. when i write, the paper sings. with a single sonnet, i could serenade the sky to sleep 'till this night lasts forever. there is no eye in this storm, only us. somewhere, i once saw a bottomless pit and jumped, which is to say that i am always falling for you.

when the sun rises and the ink dries, i'll press my ear to the page and hear your name thaw in the warm morning air. i'll text you and say i'm a writer, when, really, i am just braver over a keyboard than in person. i'll be so crazy and chaotic and weird, but i'll cherish every minute i spend searching for the right words. when i say i'm a writer, i mean that every day, i greet the morning with ink, close my eyes and reach out and again, you are right here. i am always too awkward to say anything except hi. nice to meet you. you know my name already.

DELIGHTED MOON

Kenneth Poko

I'm likely to fall in love with
a passion flower vine
opening for a single day—
the world feels open
like a sky. I float

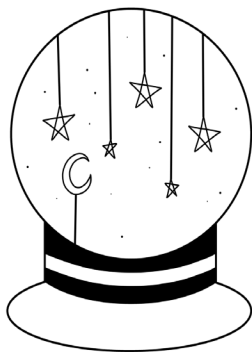
above gray roofs,
gray as faces or hair,
the gray daily grind. High

above trees, I blow up
a cloud balloon
for the delighted moon.

SPACE BOAT

Kenneth Poko

Out
in space a rowboat
of sunlight leads
to backwaters. I toss
my oars away. The boat
steers where I need
to go. I drink
ginger ale at a table
made of comet dust,
wave to the moon,
weary of turning
tides.



steep

Camilo Velasco-Overson

your rosehips shriveled
on the branch.
you got scared
of picking them, always
biting the worms inside
walking in circles
around the lake
cut in half,
a railroad down your spine.
so lonely with your
73 unread messages and
rotten apples in your pockets,
crumbs stuck to the flesh
of crows and squirrels and
the dead fish washed on shore,
men nodding your passage
holding lines,
hands shriveled leather and
worms cut in half
on a hook.
mom said leave it,
leave no trace,
and ten years later wished
she let you stay with
the bones and feathers weighing
your pockets
instead.
would it have helped
with the hips and the apples?
would you make
rosehip tea and learn
to eat it whole without
looking inside?

My Canine Siren, Calling Me Back

MK Punky

When I finally died
after a brief but unequivocal illness
brought on by decades of unresolved sadness
originating in childhood and carefully nursed through adulthood
the former me
was being carried away from our collective sorrows
 on a litter of pillowy white clouds
 dispatched by agents of the divine
when I heard the unmistakable howl-cry of my little dog
 the shaggy mutt we allegedly rescued
ululating the universe with eternal loneliness
unable to comprehend where I'd gone
unfit to rehabilitate a broken heart
unequipped to survive remaining days
without her very best friend

The sound of inconsolable terror shocked me
like a defibrillator
and I came hurtling meteorically toward the bed
where she'd found me
understanding for the first time in my second life
the terrifying responsibility of being desperately needed

7.7×10^{24}

Robert Beveridge

I measure distance
in atoms, time
in the half-life
of Tellurium 128

you anointed
my feet
with astringence,
placed a slice
of lemon
on my tongue

in my dream I lie
on the floor of your
confessional booth
as you slash slash
slash the canvas
maybe to try and let
the light in

but instead I
am smeared
with high,
sharp yellow

I cannot run
I cannot wait
I can only try
to get one atom
closer before
it decays

Grip

Dylan Connell

We were in the train station again and I was on my last cigarette.

Kerry was having another one of her episodes. She had gone limp and was grasping my hand like it was a rope to a life raft in the open sea.

She was limp, totally limp except her grip on my hand which was so tight I thought she might break my pinky finger.

And I was out of cigarettes. Well, at least I was on my last one.

But last cigarettes are a funny thing. You hold onto them, treat them like they're special, like when you finish the pack you'll be done smoking forever.

And if another smoker asks to bum a stogie all you have to say is, "This is my last one," and they'll understand, like it's sacred.

And when I finished my cigarette the train came.

But, Kerry was totally limp, she was having an episode so I had to carry her onto the train like she was a corpse.

And when I got on and sat her down next to me I grabbed her hand again and she latched on to it like it was a glass of water and she'd been walking through the desert.

And an old woman with a light blue hat asked me, "What's wrong with her, is she drunk?"

"No, she's just limp," I said. "She's having an episode."

"Will she be alright?" the old woman asked.

"She'll be alright, sure, she's not gone totally limp, see the way she holds my hand?"

The old woman nodded.

Then I asked, "Hey, have you got a cigarette?"

"Sorry, this is my last one."

Mile Marker 40

Devon Balwit

Somewhere up ahead, a road-painting crew restores the lines that will keep us from running into one another in the dark drowse of this two-lane mountain highway or plummeting into the gorge of new pines the lumber companies have re-seeded in what was once old-growth forest. We're tired of going slowly, creeping mile marker to mile marker, boredom forcing us to reckon with our character, resentful of this work done on a weekday afternoon and of the driver in front of us who slows further to let a tanker-truck enter from a convenience store. We want to be there already, enjoying what there is of our brief vacation, goddammit. Finally, we pass the work crew in a turnout, spraddle-legged in breaktime, their Caution: Wet Paint sign receding as we rev past the final orange cone, on our own now with the flimsy guardrail of entitlement.



Welsh Tradition

Mason Sykes

On many a door stoop have I sung come Christmas. Aye, I'm a caroler...of sorts. I've been doing this for many a year. Instead of a songbook, I have a horse skull for a head. Did I mention I'm an ancient pagan spirit? I've been doing this since Christmas was called Yule. No, I'm not Satan or the Krampus. I get that a lot, but it gets tiring being mistaken for a baby-eating cannibal or an actual demon by non-Welsh people.

Fortunately, I fit in right here in Wales, as my carols have sparked Mari Lwyd, a tradition named after me in which carolers in horse-skull-head costumes go door to door and engage in a battle of rhymes with home owners. If the caroller wins, they get all the booze and food in the house. And yes, that was my idea. And thanks to the Internet, word of this tradition has spread far and wide.

And that, in turn, led to the tale I'm about to tell you.

So, I'm going door to door one snowy Christmas, as usual, when I notice that a house that's usually empty in the winter has a car in the driveway. Curious, I knock. The door is answered by a guy in a star-spangled T-shirt. He is clearly an American as nobody else would be seen wearing something like that. I briefly am disappointed to find the house's occupant to be a tourist, until he grins at me and starts singing. It seems he knows of Mari Lwyd! What luck!

His first verse went like this:

"Oh Mari Lywd spirit,
I don't drink spirits,
Not vodka, whiskey, wine or gin,
I do have some beer, though,
Don't wanna seem a weirdo,
But I can't just simply let you in!"

Impressed with his singing voice and talent for improvisation, I responded in turn:

"Oh little human, from across the sea,

You seem to know well of me,
But not well enough, you see,
For if you truly knew of me,
You'd know I'll eat your food as well,
A burger or two would be swell!"

He grinned wider and responded:

"Well, I just arrived last night,
Vacation house and a red eye flight,
The pantry bare of every can,
Save for the beer my friends bought me,
It's a popular American brand,
And because it's expensive over here,
I can't just toss it, you see,
So I've come up with a plan: You can have the beer!"

I was taken aback. He's just letting me have the beer? I continued in song:

"Little human, be that as it may,
Why do you do this
And not drive me away?
People 'round here look at me askew,
Are protective of their microbrew,
And covetous of the smaller batch,
So I gotta ask: What's the catch?"

The American grinned wider (if that was even possible), and belted out a response.

"The beer is one I love to hate,
And is the topic of much debate,
And over there it freely flows,
But I don't think
You want it, though!"

WHAT?! Does he underestimate me? Does he underestimate my booze tolerance??

I'm literally the booze fairy! Gritting my bony teeth, I respond:

"Little human, I do not think
You know just whom
You offer drink,
Mari Lywd is what they call
To the heavens when I've broken in
And drank it all,
All their beer and gin.
So do not trifle with whom you're honoring,
And do not underestimate my tolerance,
Little human, I implore
You to open up the door!"

The American frowned, paused for a second, and then started singing again:

"OK, I can see now that
A caroler you ain't
I'm not sure quite what you are,
A devil or a saint,
But one thing that I promise you,
My offer of beer still rings true,
OK, you got me, I'll allow you this,
But a word of forewarning,
It tastes like horse piss!"

He then stops singing, and says "Uh, no offense." in a sotto voice before breaking back into song.

"Budweiser beer,
Here comes the king,
Straight into
The guillotine,
Away with you!
You can have it!
Honestly, glad
To be rid of it!"

The human then produces a six-pack of beer, presses it into my claws, and shuts the door. Confused but mollified, I wander off to a nearby clearing and open one of the bottles with my claws. I take a big swig...And immediately start coughing. This stuff tastes awful! That human scammed me!

Furious at the betrayal, I march back up to his doorstep and demand an explanation. The smug bastard has only this to say:

“I warned you.”

Day Job

Allison Whittenberg

After a night of therapeutic bottle and blunt passing
He wakes on earth at 5AM
In a lumpy bed
He goes to the airport in his overalls
Brandishing a handkerchief
He scrubs the thick plastic windows
With long handles bruises
He watches the jets take off
They move hot through the endless sky
With purpose

When I leave Sunday School for home sometimes

Gale Acuff

I double back to see the place alone
or empty, at least, maybe even of
God and Jesus and the Holy Ghost, not
even Preacher is still around, he splits
early for lunch with the deacons, downtown
at the Korn Dawg King, sometimes I walk there
myself and arrive during their dessert
but I don't join 'em, I get grub to go
and finally walk home, where my parents
are still at the kitchen table drinking
Sanka and smoking Salems and needing
showers and Right Guard and something to eat
so I cook them bacon and eggs and toast.
And when they finish our bread is broken.

(Alzheimer's) Progression

Jennifer Sara Widelitz

The brain: spaghetti strands
packed into a bony bowl,
filled to the brim.

The stories he used to tell
laid over the ones he kept to himself,
never to see the light of day.

No wonder his mind is a labyrinth
with meandering corridors and forgotten hallways,
the unknown soldiers from those unspoken days
haunting the paths he would rather not take.

You can see in his eyes, the struggle,
the effort to untangle the ball of yarn.

He said Margaret, but I know he meant Susie,
trying to navigate thoughts laid over each other
like the concrete highways
that spiderweb over city streets.

Margaret is no longer here.



Golden Dreams
Sofiya Levina

The Art Journal I Kept Back When I Loved Jesus

Helena Ducusin

lives in a clear plastic bin below my childhood bed,
neighbors with decades-old stuffed teddies and virgin candles
gifted to me for my Confirmation, because I could never bear
to throw them away.

I'd scribble over the pages of collaged bible verses if I could,
pressure the hemorrhagic Catholic guilt that bled through
my palms and onto the paper—the same blood meant
to absolve me of my impiety.

I'd tear out the pages of strained “inspiration”, then panic
and put them back in. What if mother sees my sorrow,
or worse, my regrets inked on paper, carefully curated
back when I prayed to leave every morning,

back when I believed in one God, the Father Almighty,
maker of do's and do not's and blotches of sin. A sin for a fib,
a single Sunday absence, pretending you're still pure, and
loving who you want to love.

I don't know who I love anymore.
My old self has been smothered, de-mothered, buried deep
beneath my bed, told to make friends with kid shoes and packets
from private school while I figure out who I am.

The art journal I kept back when I loved Jesus could not
be filled up now. No scraps of women's biblical devotionals
tell you it's fine to have grown, it's fine to not know.
Forgive me, old self, for I have sinned.

Funeral for Bees

Ainsley Berg

Once again, the thunder rolls
as a single bee is laid to rest;
an unknown ritual starts to unfold.

The procession of bees has no bell to toll,
but the mourners seem so aptly dressed.
Once again, the thunder rolls.

Instead of bouquets, the trees grow mold.
The voice of the colony drones, depressed.
An unknown ritual starts to unfold.

A tarnish creeps upon the bee's gold
as its seams become distressed.
Once again, the thunder rolls.

Never would a bee grow so old
that you would mourn, but nevertheless,
an unknown ritual starts to unfold.

To you, this story would never be told,
this tale of holy wilderness.
Once again, the thunder rolls;
an unknown ritual starts to unfold.



Death Rattle

Stelby Clark

Stagnant as persimmons in the freezer, cypress knees jut like headstones for the catfish entombed beneath black water. I hear my own death rattle echoed by the mosquitos buried behind my ears, draining me of sugarcane. Shadows lay like barcodes on the road to Delacroix and I am more forgiving than the brown bats circling overhead.

Lafayette glows like a charcoal grill sputtering in the distance and Orion's belt is nothing but a possum's tail drug through wet dirt. I swaddle myself in cattail fluff and spray centipedes with dish soap to recreate seafoam. A traveling man excavates my hand from inside a Magnalite before plucking croaker scales from my eyes, arranging the colors to match his ideal August. He forgets that I hail from pool sharks and heart disease, that my bare feet stick to tile floors and azalea petals, that each time I speak, crawfish claws emerge in rotten tongues and cling to another's frayed clothesline.

The Valley

Joshua Shepherd

This land runs wild in my veins
The sweet smell of fresh dew on the grass
The rush of the morning river quick and frosty

A deer trots through the squishy field
The mountain lion sneaks behind
I pull a plump tomato from the wiry stem

Soon the black tar will slop over the grass
Identical stone homes will wall off the indigenous
The river will lie murky and still

Today the river is blue and rushing
Housing a thousand unbothered fish
Painting a rainbow in the clear current

My cabin hides secluded in the shadows
Undisturbing of wiggling trees surrounding
I spy on the wind as it carries their leaves away

The wind knows what's coming
I hear the last breath in its song
Before the grey drudgery of tomorrow

The animals buried under white pavement
I'll sip gin under dim neon blue
The American Dream rumbles on

Divinity in A Palm of Stone

henry 7. reneau, jr.

Anyone
who works for a living,
to pay the bills,
the heat, food & shelter,
will tell you that
their dreams wear them down
to Valium in wee fistfuls,
their lives too small to realize
every tomorrow
could care less
how much they hurt,
the entropy measured
as matter-of-fact, as
stagnant uniformity,
their hearts
soon bereft of empathy,
like the homeless,
brandishing a feigned conceit
in the face of God/: *The Catholic church*
has made me feel rejected by the Son of God,
& it would take fire,
or breaking glass,
to convince them
that it's in their hands.

3 letters I can't write

Camilo Velasco-Overson

1. Dear cousin whose best friend just died of an overdose:

I remember you reading me Calvin and Hobbes. I remember you playing carpet is lava with me and teaching me to play-shoot bow and arrow in the woods. I remember you liking that I was a tomboy. I remember you kissing me that Christmas after everyone was asleep and we shared a bunk bed. I remember coming out to you at 14 and you were stoned and had a gay coworker; said whatever, be gay or whatever, and gave me a blueberry cigar. We fell asleep to snow and TV static.

I showed up after 6 years and your hug said whatever, be a boy or whatever, here, watch this wrestling video with me, say nothing. You were honest once at 17 but now you're 25 and maybe you'll never be honest again.

Boys need to be honest or they die. I see what boys need from the outside looking in. I say boys because men are still boys when they're hurt. All of you are hurt and none of you know how to say it. I know how to say it but I can't because I'm still caught in my own throat like the rest of you. I wonder if you cried. I wonder if you cried when you woke up in a hospital. Your best friend didn't get to wake up in a hospital. Is that what did it? Did you finally cry? Or will you hide in your veins again?

2. Dear sister who I've never met that knows I exist but doesn't know I know she exists:

When I think of you I think of the ocean and I don't know why. Your hair and eyes and skin are all darker than mine. Our smile is the same. I went through your whole Facebook. You're too good for your husband. I hope you're happy. I don't remember anything about you but I wish I did. All I have is the feeling that I was alone. That I was missing something, someone, hungry until my stomach ached. Neither of us could hold anything inside. I want to say sorry about that but you were born first. I want to say, can we talk? Can we start making up for 21 years now? When can I tell people about you without making it weird; a comedy-tragedy on being estranged? I open the story up with 'Guess what my dad told me in the middle of a Whole Foods! First: my grandpa has a brain tumor and he's dying! Second: I had a sister this whole time! (I put a laugh track here because no one knows what the fuck to say). What I want to say is:

Everyone in my family has a dead best friend. Yours didn't make it through high school. He swung himself from a rope. I'm sorry. I'm sorry we walk around with death. Maybe the light cuts a pretty pink triangle out of the stained glass that follows everyone in the Midwest, waiting, waiting, please take me up to the glass and the rope and the hunger and you.

3. Dear me trying not to be another dead best friend:

SAFEWAY

Emalee Long

It was July in Oregon.
Lincoln city and their stretches of beach,
Waving to Japan,
With sandpipers holding congress,

Moving along the foam.
I was collecting glass and green rocks,
Between the crab heads, big claws
The breakfast of seagulls

Still begging into the wind.

Coarse.
The spray is coarse,
The sky, too
The rocks, and caves, and sand.

The sunlight, filtered and weak,
Was soft. Like my hazel eyes,
My damp skin.

We left to buy thick brie cheese,
To wrap around wild blackberries
Plucked and rinsed and set in bowls.

We bought fried chicken, egg rolls,
Ice cream, coffee.
A toothbrush, and my hair smelled like salt.

Later,
As swallows puffed into daub nests in the eaves,
And while time became measured by
Fingerprints collecting on wine glasses.

We laughed and whispered,
That love was art and muscle.



First Night Skies

Adeline Cruz

Another summer night slinking through
pine paved paths to the beat of cricket lullabies
as our sputtering about the complexities of life
faded into a silence deserving of their song.
By chance I glanced upwards to the sky
and my knees knocked and gave out beneath me
fixing my feet to a place among the saplings.

Has it always been this way?
What do you mean?
Have the moon and the stars
Have they always looked this way?
She did not understand what I meant.
She did not understand that I was
blind but now could see

The dippers, orion, the bears
floating fixed around the northern star.
A moon that wasn't smooth at all
but chiseled, patchy, haunting.
Details I could no longer miss
as they dazzled me with the clarity
and precision of a thousand bullseye hits.

The stars were space themselves
innumerable blessings to my eyes
with sharp edges and brightness I hadn't known.
I stood among the saplings in awe
searching for someone to acknowledge
but my heart could find nothing worthy
beyond the boundless sky.



Kick It Up

Bridget Spærri

Please go wandering the earth
Looking for hints of things
You can't ever know,
Like how high the clouds go or
What the dust on the moon
Tastes like on your tongue
When you kick it up into your breath.

Please fear the sharpest heights
As if what's beneath you could
Sever your heart into a thousand pieces,
Like a bloody puzzle,
But climb them nevertheless.

Please never let go
Of what carved you into yourself,
Like ticket stubs or star dust or hope.
You may be open and raw,
But you'll never find these again
Once they're lost.

*The Faun
or Petrichor and Unfamiliar Mushrooms
Rebecca Petchenik*

Sometimes I am like the riddle-telling demons you meet at remote crossroads.
Can't you just imagine me in a silk hat with a poof of chimera feathers in the band?
I am both here and not here, dead and not dead, living and paradoxical.
I am couched in falsehood and misdirection, an act still performing as I sneak out
the back.
There's a confession in here somewhere, but you'll have to look closely.

I could breathe stained glass, fingernails, petrichor, and turpentine.
But I prefer to breathe deep the smell of where you used to be.
There is a hard, cold, vacuum there like the frigid darkness between celestial bodies.
The horrible truth is that I exist in flux, at any given moment, both a particle and a
wave.
Until you look directly at me, and I disappear in a puff of purple smoke.

I'll run down the hill and into the dell where I'll tumble into the shade and land flat
on my back.
I'll just lay there and let time turn the world below as nature reclaims me.
I'd rather become part of an undiscovered mycota, a single organism the size of a
mountain.
Maybe then, when I am ancient and slow moving, my feelings will be the same from
day to
day.
Maybe I'll be able to catch a promise on my tongue like a gray, mid-city snowflake.

Let's just turn to stone together, staring into the eyes of the Gorgon, enraptured in
her beauty.
I can keep my riddles and my stained glass and maybe even a few of my promises.
I'll never have to be a sphynx or a demon or anything other than a static truth.
I can sit on a stump like a faun and sing "no more change for me, no sir no how."
I can blow a pipe and never once acknowledge any single me that I ever have been.

We can always be these dancing and singing forest spirits and forget about truths.
We can forget about the reason I'm here in the first place.
We can leave the hard things unsaid if we put our minds to it, trust me.
We can all prance off into the forest together and forget I ever had a confession to
make.
We can go into the warm, dark thickets I come from and be mushrooms together.

Home
Sage Wolf

All these walls

Flannel sheets with coffee stains

A patchouli breeze

that breaks the day

She whispered,

“This is all I have”.

As my elderly kitty needed my leg.

This is it. She said.

She casts spells with these words from her spine, heart, and brain.

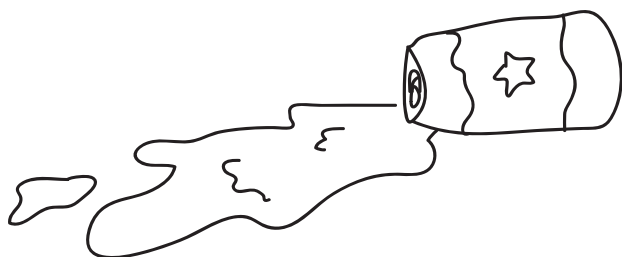
And they hang in the air,

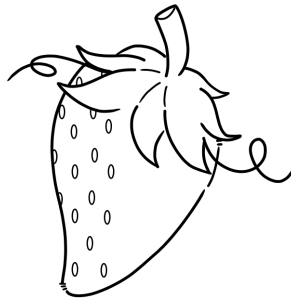
when she shakes up the place.

I built a rocketship

Nikhita Makam

I built a rocketship,
with kraft cardboard
and Elmers glue that stuck
to the pads of my fingers
the epoxy of eternity
on my epidermis just
a mess of chemicals
but then again
isn't that just all of us?
I built my rocketship
and dragged it into the yard
the grass was wet
and it stained the cardboard
the dampness of dew
on the rocketship door
not so perfect,
not really perfect anymore
but that really
just about sums up life
I clambered into my rocketship
and pulled out a paper map
it was a map of the universe
drawn on newspaper
with subsiding sharpies
and I forgot how vast
and wide the world was
until I recognized my map
of the universe
many weeks and months later
in a different phase of life
in a different country
in a different continent
I found it in human eyes.





XXXVII

To any who claimeth unrightful ownership or would seek to
deface, abuse or otherwise mistreat this book:

Be blinded by botflies and bitten by pilliewinks
a blight upon thy days,
may thy digits fall from thy feet,
may thy coffee always be decaf,
may thy cat eat thee and may thy devil eat thy cat
may thy wild strawberries never be tamed

Fonts:

Handwriting is used for headers

Apple Garamond Light is used for everything else