

## Letter From the Editor

Hello, Friends! It's been a while — too long actually. And that has me even more excited for this issue. I'd like to apologize for the delay(s), and I will try my best to never let this happen again. But you know, life. It happens. I hope the delay hasn't affected the way you all feel about this magazine because the same amount of love and stuff is still being put in — just in the middle of everyday tragedies. With that being said, I hope you all enjoy the works here as much as I do. I know the artists are just as proud of this issue as I am, if not more. So, get reading, stay safe and I hope to hear from you guys online.

All the best,

Markali

*The Things Herein*  
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# POETRY

This light

so clear  
you can see through it

passes between the skins  
that hold me together -

sharpens my life against the death  
of rotting leaves underfoot -

making me

or unmaking me

into the frost whose crystals cling  
to the sunlight and

today I decide I do not want  
to become water

Every night her footprints  
mark the edge between light  
and shadow

memories melting in them  
like frost

the light, empty; the shadow alive  
and full of doorways that may  
or may not lead somewhere  
she has been before.

The darkness stands still, poised  
on trembling toes.

The wind sings to her  
of what she's forgotten

notes dropping like water  
on water

*There are only mirrors*

*but this night  
could be someone else*

Wayne Benson, Jr.  
**Lament for the Japanese Martyrs**  
*Found poem from Silence by Shusaku Endo*

Mokichi and Ichizo  
began to burn  
they didn't bring home  
the remains the bodies  
reduced to flame  
and black smoke

Today I look down  
the sea  
endlessly dark  
now I know meaningless—  
Martyrs

Enjoy this feeling  
of grief in my heart  
*We're on our way*  
*We're on our way*

To the place  
filled with sadness  
relying on paradise  
to go on living

Again I've neglected what tries  
to find me  
the words I've hidden  
remain quiet for the meeting  
of flesh or spirit

Someone told me hell was more discrete  
but I want to believe in fire  
I want to believe

for healing or burning—  
the sound of death  
cannot just be air giving back to air

or fire crackling in the wind  
when nobody is there, when no one's risen  
or rising three days too late  
for some forgotten love  
my love—displaced

Wayne Benson, Jr.  
**I had a thought and it was good**

I was weeding the garden  
next to the big bees getting down  
to the roots, uprooting grass  
removing what's been dead

I thought about taking a stroll  
around the block, not because I wanted  
but because I could see myself

balancing off the edge of the sidewalk  
breeze under my underarms  
having the talk  
with myself about myself

I was getting to the bottom of it.  
The first time I heard love  
it sounded angry  
like seasons changing

So when I saw the bees rise  
like hot air from the ground  
batting their stingers around  
because they could

I thought I might go down to the garden  
when I wake  
and see what receives me

Though I do not think I should

In the disconnection aloft, I see your  
crumpled clouds,  
mock-sashaying,  
with droppings of the sky range. If you  
consider, downpour is another badass guy on  
your bulged heartlessness.  
And that rain-soaked caramel, at times looking  
like horrible, terrible stains. Example?  
On your lip it is like the greed  
of McKenna's Gold. A maybe-thinking aquiline  
Gregory Peck back in the slight chaff of  
hair on your forehead,  
evincing,  
forming couple of good luck kisses  
for you.  
So, tell me of those dramas playful in  
whatever knowledge-form, how they  
collecting my drones and names  
Kind of a smoking connection, while  
pampered much, in our teasing distance-form,  
what a feel of being a  
lonely moon on the creek of this planet  
Tell us, if there's no crank-call at all,  
what that so damn crystal-clarity, so much  
hard, sure or lip-smacking in mind,  
when man is just a taste-form,  
never born to be sweaty or salts

Imagination, my first metal road.  
I imagine a time-frame turning to a swamp in my mind.  
I drive a car and the fuel smelling only backdrops,  
afternoon bookworms, beige water-colours.  
And destiny on a backseat like a grotesque salesman,  
destiny licking intravenously.  
Somebody is my imagination, rosewood too.  
The impervious is always a beautiful bae, no?  
Such use of cinders on thick paper wrapped by  
your skin, or something maybe never more  
than that combative dichotomy, –

*Que sera sera?*

Liquid words engulfing your life, flooding your  
neighbourhood body. Solid is only memory not fitting under  
your shapeless topknot. When we cross the darkest  
swampland in our mind, making the alchemy of “*I have  
everything only yours, already, honey,*” we don’t know what  
that netty ink-coloured ribbon we use to tie our memories  
up with future envelopes

When we relocated last year, we had  
all our 3 rivers, 2 uncut fire-bands, 1 diaphanous  
sky shifted with us. A morning bird sang a song to  
such a wakefulness, as if a carnival of memory.  
You think the birds all have artful alert minds,  
and can do a lot of noontime flirting.  
You think an afternoon will lastly  
bring all your ex’s back



If seeing is *not* believing the curtain already removed, if a stone is all you know as language spoken in the dark and love, if I'm truly given a chance,

I'll say we were once polished as eggs, the remains  
of the blissful soulmates. We were once gratitude and  
its simple starmarks spread through the pages of  
spherical objects, we were the sides always so permanent  
as you walked along your sharp heartbeats.  
Once we were birds, too, aboard, our shadows with us flying,  
flying high, flapping to the bittersweet

These days, when we see humans born with us,  
born with sand-dunes, sex-orbits and secret phantom ability,  
a ship halts somewhere around facelessness of dreams.  
Like, not so careful, but a misery still ensures that we all  
are the born seers, our belief only a Rubik's cube with  
one single colour, – why do you feel it toned a little in  
gold, silver, brass, unsurpassable lacquers? Why don't you  
say what you can see is not a soul-element, not nemesis or  
sign of limitations, but the real wonder only etched  
on your entire body?

it is a hard poetry, of your unbreakable skull.  
A shell of impassioned preface, just cogito ergo sum  
or maybe *I Don't Know* type, frozen amount of  
thinking grey, et cetera. The hard is a quasi-gorgeous look  
with unmaterial goggles, with an umbrella never open,  
with rains that recently began, and water logged in utopia.  
Now, comes here a rare storm, warning, its stormy index  
finger erecting a full-sleeved shirt,  
when the entire world seen flapping,

flummoxed

in fiery sympathy, – it's a poetry, suddenly  
hard over all raw synaptic wingspreads. Quite like  
an excelling soda just too oceanic in drinks.

So, I now offer you water. Black Horse is often  
thirsty in this party room. Prosaic zoology showing this  
awkward quadruped team. In such beastly sweatpants,  
you are just a rotten luck, and such hard letters studded in  
your unkempt feature.  
Rest are of course the fat papery poets,  
their paper-pieces,  
vacuum stuck on both the sides

Poppy and rose petals plummet  
from a transparent flower vase,  
resting on the Grecian pillar's  
flat square surface. The petals caress  
against the silk, white bedsheets,  
imprinting a voracious desire.

Two hearts precipitously palpitate  
vehement blood through interwoven veins.  
Sweltering sweat and gratifying moans conjures  
their tempestuous, primal nature.

Like wine being poured through  
the bottle's glass rounded rim,  
their scarlet blood stains and streams  
down from the white bed sheets  
and onto the polished wooden floor.  
Their blood emanates a mauve carnation  
aroma of their impetuousness ecstasy.

All emotions have dispersed  
The masses are called to their resting places  
No details, just a blurry retreat  
A tide sucking everyone away with it but me.  
This violent palpitation in my chest  
Fights disappointment, embarrassment  
He doesn't look at me,  
Says superficial things,  
Things I see through easily.  
The distant whirring of engines...  
People are escaping this awkward realm  
And the lights go up  
Tipping me off that time is running out.  
I grapple for any last thought,  
Any dull shred of language  
That will hold him here for just one moment more.  
I *know* who I am, but does he?  
I feel used, nauseated by let-down  
Tinny flavor in my mouth.  
"It's all the same after the first night," he says  
...Or was it the second?  
But nothing is the same for me,  
And how can I make him understand  
While still smiling,  
Still laughing and secretly hoping?  
Drunk, he misses my mouth and grazes my cheek instead  
But was there feeling behind that nothing?  
This cold standard I dwell so readily upon—

Gareth Culshaw  
**TONY BROWN THE SCAFFOLDER**

Tony Brown's bones are tubes of scaffolding.  
When he walked, a clunk could be  
heard a mile away. Tony's voice box needed  
WD-40 when the rains came in winter.

Tony knew his dad better than his mum.  
His mum played cards, had one eye  
on the neighbours letterbox. His dad  
took Tony to watch football, and they played

snooker until the lights switched off.  
His dad had his own business and drove  
a van to keep a check on his staff. Tony wanted  
to be the same and took over when his dad

had a stroke. Tony fed his dad with soup  
for six weeks, poured it down a galvanised  
tube into his mouth. Tony's dad left him his will,  
told him to be a scaffold tower with wheels,

as they allowed him to move with the weather.  
Tony's mum poked herself out, then fell from  
the upstairs window, found death in a plant pot.  
She hadn't realised her husband had died,

and with it took away the scaffolding. Tony  
had her coffin carried on scaffolding boards.  
His dad's he kept in his van, in case he needed  
to ask a question on tax returns.

Gareth Culshaw  
**THE BREAD DELIVERY GUY**

He filled a white van full of bread  
signed worksheets with an initial.  
He walked like his socks were wet.

His wife sent texts throughout the day.  
The bread in the back sat snug  
like all the dreams he ever had.

During runs, he always left the engine  
running as if to keep himself awake  
His hands sand coloured. His hair  
sank into his skull until no more grew out.

The roundabouts he circled, traffic lights  
that made him stop, morning bird song  
that fell through his open window.

Then at weekend he turned off his phone.  
Knew her tongue was in his eardrum.  
So he closed his eyes and dreamt of bread.

Gareth Culshaw  
**A FARMER'S TALE**

There's a farmer who has hay bales  
around the front of his garden.  
He wheels his tractor to fields

ploughs the soil like he wants  
to see what is underneath.  
He watches seagulls create

a whitetail behind his machine.  
He wears a flat cap warmed  
in the microwave before he comes out.

His wife is stuffed and stands  
in a corner of a room upstairs.  
Her eyes last used a decade ago.

He had been filling his wife for years,  
stuffing her with idioms, cliches, spit  
and fat until one day she stopped.

He tells the family she has emigrated  
and left hay bales around the garden  
for him to deal with.

He wore a cigarette in his mouth  
had fish lips in the pub, rolled  
notes in the toilet.

His jeans were long, made his  
legs look short. He never closed  
his top button on his shirt.

Some said he slept with his  
feet dangling out the window.  
Crates of beer sat in corners

of his shed. He worked many  
hours during the week but  
none on the weekend.

His wife threw him out when he  
told her he hadn't cheated.  
She knew his tongue mixed up

words to please his brain.  
In winter he had a coat that  
stayed on a door hook.

In summer he sat on pub benches  
infused his body with cider  
grew apples in his dreams.



Carla Durbach  
**One day while searching**

You do recall the day your  
hand found his, carved on  
the wood of the door leading  
to the front steps, and you  
traced the indent, forever  
marking your time of stitching  
ventricles closed to stem the  
blood flow, desperate beats  
like birds bursting against  
glass. 'Love' can be a close,  
choking embrace, even death  
remembers it.

She sat in a sulk, crying her eyes tired,  
Long passed running out of tears;

The clouds block the light, living is unoriginal  
The eggs from the grocery were filled with only air...

And meditating on the thought of death throughout  
the night, cried herself blind

at dawn walked down the pier whispering "I know  
this place all too well"; unable to see with no fear of falling

into the water she stole a cigarette boat from the marina  
Drove it full speed towards the horizon

Cutting through the ocean's chop wind  
blowing her hair every which way

Until she dropped off the cliff of  
This. Flat. Earth.



**Loving My Shoulders - Self Portrait 2020**  
*by Reese Alexandra*

Kari A. Flickinger  
**Onion Flowers are Beginning**

The onion  
flowers are beginning  
to kee  
l over—tip to the source  
of all burgeoning beginnings. Transcend  
dents in the sidewalk. Purple into the divine. Edge into  
an act of divinity. Suck  
back to deep minerals—red clay, fools  
gold—to sweetly sleep  
as green shoots.

Onions pivot in liminal exult  
through layers no longer  
plundered. The maidens—no longer  
svelte or fine and wet and may  
meander soil-soaked  
in this vicious way.

Love poems are  
narcissistic

yearnings dipped  
in a dream-filter.

Crush poems start  
with narcissism, as well

as an opaque slumbering  
sieve, but include

a dram of unrequited  
existential dread.

—to love : to love—

The recipient changes  
the circumstances

with a response.  
The term

recipient implies being  
acted upon.

Being crushed  
by a poem

is love  
without both parties.

L.E. Francis  
**The Malevolent Worship of a Malign God**

& the shadows that fell over his face,  
folding like lines & spaces, writing  
love stories in the hollows of his cheeks,  
language carved into the ridge of his nose,  
transposed through the music of him,  
of his eyes more fluent than any tongue —

plot knitting through the depths of my unknowing  
stitching through supposition & winding around  
the brackets of his hips, exposed as he raises his arms.  
So many ways to interpret the things that haven't been  
said, so much more indulgent than surrender,  
than return, than dropping like a bird slammed

against a windowpane & back into a cage of cliff-faces  
that hold this heart like a vice. Can't be blamed for all this  
wanting, for imagining a story where even cold stars  
burn, the archer for all his restless arrows warms  
his hands over an imagined fire on an imagined night.

Girl look, you gotta breathe in  
& make it hollow underneath  
your ribs, you've gotta pull

your belly button up & in,  
picture it like a well, a passage  
through your guts & into your spine —

your spine which is a bow-string  
about to launch your wishes  
straight to heaven — but keep

your shoulders soft, blades kiss  
as if you could feel his hand there  
drumming a beat into the hollow

where your pulse reverberates,  
a cathedral of bone & panic;  
you gotta make space for it,

for the love you are inviting in;  
gaze as soft as the first snow,  
before the blizzard comes

& covers over all your exits —  
pull all your walls down  
& make it empty inside,

a residency for nobody;  
attract the universe in  
& watch him set up shop,

read him your love poems,  
& write him in as a hero —  
they all have the same eyes

& the same voice; the same echo,  
big enough to fill your well  
& flood out into the world.

Some nights we clash and curse. We cry and plead,  
throwing weapons disguised as words and spite.  
Verbs and nouns that we know will cut and bleed.  
Brawling until we are too numb to fight.

It's not always sunshine and smooth blue seas  
instead, there are storm clouds and hurricanes  
and words that can infect like a disease.  
When the storm has passed we see what remains

But what is left is still our loving bond.  
We can forgive and we can grow. Always  
letting what's real and good and true respond,  
trusting repair and growth. Revise. Rephrase.

Some nights we fight, battle and spar. And then  
We love and trust. We grow and laugh again.



Burnt popcorn and  
old hardcover novels:  
The basement always  
smelled like you and  
books. And popcorn.  
Even after you left, after  
your ribbon necklace tied  
your scribbled words into  
A neat package of  
endings I was too young to  
fully understand.  
Burnt popcorn and hardcover novels  
The stage always smells like  
you.

Shannon Frost Greenstein  
**Lord Show Me How to Say No to Him**  
*After Lin Manuel-Miranda*

Sweat.

A baby city, sauna, humidity off the river.  
Sex hiding around every corner  
like Darwin comes out to play,  
when nature needs to be replenished  
before the winter.

Alone. A pawn, chattel, goods to be acquired  
and a service to be rendered.

Castled. In check. A door in a row;  
the night is dark and heavy with regret.  
Nerves like synapses, firing; jolts; sparks.

The door opens. An unknown.

So many times a door will open, and open, and open again, as the world outside bakes and the sun burns the surface of the earth and the sound of children playing in the street echoes outside.

The same screenplay, like a scriptwriter past his prime.  
But different, after a while; feelings, after a while; longing, after a while;  
And love.

Unrequited.

Then a chill so foreign in this greenhouse of a season.  
Goosebumps on flesh; the smell of burning wood.  
Autumn approaches. And the city,  
rife with energy after a rest,  
back to real life.

Happy?

I do not say no. Comfort, familiarity, nurturing;  
orgasms and post-coital tea. Until real life intrudes  
with the first snow.

*(Lord Show Me How to Say No to Him, continued, stanza break)*

Alone. Unfulfilled. Manipulated. Abandoned.

Half of me His, and the other half his,  
and King Solomon rips me in half.

Pressure.

To beguile. To interest. To remain. Until he forgets.

We limp along; I am desperate, needy, rejected.

Inferior. Enraged. Heartbroken. Exhausted. But still I come when he calls.

Lord, show me how to say no to him.

The voice of inadequacy has green eyes like  
Amanda has green eyes.  
They shout at me through the silence;  
dictating dreams of perfection,  
while I cut my skin with futile hopes of measuring up.

A more perfect version of me,  
on the pedestal of your idolization.  
A dialectic, I renounce and accept it,  
two-faced in my complacency and my knowledge.

I know everything and therefore  
I must know nothing to bear it at all.

We go through the motions of life; through a haze of fiction,  
damned characters and ironic plots  
From here, we continue the farce in perfect love  
and perfect rage;  
wedded bliss, grounded in the certainty of self-doubt.

I hurt with the painful reality of being your consolation  
prize.  
You think of her while we touch,  
and I hang, forgotten, by our bedside;  
like a silver medal when all you ever wanted was gold.

Keana Aguila Labra  
**The Space Between You & I**

Time is eternal  
therefore you and I,

though separate,

will continue to  
exist concurrently.

The sun sets on your cheeks  
as my eyes awaken to a new day.  
It was never about what we  
deserve.

I have begun to tally things  
that are becoming older  
than you were,  
I refuse to become older  
than you were.

It is while I sleep

*outstretched blue hands  
splintering into the expanse  
faster than sound, light,  
and stars:*

I touch your cheek  
one last time.

**WHAT MY HEART'S BEEN WAITING FOR**

I foraged for love in the cavern of someone who already loved me,  
scraped them dry. Attempted to force an object in motion—  
me, I am and will always be the object, noticed or not—  
but could not accelerate. Instead I broke, sought validation  
that it's okay. But no one will give that to me,

so I must have done something wrong. There must be something broken inside  
to crack open like an old computer, to replace a few parts and then force restart.

When I went to bed last night, I told myself that I would wake up a different person,  
one who propelled themselves, one who did not carve out the innards of someone  
who already could. I don't feel any different, but the sun has yet to rise.  
I still have a chance.

Floating face down in the ocean, I can hear yet another lo-fi remix  
of a Ghibli film soundtrack echoing in the depths,

which makes me want to write, but it's a little  
too late for that or anything else I want.

Slovenly body feels like it might sink.  
It will sink, and then my gases will make me rise.  
A sloppy burial.

Piano music swirls in the salty breeze,  
the ripples of water already smelling like  
my rotting body, or of sweat. I guess I can't tell the difference.

Ancient and now here, a living nightmare. In my arms,  
a red-eyed creature as tired as all of us but much more hungry.

Pull oil from my cheeks, prep skin, rub hyaluronic acid  
all over and then drink lots of water: my secret  
to this glow that only exists when I try to glow.

People who truly glow don't try at all. Right?  
As a conscious math test, I find one problem to skip over  
and answer all the others. My spectrum is not a puzzle, these repetitions  
of my cheekbones on my forehead a spectacular illusion,  
my witch eyes a divine right, a monstrous blessing.

There was a time when I was too  
self-conscious to wear my glasses  
because I felt like I was obscuring my best asset.  
So I instead felt the self-consciousness  
of walking down the street or through halls  
without seeing any faces. The connections I lost,  
the friends I offended just trying to look nice for them,  
  
something that they never cared about, because we only care  
about ourselves in that sense.

But sometimes I'd like my life to be blurry again. I know too much now.

you frightened me, so i searched out those  
who had no fear

*(i heard this in a song once)*

some modern version of the maiden and  
the goat, someone who could hold me  
down and pour his fire into me  
rake his claws across my back and make me  
cry out

Mr. Fox, Mr. Wolf  
you left me bleeding  
yet I returned to you time and again  
till you taught me how to stand  
and see  
the roar of the flame inside me



Kushal Poddar  
**The One Arrested and Later Left at Our Doorstep**

The missing one is restored to her apparition,  
disoriented, oozy-blood,  
smelling like a marsh; two days've passed  
since the protest fired up from the gully to the alcázar.

We ask the silence to nurse her.  
Tim answers the media in waiting.  
We blame the throne obviously.  
The air stinks of conspiracy.

The missing one, reinstated, exists in flickers,  
now here, now beside the basin, a hologram,  
a substance, now a totem archaic,  
now a numen, Jesus.

The protest flows with the paradigms.  
Tim and I ask her what happened inside;  
she seems to miss herself if only by a smudge of soul  
or some slogan half finished.  
Silence bandages her; strings her together.  
MediaMedia disappears to attend another somewhere.

A teargas shell tore off my bro's hand;  
since we called him a primate in childhood  
we kept the hand, nicknamed it 'Monkey's Paw,'  
presented it before every guest in our house,  
cherished their shriek; the severed limb  
just wouldn't rot; the second hand revolutionists  
often borrowed it for their demonstrations,  
but no one asked my sibling what the paw  
meant to him. Probably a missing link  
in the evolution chain between Adam and Cain.  
He wouldn't have answered anyway, rather  
scratched his arm's end the way one alley cat  
scratches the blind bricks when cornered  
in dire need of some magic.

Carlos Mijares Poyer  
**The Great Screaming in My Sigh**

Unreal sensors  
The pistils of the brain in bloom  
Like the bee's flight  
Afar the moon

The wave surged utterly pregnant  
And the squaw giant  
Jumped like a skyscraper  
the crescent wind askance  
the pink kites in a trance flew  
lost to the haze of the horizon

The buildings drowned  
The gentile cried in dismay  
The eye of the clocks  
Upon the shadows  
the killer pedestrians  
staring at erased windows

And the lights you used...  
you lit yourself to see the storm one last time  
while darkness shown

Carlos Mijares Poyer  
**DURING A STORM OF SENSES**

In the evening  
When the doves cry  
Asunder the watercolors from the sky  
Drip on to my hands.  
And I recognize a painting,  
I am standing in a white museum  
Of summer ending.

And I look back into the sunshine  
And find myself framed, smiling...

A road awakes,  
I open a gate door hinged  
And I step forward  
Into the vacuousness of America,  
Into the swirl of generations,  
And I pray dialectic without gestures.

Eyes meddle  
A thimble falls away  
From the grace of a knitted world,  
A timbre tones death like an old piano diapason  
bewildered in cry  
the reflected tear  
And the birth of a new Kingdom.

Baby child  
Toes dabble in wet spring grass  
And a cricket saunters  
Away in smirk profile.

An American Smile extends  
The glee for horizons,  
A blonde man beholds the bygone  
Headless skyscrapers  
And lonesome T.V. Alleyways  
To this day and after ,  
The rise and fall of heaven.

*(DURING A STORM OF SENSES, continued, stanza break)*

One man desires to save the  
The souls from philosophers' timelines  
And a woman gives birth even  
A grandmother lies dead.  
Upon a spine of roses.

The kites swim astray  
White bows jostled by a Bachelor's throat  
Lay then the end  
Like our fathers prayed.

The last petal flown  
And your small hands  
As I have never seen,  
And your small hands  
Embracing the evening.

Look away  
And stand in shadows  
And you steer your eyes  
And so dilate the sky  
Like an overtone  
Dares time  
And your mind tastes space.

Saint Something rides again  
Comes marching in  
And parts the ocean  
At one end the rest of the sea  
At this end..  
"O' say can you see..."  
The footprints of Liberty?

The Eagle is the nation  
Shared  
The swastika is the nation  
Scared

*(DURING A STORM OF SENSES, continued, stanza break)*

Hear the clapping, nods and smiles  
A President is to erect a Nation  
A hippie is to save the erection

I gave you books to read  
And you read them  
I give you songs to sing  
And you sang them  
Why do you kill the weak?

It takes death no time...

Tomorrow you will dance and forget  
The songs and the books

It takes death no time...

You wrote a poem that spirals  
And stabs glory,  
And you dream of heaven  
In the afternoons...

While the earth construes you  
Into dust  
You wear a mask when you die  
You wear a mask of laughter,  
Come and bid good-bye the answers.

While the earth conjures  
While the earth unearths you  
Into dust  
And dust sighs into a sprinkle  
Of magic.

Marilyn Melissa Salguero

**Bitch**

*Previously published with Ellipsis Magazine*

People chew on words like dogs.  
Work at them until their teeth crack until whatever they bite bows down  
grinds into nothing but  
a hot, sticky exhale that once had a name  
until it becomes raw  
hides back in the throat.

I say *Spit it out* and yes,  
I am prying here.  
Reaching out a hand towards a snapping thing that is all gnashing teeth  
and backwards smile  
and I offer a taste of my blood

The boy looks at me  
and swallows  
furrows his brow and he

hesitates.

See,

I am asking the boy who does not know me to open up  
unhinge his jaw  
and place the bones from everybody he took from and lay it at my feet

I demand all of the words that never escaped past the porcelain border lining his gums  
all the raw and ripped up remains of a live thing turned leather  
suffocating &

still dripping a man

gl

ed heartbeat off of his tongue.

He likes the taste of blood, I think.

Likes the way he can bare his teeth

and make everyone else think themselves a skeleton

a meal stuck between his mercy

likes how all his howling echoes in agreement off the concrete

I expect that the bark will not be worse than the bite if I ask for it

So, I ask for it.

Ask him to give again

and he calls me a Bitch.

(*Bitch, continued, stanza break*)

it falls onto the floor between us

& I make him look at it,

see fear in his eyes when he remembers  
all the times he            too was a body  
                                 between someone else's mouth  
                                 how easily teeth sink  
                                 break both our skins

                                 & he remembers that he too is a bleeding thing  
he apologizes,  
                                 places himself in the palm of my hand and I call him  
                                 *a Good Boy.*

See,  
                                 who else but a *bitch* can teach a mad dog  
                                 how to *heel*?



*Tell me about the Trauma,*

but make it beautiful.

No effort “just woke up” kind of beauty

Let me see how it’s crafted

how other hands made you

Be cement and a soft glow in the sun

all natural

all truth dripping off your tongue

and by this

I mean

Vulnerable.

And when I say “*vulnerable*”

I mean like a soft grin

Inviting

I want to see your blood *rush* STOP

s

p i

ll

r a d i a t e

like a blush though your cheeks

subtle and something the audience will notice first

I want to see the wound all dressed up

A half bandaged hurt

The kind I can imagine myself in

You know

*relatable*

always *healing*

I need to experience the thrill of the hunt without the hassle

without the body

I want the trigger

& not the gun

*(Audience Says to Slam Poet, continued, stanza break)*

Afterall poet,

*they're called blood diamonds for a reason.*

*Sweetheart,*

don't you want the gold?

Want the ten?

Want the judges to listen to me?

Art is not art unless the audience says so

So, make yourself surgeon for me

*poet*

Do no harm but rip yourself open

give me the sanitized history  
dissect yourself

give me your liver and drain it  
of a memory  
a sunset with your father the way both of you almost drowned  
in tequila

give me your tongue  
unroll the stubborn "r's" your foreign mother imprinted  
taste the diaspora

give me your eyes  
tell me about the PTSD  
retinas an unresolved fire  
reduces your stomach lining until anxiety is all that is churning there

give me your eyes

tell me how you still only see hands

give me your hands  
until your fingers beckon  
the half-processed parts  
back up

all for me *poet*.

The judges will call all this residue of you onstage  
warm.

*(Audience Says to Slam Poet)*

call it sun shining through you  
call it the kind of softness that can't help but be felt  
& that's what we've been trained to want  
right?

If you give us a scalpel  
the pen  
& the blood

If you  
be cold and steel and calculated  
be stubborn and loud and sharp  
be resilient, ever-flowing and tender

if you make slam an exercise in discovery instead of a game of operation

we  
the audience

may have to answer for what our hands have done you too.

When I name my abuser, they write my accusation off as a witch hunt,  
Said I was swept up in a false passion, a movement of school boy ideals,  
Called me unpredictable, a violent thing,  
Said "Honest men are not safe with her around"  
They all gathered in crowds to protect him & shielded him with their blind allegiance.

Who am I to call the king a pauper?  
After all, didn't he make me what I am?  
Used his platform to build me into an icon,  
What a heartless iron maiden I am,  
A loud and lying thing.

Well if I am to be made into an symbol of a revolt gone wrong  
then let me be the femme fatale  
La guillotine.  
Fierce & Unforgiving,  
A pointed piece of work.  
I was built to provide a gentler end to things,  
Something to soften the blows,  
something that sat so pretty & looked best when splattered with crimson,  
I offered peace of mind in the form of a severance pay,  
Lost my mind along with every waiting and bowed head.

I was an offer of humanity until it was taken from me,  
Until my body was used to satisfy  
his bloodlust, until his hands stripped me of all things human and left me splintered,  
A submissive & quiet thing.

How easily am I blamed for all the bodies.

& Isn't it the history of woman to be vilified for her search of justice?  
To be blamed for the blood on her hands  
But never once asked who made her a widow?

So if I am to be remembered as the scaffolding,  
Let me also be remembered as the blade,  
All sharp edges and unforgiving swiftness,  
Let me be the "fallen woman."

*(GUILLOTINE, continued, stanza break)*

The one who drags every man down with her,  
Watch as I takes his name and claim it as a war cry,  
become both hero and executioner,  
Call me maneater as I leave him as nothing more than bones,  
Let justice be my legacy.

And when you tell my history,  
Let my truth be a mirror,  
Tell them how kings, kavanaugh's, and criminals all trembled the same way,  
all looked the same in the light of my reflection, no splitting hairs between them  
Tell them that I was  
Cold and piercing,  
And exact.

And remember,  
How the crown of every king splits apart so easily  
And how they all run red

Marilyn Melissa Salguero  
**In which my best friend tries to kill herself**

And everyone describes her the same way they would a Firework.

Bright you know?/she was something to behold/did you see her?/surrounded by tissue/paper &  
tinfoil/no note either/

they tell me it was her hands/or the trauma/that kept breaking her skin/they said she went  
screaming/as every dying thing does/called the cleanup messy/said it was a wonder/

She survived/as if they didn't see her burning in the first place/as if she didn't leave her body  
screaming/his name/as if every girl I know hasn't been calling/for someone to help/to hold/to hurt/us

she wanted to reach heaven/but bruised the sky instead/became purple, and yellow and red/and  
red/and red/so much red/ What a crimson glory/

She fell back to earth despite her best efforts/spent three days in a psych ward/crying/And when people  
learn about her/him/they call her brave/post photos on her timeline/try to capture/or remind/or  
expect/her to go back a time before she burst herself open/

they call her destruction beautiful/said to survive is to burn this way/to become a Phoenix/but PTSD  
is not fire/it is flashbacks/it is to have your brain burn/blister/burst/memory into your skin/to shed  
your skin/leave your body every time/it is to be a half lit fuse/not quite Firework/but not quite  
explosive/reacting/reconstructing/living between ash/and char/

And I can't say that I blame her/for her fall out/for wanting to stay ash/and not smoke her way into  
survivor/for swallowing handfuls of pills/for wanting to sleep/because lord knows I too am so good at  
lying/

And although it is Monday night when I learn about what happened/I drink/I call this/healing/a  
communion/because the sweetest coping is a bottle/rocket/the kind you can hold in your hand/&  
direct where it will burn/

and aren't I a trigger warning too?/aren't I so damn good at making my trauma pretty/at hiding behind  
metaphor/at making my hurt into a display/didn't I too/light up/erupt/once?/wasn't I just/another  
survivor/who became a shell/and emptied herself out/left her mark/too?

but despite the blaze I am still here/this body is a hearth/a home/a soft place to land/it can provide  
comfort/cauterize/it can/it did/it will heal/so watch me/believe me/when I say we are more than  
kindling/we were not made to succumb to darkness we were made to light it up/

So, let them remember us. Let them see us.

And let every booming breath we take be heard for miles.

**The Light of Inspiration**  
*by Edwin Morris*

Profile picture depicts happy girl--  
shows gleaming with teeth earned with four dollar a bottle toothpaste  
occasional white strips  
and brushing at least twice a day.

Profile pictures depicts well-adjusted girl--  
one with her arms thrown wide as though she's inviting the world for a hug,  
another where she twists her face in a funny way because she didn't like a joke.  
The world is a joke.  
Isn't it so funny?

Profile picture depicts girl with dogs.  
Dogs piled on the bed,  
dogs on the couch,  
dogs on top of a mountain, camping...  
She smiles with sunglasses on with one beside her in a car.

Profile explains, *"I have three dogs.  
They all sleep on the bed."*

Profile forgets to mention,  
that all these pictures were taken before August 14  
there are only two dogs now.

Profile picture says swipe right  
Because smiling face with white teeth promises a good time.  
Profile picture promises she's stable  
Promises she doesn't sit on my couch at night and cry because  
the day before I put my dog down,  
my sister called to say  
my best friend died, too.

Profile picture and profile text  
promises two-dimensional girl.  
One that can't harbor grief in her chest  
like a ship anchor on a wooden dock that's rotting from the salt.

Profile begs  
**SWIPE RIGHT**  
So that I can feel anything other than this.



Jail inflames me. Curious smells, endless taunting, suffocating closeness.  
Jail tags me as an 'other', forever to be feared.  
Lacking my cloak, my red gloss, my scarf, who have I become?  
Jail is full body searches, piercing stares, and sweat.  
Jail is premature aging, relentless paperwork, and forced-smile visits.  
Jail is hard labor, aching knees, and filthy toilets.  
Pervasive loneliness, bodies everywhere.  
Persecuted innocence, money games, and constant noise.  
I now dream of death, if I sleep at all.  
Name cleared. Too late to care. My own being repulses me. Who have I become?

*A ~~free~~ woman. Record. No vote. No voice. Who have I become?*

Jen Schneider  
**Gym Rats, Ravens, and Raptors**  
*Previously published with Ulalume Lighthouse*

Help me, please. Someone. Anyone. I'm surrounded. Everywhere I look there are bodies fighting back against extinction. The weight is deafening as everyone speaks loudly, in sound, smell, and sight. Most without voices. Little conversation. New languages are observed. Mirroring species long past.

Complex creatures with complex lives. Carnivores, omnivores, herbivores, too. I'm overwhelmed. I can't tell the meat eaters from the plant eaters. All drink water - *slurp, gurgle, gulp*.

On the far right, where the dead weights lie, pterodactyl screeches emerge and haunt those less weighty or strong. Calls. So many kinds - *Alto. Soprano*. Deep, guttural groans.

A burp. To my right. I turn, reflexively. He blushes, instinctively. Our interaction stifled by sounds I am unable to identify - *A scream? A milestone achieved?*

Weigh in with the coach, near the steps. Zombie brain eaters march to the commands of an authoritative voice in front of the mirrors in the paneled room. A room with one glass wall that bares the zombie like stares and groans within.

Alligator crocodile growls. More sounds. More questions. "Yes!" followed by the thud of a 200-pound weight dropping to the mat. No, mat. Its former resting place. Unlikely its last. Monster laughs, fellow lifters rejoice. Distant humming. Tunes. Woven - *Rock. Jazz. Hip hop*. TV screens with sounds of silence. Talking heads and ticker tape - *CNN. Local news*. I cannot watch. I must watch. I feel the shots. See the shots. Hear the wails. I see self-destruction everywhere. What compels us to seek the same fate as the dinosaurs? Though time shall not wait, there is no time to think. More distraction - *Athletic club filler. Sports. Focus on baseball. Watch bat strike ball. Imagine the crisp clink of ball on bat. See crowds lift hands in unison. Silent cheers*.

I try to read lips. Not all screens are captioned. Not all screams are cautioned. I focus intently. Too much so. I trip, gasp, catch myself. *For now*. Breathe in. Out. Thinking of lives lost from treadmill mishaps. I'd rather not say names. Superstitious always. Whisper silent prayers for lives lost instead. No time to pray. Must focus. Seeking to belong amidst the reality of a state of unbelonging; *Everywhere. Everyone*. More distraction: *Beep. Beep. Beep*.

Reduce running speed. A cautionary measure, only. In case of dinosaurs.  
Good think I did. Think. Thing. No meaning. What am I doing here?  
Burning calories. Trying.  
Now wondering about the sounds of burning.  
So much work. So little noise. Repetitions. Up. Down. Again.  
Cycle. Wish. Legs continue to rotate.  
Can't think. Too much noise. Too little talk.  
Ticking clocks. Digital lives. Western time.  
Sun sets in silence outside the window. *Stop looking. Focus. Now*.

(*Gym Rats, Ravens, and Raptors, continued, stanza break*)

"*All eyes on me,*" the instructor chants.

Isolating boredom. Relentless roars. *Hums. Whistles. Whistles.* Dangerous calls seeking pray.

I too am hungry. Not starving. Starvation differs, of course. An important distinction. Often lost in the endless chatter of news and screens that play 24 hours a day.

Some say dinosaurs died of starvation. Sam does. I wonder what they'll say when we are all gone. Say. Not Sam. Though Uncle Sam would be appalled.

Is it too late to wonder? From what do we accept defeat? Each other? Waste. Guns. Silence. Not hunger. Not starvation. Though we are losing, nonetheless.

Distracted by the hum, *so loud*, of my thoughts. My feed continued to pedal. Not feed. Feet. A steady rhythm. *Click. Clack. Click. Clack.* Thinking of clopping. Sea horses on the television. Restrained. Forced. Not sea. See. Do I feel forced to be? Hear? Here? Still can't think. Muddled thoughts. So loud. Too loud. I jump. Shriek. A true scare. Tyrannosaurus Rex roars. Emerge from the basketball court running perpendicular to the larger gym. Padded walls stifle some voices. Not all. Alligator crocodile growls. Everywhere. Grunts. Groans. Growing louder. Louder still. Feed pounding. Repetition. Feet. Not feed. Some synchronized. Most not. All I see are herds of dinosaurs. Everywhere. *Raptors. Theropods.* Others I cannot name.

Buzzes. Beeps. Games ending. Classes, too. Top of the hour nearing. Witching hour. Time to feed the animals. Why does my machine not stop? Buses approach. Meal prep calls. Voicemails ping. Nighttime rituals await. All self-programmed.

Auto-pilot. Too much. Too fast. Hurry. Rats, roaches, resistance – everywhere and nowhere. Not a part of organized resistance. A fight all my own yet no different than the others. Fighting Time. Reality. Extinction.

Jen Schneider  
**Re: From the Files of Library Branch X**

Dear Library Patron,  
I regret to share some terrible, horrible,  
no good, very bad news. I long to welcome you,  
down the well and through the  
looking glass, to shield you in my wealth  
of pages and printed texts sharing words of wisdom,  
feats of bravery, and tales of faraway wanderings -  
from Green Gables to rough seas with fantastical ships,  
from small towns like Maycomb to haunting cities  
such as Panam, from unknown settings like Hogwarts  
to the Smoke. Though my vast stacks are full, my stories  
eager to share, funding ails close my books and evil villains  
block your entry. *Hark! Who goes there?* Rumbles  
of the train roar in the distance. Might it be the children?  
My doors lock, my well has run dry.  
Now a place where no mockingbirds  
fly, a long way from the riches  
of the plaza, I fear my tale  
is one denied Manifest?

Dear Library Patron, I bid  
you farewell with a promise  
that our literary adventures  
continue. In a land where Little Women converse,  
Harry Potter conjures his own potions,  
The Hungry Caterpillar inches  
on in a never-ending quest  
for nourishment, and armies of tiny mice  
consume strings of letters.

I long to feed you, Dear Library  
Patron, to see you transform  
into a beautiful butterfly, but you too must  
inch onward until we meet again.

*(Re: From the Files of Library Branch X, continued, stanza break)*

*Good night desk,  
    Good night chair,  
        Good night books,  
            Good night Dear Patron.*

Time to turn *off* the lights.

The End

Jen Schneider  
**An (American) Plea**

With time on my hands and amends to be made,  
I cast aside questions of blame and focus on history  
in my quest for forgiveness. Is my time spent meant  
to repay debts that found me - in trunk deliveries  
and Tupperware trays with unknown inhabitants  
and foreign names? Is my time spent meant  
to reform behaviors that preceded me - in boyfriend  
taunts with unknown provocations and false flames  
of anger? Or is my time spent meant to recharge,  
focus, and fuel a belief that even I - *yes I* - am worthy  
of a life? What say you in the words of reform?  
With time on my hands, toilets with no shade,  
and garments with no shape, how can I forgive  
and be forgiven when I live of life a daily shame?

Toilets on display.  
Sanitary needs unmet.  
Founders, please help us.

Mothers miss children.  
No touch at visitation.  
Time ticks on. We wait.

Opinions don't count.  
Hungry for education.  
Regret everywhere.

I never cared for socks with shoes. Never favored socks at all. Yet my bare toes haven't touched the bedroom floor in over 6 months. Not the bathroom floor, either. Sweaty little buggers wriggle, seeking freedom. Hoping to show off shiny red, blue, and purple polish. I sleep with socks nightly. We all do. Me. The Mr. The baby. My boy. In fear of the feeders that dance in the night. Hungry beasts seeking to satisfy their hunger. *Finding us*. The baby wears a white cotton set - trimmed in lace. Her best and only pair. A favorite, too. Saved from a Sunday christening. The boy prefers his black tube socks, and its outside swoosh. The Mr. pretends not to care. No fooling me. Not the feeders, either. I've seen him sneak out of bed and pull on his next day's trouser socks. The pair with the sheer heel and stretched elastic. A nightly parade decorates the floors. Walls. Ceilings. Beds. Ourselves.  
... Feasting on fast food. One dollar at a time.  
... Feasting on us. One bite at a time.

I never believed the bottle had eyes.  
When you took me into the forest  
  
on your fourteenth birthday,  
showed me the abandoned swing set  
  
hugged with overgrown ivy, slung  
your backpack to the ground  
  
where it met rusted metal,  
I thought Demeter was home—  
  
thought she might grab our feet  
with earthen palms as we take turns  
  
with the bottle, swigging off-brand alcohol  
stolen from your drunken father  
  
while he was away. We never knew away,  
and though we accepted that labyrinth  
  
in our minds and bodies alike, childhood  
emblazoned by the sun into foliage,  
  
I wondered if we might return if taken  
by the Earth Mother's hungry hands.  
  
We hear the birthday reprise, a haunting, floral echo—  
awaken—and retreat home with backpack moonshine.



All the best things are fermented.  
You knew I practiced optimism with reckless abandon;  
still, you left, and still I breathed  
each shard of glass you broke in fits of rage.  
Twofold, a culmination, slumbering realization,  
a mirror erected inside. Your impact  
is felt, lived. I wanted to expel you from my body  
like how you tossed me into the undertow.  
I taught myself how to swim  
using your mirror—the storm reflected splendor  
I never knew I could see. Now,  
my heart doesn't recognize your name  
or any signifier of your existence. The mirror's film  
has been spliced, our supercut burned  
in a layer of wax secreted by the heart.  
Fermented, I shatter your mirror on the permafrost.

John Tuttle  
**Stepping into a Frame**  
*Previously published with Poetry in Form*

I peer at a reel, a slideshow, into a little frame  
A tiny, translucent sheet, a picture of you & me  
I dream of togetherness & forgotten fame  
What dwelt in my heart before we were “free.”

The reel is wrapped and wound round a wheel  
That crudest of instruments we ever did invent  
For millennia later, we still neither learn nor heal  
But we find we ourselves regret and lament.

My life is like a roll of postage stamps  
Unused, unpeeled, unsent, having never traveled  
To see waves, platters, paintings, and lamps  
I should look at them; the roll unraveled.

It's rather like the reel of monochrome  
Each frame a single day, and one over-slept  
With many a time a desire to roam  
Each frame is a dead moment gone undeveloped.

Untapped potential in years long left behind  
I play out alternate endings & second chances  
As long-lost memories resurface within my mind  
Of lost friends, times, plays, parties, and dances.

And if I could step into a little frame  
May I forever be under your shining gaze  
To project your light to an audience you tame  
To a family, a culture, whose thoughts you raise.

A slide, a second, a scene in stop-motion  
With a background blurred, the highlights sharp, vivid  
I stand with flawed recollection and emotion  
So when I sit with a frown, think not of me as livid.

Don't cry; not good for the old film strips  
Take care not to get it close to heat or fires  
Too much or too little, the struggle tares and rips  
Impaling me between other frames, other desires.

*(Stepping into a Frame, continued, stanza break)*

I'm tired now of waking and tired of no company  
There lies my evening bed: bitter, cold, lonely...  
As I recall companionship with few and many  
I don't wish to slumber beside loneliness, nothingness.

The portrait is going blank...

John Tuttle  
**Brain Wreckage**  
*Previously published with Literally Literary*

The nerve plexus  
Residing in my head  
Is a little out of sorts  
The humps are wasting  
Among ruins of rubble  
As my notions are crumbling, composting  
The pulsating muscle languishes  
The result of the wrong exertion  
Is it rotting?  
An atrophying mass  
A putrifying intellect  
Whose leftovers are merely repetitious?  
I could see it coming on  
From false cognates  
A bad memory  
And writers' biases  
Producing toxic fumes  
Submerged in a jar  
For others to examine  
A locked time capsule  
Of thoughts, ideas, concerns...

John Tuttle  
**Awaiting the Intangible**  
*Previously published with Ariel Chart*

Rousing rumblings  
Craving companionship  
Infinite inferno  
Perceptible; invisible  
Rising from within  
As slumber cuts off  
Tinnitus fades in  
Sheets can't provide  
The warmth my blood lost  
I sit up  
A crink in my neck  
Throbbing nape  
Pangs in chest, abdomen  
Signs of a deeper pain –  
I recall  
In timeless rest  
Unaccountable, intangible  
Pretending she was with me  
The one  
Who is not yet here

# FICTION

When school resumed after Christmas break, snow piled everywhere, Gabriel couldn't stop getting into trouble. He refused to listen to his teacher, one time even sassing her back. So unlike him. Then he hit another kid at school for taking his seat at lunch.

When he cursed at his best friend Devon, Miss Hennessey, his second-grade teacher, had had enough. "Okay, Gabe, you're coming with me. We need to have a talk." Arm around his shoulder, she walked him to the back corner, grabbed two chairs, and sat him down. A chart hung on the wall with colored balls, each associated with a different emotion. Red for angry, yellow for scared, blue for sad. "It was hard having to move in with your grandmother and change schools, wasn't it?"

Gabriel nodded and hung his head.

"What's going on with you today?"

He liked Miss Hennessey, so pretty and nice, and hated disappointing her.

"You know better than to behave the way you did this morning. Hitting and swearing and talking back? You need to take a couple deep breaths and use your words to tell me how you feel."

Gabe looked up at her with his sad brown eyes, long lashes fluttering. He heaved a big sigh, studied the chart, and grabbed a red ball and a blue one. His eyes glistened.

Miss Hennessey so wished school policy would let her ruffle his tightly curled brown hair. "So, what're you angry and sad about?"

Finally, it all tumbled out, the pain he'd held in for months.

"I didn't get to visit Mom for Christmas."

"Why not?"

"Because we had that blizzard and Grammy—she's old—couldn't drive. She said that place is four hours away."

"I'm so sorry—"

"Mom said we could do a video chat instead. But we couldn't 'cause Grammy doesn't have a computer."

"Oh, dear. That must have been disappointing. Is there anything else that's bothering you?"

Tears dribbled down his cheeks. "I miss my daddy. I'll never get to play videogames with him again. Or basketball." He sniffled, and Miss Hennessey handed him a tissue.

"I didn't even say get to say goodbye."

"How come?"

"'Cause I was sleeping when those scary men came to get him. Bree said he took some drugs and they couldn't wake him up." Gabe sighed again. "And now I have to live with Grammy, and I only just barely met her! Sometimes she's mean and punishes me if I can't sit still and do my homework. I liked it better when Bree was taking care of me."

"Who's Bree?"

"My big sister. She's in ninth grade," he said, his voice full of pride and longing. "They made her go live somewhere else when Mommy had to go to that bad place. I miss her so much." His eyes filled again.

"What was it like before you lost your mom and dad?"

"Mommy and Daddy were always gone, so Bree took care of me. Even when Mommy was home, she'd be asleep on the couch—passed out, Bree said. She made me pizza or mac and cheese in the microwave, my favorites. But I made my own breakfast, cereal and juice," he announced proudly. "And when it got late, Bree made me turn off the TV, brush my teeth, and go to bed. After Daddy died, the police took Mommy away. That's why she lives so far away now. Mom said she messed up, did some bad things, but she didn't tell me what."

Miss Hennessey shook her head. No wonder this poor kid was acting out.

"It's not fair Bree got sent someplace else."

Later, after she got Gabe calmed down, Miss Hennessey retreated to the teachers' lounge to unwind. She heaved a big sigh and said to another teacher taking a break, "Yet another damaged kid who lost both parents to fucking drugs. I don't know how many more of these kids we can manage in regular classrooms. They need so much. It breaks my heart."

\*\*\*

When Gabriel got home that night Grammy was extra nice to him. After he climbed into bed, she sat with him and rubbed his back. "Your teacher called me today—"

He jumped out of bed, his face red, eyes flashing, and raised his arm to hit her. "She tattled on me, said I was bad, didn't she?"

His grandmother caught his arm. "Oh, honey, no. She said you were having a hard time. Missing Mommy and Daddy and Bree. We don't hit people, remember?"

"Why can't Bree live here?"



'Cause that girl's some other man's daughter, Grammy wanted to say. Instead she asked, "Would you like to hear about when your daddy was little?"

Gabe nodded and returned to bed. He laid on his side, eager to hear about his Daddy.

Grammy told Gabe about her only son Billy as a little boy, how he loved to play outdoors, down by the stream in the woods near their house, catching salamanders and frogs. How he climbed trees and one time fell down and broke his arm. "He had a hard time staying still, just like you. I had to get after him to do his homework, too."

But telling the story made Grammy sad all over again. She remembered the funeral, having to borrow money to pay for it because Gabriel's mother Desiree spent every penny on drugs. Only a handful of people showed up, mostly friends of hers and Desiree's. Lordy, they looked like crap, covered in tattoos, skinny, their faces pale and haggard, teeth black. She insisted the casket be closed because poor Billy looked so awful, even though the funeral director told her he could make him look okay. He was never gonna look or be okay again.

She thought it best Gabe not be exposed to that, so he never got to say goodbye.

Gabe wiped a tear from Grammy's wrinkled brown cheek. "Are you okay, Grammy?"

"We will be, Gabe."

Eventually.

Chris began to question the wisdom of this trip. He boarded the bus departing the city, heading for the suburbs with a busted guitar case, a backpack full of books, and a basket with a picnic lunch. His eyes were rimmed with red; sleep was a stranger. It was the same routine every time – he'd pick her up, take her to the park for a picnic, and then spend the rest of the afternoon reading aloud to her and mangling her favorite songs on his guitar. She loved Sinatra, and, no matter what terrible sounds he wrung from his guitar, she sang along. That was when her memory was best.

He loved visiting her, but he was always afraid that each trip would be the last. Not the last visit for him; he knew that he would continue until the end, no matter how painful it became. He was afraid it would be the last visit for *her*. What if this was the last time her eyes lit up with recognition when he entered the room? He never knew whether she would be herself, or if she would even know him. With each visit, his heart broke a little more. What happens when a mind begins to go dark? Would she become angry and lonely, thinking he had abandoned her? Would she become sad and confused, never quite knowing where she was or what had happened to the life she knew?

Chris knew it would be easy to stop making these trips. He justified these thoughts, telling himself he wanted to remember her as she was before. *Before what?* He wondered. *You know, before... when loving her was easier.*

Sometimes, when they returned from their afternoon picnics, the nurses invited him to play his guitar in the Rec Room. Some of the residents would get up and dance, their aged bodies shuffling to the beat. His mother would beam with pride and say, "That's my son. Isn't he wonderful? He's going to cut a record someday."

He had given up telling her that he'd let that dream go. That he worked now as a bank teller. That he had to in order to pay for her medical expenses. The only music he played these days was for her. He stared at the busted guitar case on the seat next to him as the bus rolled on, bringing him closer to his mother, and he smiled. Tears welled in his eyes.

When he exited the bus and walked around the corner, he'd cheered himself up with thoughts of the songs he would sing to her and the stories that he would tell her. His doubt lifted as he signed into the visitor's register and headed down the hall toward his mother's room.

The nurse on duty stopped him before he reached the door. "Mr. Powell, she's having a difficult time today. Are you sure that you don't want to try back later?"

Chris shook his head. "I'm sure. I'd like to try to talk to her."

He entered the room and walked over to where she sat, looking at an arrangement of pictures laid out on the dresser. She beckoned him closer and pointed to one of them. "This is my little boy, Chris. He's coming to visit today."

Chris took her hand in his, surprised at how cold she felt. "Mom, it's me. I'm here."

Her face contorted. She stared at him blankly, trying to determine whether he was joking or just confused. "No. Chris is..." she started.

"I'm what, Mom?"

She shook her head. "Chris is a boy."

"I was a boy, Mom. I've grown up. Don't you remember? I live in the city now."

She rocked back and forth in her chair, looking from the photo to him. "You can't be Chris. Too old to be Chris."

"Hey Mom, do you remember when we used to go to Friendly's after guitar lessons? I teased you because you always got vanilla. So many flavors of ice cream, and you only ever wanted vanilla."

She pointed at the picture. "This is Chris. You aren't Chris, this is Chris."

"Yeah, Mom. That is me, but that was taken years ago. Do you want me to get you a more recent photo, to help you remember?"

"No. No. NO! NURSE! Get him out of here! Make him leave!"

The nurse rushed in and leaned down to comfort her. "Okay, Mrs. Powell. He's leaving now. He's going."

Chris backed out of the doorway. He stood paralyzed, his back pressed against the wall. He'd made it worse. He shouldn't have come.

A few minutes later the nurse emerged from the room. "I'm so sorry. She has days like this, you know? They aren't all bad, but this is the worst she's been in a while. She was asking for your father today."

Chris nodded. He couldn't think of anything to say. It was as if words didn't exist anymore. He picked up his guitar case and had turned to go when he heard his mother singing from her room.

"Somewhere beyond the sea, somewhere waiting for me..."

He opened the case and took out his guitar. He strummed the chords softly from the hallway. He would keep coming to the end, he reminded himself.

Rodolfo and Gloria were an old mestizo Mexican couple of many married years. They were growing old now. Gloria could accept this but Rodolfo could not. For he pined for the days of his youth when he had been quite the handsome debonair young ladies man. He still had his looks, or so he thought, for he still had all his hair and all his teeth which was more than most men his age in the village could say. So based on that, and that alone, he set out to have one last fling before he died.

He sought to do so with a woman named Felina, a sleek young creature of dark beauty who was the proprietress of El Gato Negro Cantina. Rodolfo fell under her spell the second he saw her and Felina knew this and thus wove her charms around him so that he spent all his money at her cantina. She had no interest in him personally. She did not find him, a dried up old man, attractive. For as said she was a beautiful young woman and could have any man she wanted. All she had to do was purr.

Gloria knew of Rodolfo's infatuation with Felina for when they went to the market he always wandered off to El Gato Negro where she would find him and drag him home by the ear. She was afraid of losing him for she dearly loved him so and could not bear the thought of living without him, not in this world nor in the next. So she went to her priest Father Tomas to seek his advice.

"You must put your faith in God," he told her. "Pray to God that your husband will change his ways and return to you and God will answer your prayers."

So Gloria prayed to God.

But her prayers went unanswered and Rodolfo kept spending his time and money at El Gato Negro rather than with his wife. Now worried more than ever Gloria went to speak to Father Tomas again.

"Do not doubt the Lord but trust in Him," repeated Father Tomas. "For the Lord works in mysterious ways."

And so Gloria prayed again to God.

And like before her prayers again went unanswered and she began to doubt that the Lord did work in mysterious ways. To her, it was Felina who worked in mysterious ways by placing a spell on her husband. A spell that must be broken. So she went to see Felina to make a deal with her.

"So you have come to see me," said Felina. "You mestizos are all alike. You claim to be good Catholics yet you still believe in the legends, myths, and magic of your Indios ancestors. You still believe in magic and witches."

Gloria was ashamed of herself for being there. But she believed that God had let her down. She was quite desperate. She had to take matters into her own hands now. So she said to Felina, "I know that

you are a witch and can use your magical powers to remove the spell you have cast over my husband. How much will it cost me?"

Felina gave her a price.

"Well, that is more than my husband spends now each week at your cantina. If I did not love him so it would be cheaper to let him carry on as always."

"Oh but it is a fair price, my dear," said Felina. "For I am a businesswoman and this is an opportunity for me to make money. You will pay it each week to keep your husband in tow and I mean that literally."

"Tell me first what magic you will work and then I will tell you if I'm buying for I too am a businesswoman," Gloria bravely countered.

"Remember when your twins were little and you came to the market," said Felina. "They were wild and rambunctious so you tied a leash around their waists like they were dogs so that they would not stray. I can have your husband kept on a short leash too. I will sell you a magic leash to tie around him to keep him in tow."

"He will not consent to that."

"Oh but he does not have to. You only have to put the leash on him once. When it is removed the magic will remain and keep him tied to you. Here is the leash," she said magically making one appear out of thin air. "Trick him into putting it on."

"Here is your price," said Gloria, not so magically making the coins appear.

So Gloria took the leash home and said to her husband, "Look Rodolfo here is an old leash that I found. Like the ones that we used on the twins. Try it on. Maybe you can use it as a belt. I bet it would fit you for you do not have the belly of a fat man like all the other old men in the village do," she said flattering him.

Rodolfo answered the call of vanity and tried on the leash.

"It fits," he said. "Maybe I can use it as a belt. But there is no need to use it as a leash. I do not need to be kept on a short leash," he joked. "Now quit all this nonsense, Gloria. It is time to go to the market." He took off the belt leash not realizing that the joke was on him.

So they started for the market and along the way Gloria tugged on her new invisible magical leash every now and then to test it. Each time she did so she could see the reaction of her husband as he looked strangely at his waistline. So she tugged harder and harder, over and over again as they walked along, amusing herself, for she liked jerking her husband around. She now knew that the magic worked. That her money was well spent.

At the market, Rodolfo tried to slip away to Felina but when he did so, Gloria yanked on her imaginary leash and immediately dragged him to her side. And when he tried again she yanked him

back again. Rodolfo was baffled by all this but said nothing for he did not wish to appear as a fool in public.

Now that night Felina came to see Rodolfo. But first she cast a spell over Gloria and put her in a deep sleep so that she would not awaken when they talked. Then she woke up Rodolfo.

“Your wife has paid me to put a magical leash on you so that she can control you,” she told Rodolfo. “For the sum of,” and here she named her price, which was much more than what Gloria had paid, “I will remove it.”

Now having heard this Rodolfo knew that it must be true for he had felt the tugs on his belly and he had no other explanation as to what was happening to him.

“Well?” asked Felina. “Are you going to pay me or not?”

He could not believe what he had just heard. His feelings, his pride had been hurt by this demand for money. He thought the woman liked him, wanted him, because of all the attention she gave him at her cantina. But now he realized that she only wanted money, his money, and not him.

“And I was foolish enough to believe you wanted me,” he blurted out.

“An old prune like you? Surely you jest.”

Rodolfo became enraged with that answer. She would never get another centavo from him ever again.

“You may be a witch. But you cannot make me pay. Go! Leave!,” he ordered.

“Then the leash shall remain on you forever,” she screeched in anger and vanished in a puff of smoke.

“So you have placed a magical leash around me,” Rodolfo said to his wife next morning at breakfast. “A leash that makes me never leave your side. Felina has told me this last night and she wanted money from me to remove it. But I did not pay her. Is that true, woman?”

“Yes, I have done so. For I love you dearly Husband and do not want to lose you to her. I will pay whatever price she demands to keep you. In fact, a payment is due today to keep the magic in place.”

Now it suddenly dawned on Rodolfo that this woman truly loved him and that he truly loved her. He realized that he had been a foolish old man chasing after Felina trying to be young again, so he said to his wife, “Do not pay her.”

“But why husband?”

“Though the magic will be gone we will pretend that it is still there. Felina will see me always at your side and feel cheated. She will think that the magic is still working somehow even though you haven’t paid for it. This will drive her crazy that you are getting something for nothing. This will be our revenge.”

So Gloria did not pay Felina and the next time they went to the market Rodolfo acted as though he was still leashed to his wife and never left her side. Felina saw this and became enraged. She did not remember that she had placed the leash on Rodolfo forever in her fit of anger when he refused to pay her to remove it. She thought Gloria was getting her magic for nothing and this drove her crazy.

They were quite happy now, happy for having fooled Felina or so they thought, for as said Rodolfo never left his wife's side per their plan of revenge. Yet all the while Felina's spell was still upon him even though Rodolfo did not know it. And when Father Tomas saw them so happy together he said to Gloria, "See didn't I tell you not to doubt the Lord. That the Lord moves in mysterious ways. He has answered your prayers, Gloria. You and your husband are together here on earth now and will be so in heaven forever too."

Gloria's faith in the Lord had been restored for she did now truly believe that God had intervened in her life, that He had answered her prayers.

Then one day Felina, who was not able to deal with her failure and humiliation anymore, appeared before Gloria and spit out in a fit of bitter anger, "You may be together in this world but will not be so in the next. For I have put a curse on your husband and he will go to the depths of Hell when he dies."

Gloria laughed off the curse and said, "God will not let that happen. My husband will be with me forever for I no longer believe in your magic or curses. Go away you, witch." And with that Felina left in a puff of smoke cackling as she went. But Gloria was not scared of the curse for she always prayed daily to God to keep her husband with her.

Now the few remaining years of the old couple's lives went by quickly. And Gloria became ill and she knew that Death was coming for her that night. So she prayed to God and then said to her husband as they lay in bed, "Lay next to me tonight Rodolfo, your hip against mine."

Rodolfo did so and they went to sleep. Neither awoke.

Father Tomas went to check on them the next morning, as he had been doing so for several days now since Gloria was ill, and when no one answered the door, he went in and found the old couple both deceased lying next to each other in bed. He smiled.

"Why are you smiling priest?" asked Felina from outside the open window for she too had been keeping an eye on the old couple.

"I have put a curse on Rodolfo sending him to Hell. And Gloria will be in her own hell as well for she will be without him in heaven."

"You are wrong Felina. You have no power over people that believe in the magic of God. Come see."

Instantly Felina appeared at the priest's side.

“See,” he said and showed her the two bodies. Actually, they were one body now, they had become one flesh, for the Lord had joined them together at the hip that night as they slept. Thus when Gloria died, she took Rodolfo with her to heaven.

“See the Lord has answered Gloria’s prayers and joined them together for eternity. The Lord truly does work in mysterious ways,” said Father Tomas.

But he was speaking to himself. Felina had already vanished.



Jen Schneider  
**Birthday Lace**

*Previously published with Mothers Always Write*

The lacey fabric was a belated birthday gift. The birthday he forgot until I reminded him through tears. The same month he changed his job of ten years and we brought our third baby into the world. He was working longer hours than ever. But I was the one pacing the floor every hour with the baby. Nursing around the clock. Then up – *and dressed* - at seven. Bus came at 7:40. No way was I going to be the source of any bus stop gossip. I also needed to prepare breakfast and pack lunches. Our girl liked turkey and cheese. The boy preferred tuna on wheat toast. The magazines talk of Mommy Brain, but there's nothing wrong with me or my thinking. I make sure the baby is fed, the clothes are clean, the toys germ free, and the beds made. Blue and gray stripes on the boy's bed. Red and gray on the girl's. *No more labor contractions, but ever more labor.* Why isn't he able to remember a single birthday?

I think my tears bothered him more than anything. He started quoting so-called experts. The same ones he used to mock. He sounded like a writer for Parents Magazine. Stuff about hormones and pregnancy. "I'm not pregnant anymore," I reminded him as he shuffled uncomfortably. "Year, but Babe. Maybe you've got something else going on," he countered.

I was having none of it. Me, a traditional Hanes girl. Sturdy. Dependable. Strong. Until he came home the next day with tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Babe. Really sorry". He handed me a small black box. It was wrapped in smiley face paper, the kind with a glossy coating, and a giant red satin bow. First time I've seen him excited about a gift. First time I felt excited in a long while.

I opened the package between feedings and melted. Silk panties – so unlike my typical cotton briefs - just like the ones we saw in a storefront window on our first date. Delicate black lace decorated with tiny mauve flowers. Daisies, I think. Years ago, I had paused on the sidewalk, drawn to sheer beauty of the fabric, and he noticed. "We're gonna bloom, together. Like those flowers," he told me a few months later. Nothing wrong with his memory, either. Why do I feel so fragile now?

I knew he was trying to make up for my missed birthday. I also knew we couldn't afford the luxury. He knew, too. But neither of us said a word.

And now, only a day later, I couldn't find them. I've looked in the laundry room. Washer. Dryer. Under the beds. The beds. Dresser drawers. Diaper bag. Toy box. The fridge. Everywhere.

Maybe he was right, after all.

But the bus was coming and I needed to meet my boy. *Carry on. Carry on.*

Right on time, the yellow school bus rolled in and out poured a sea of mayhem. High-pitched voices woke the baby, who started fussing almost right away. My boy hopped off, kissed the baby's head, and kept on walking. All I could do was stand. Still. Perfectly still. As the bus pulled away, I

watched the back of his navy fleece jacket disappear into the house and the cranberry red front door slam. Before the door shut, I caught sight of a dark fabric peeking out of his right-side pocket.

Almost immediately, my so-called Mommy Brain turned crystal clear. I had thrown them in the wash together. Trying to save some water. And my sanity. My boy likely went off to school with both his fleece jacket and a dark, delicate fabric clinging to its otherwise solid back.

*Did he know? How could he not? Did others see? How could they not?*

Back in the house, I saw the jacket in a tight ball on the stairs. I unfolded the knot of navy fleece and found my lost gift.

*Would I ever get this right?*

Tired of tears. Tired of Mommy Brain, I headed to the kitchen and whipped up his favorite dinner. Creamy mac and cheese with a hint of cayenne. Sweet corn sprinkled on top. A plate of sliced tomatoes and a wedge of rye bread on the side.

Sat and watched him eat. He looked right back. The baby fussed, but our gaze was locked.

I spoke first. My eyes welled but I continued. *Carry on. Carry on.*

“I’m sorry, Baby.”

“I know.”

“I love you, Baby.”

“Love you too, Mama.”

And that was that.

Until my day’s final feeding. As the clock struck midnight, I ordered a set of mesh laundry sorters on Amazon. Another love-hate relationship that both complicates and eases my days. Looks like my lingerie drawer isn’t the only part of my routine getting an upgrade.

# CREATIVE NONFICTION

Everything's nights out, lads on the town—cheap kebabs, cocktails at Revs. Sweaty student bodies packed into dubious nightclubs—where Callum can assault Molly and call it “banter.”

While everyone's swapping uni stories—I'm holding my tongue and my glass up to my lips. There's vomit vacuumed up by Henry hoover—flat parties with half-naked girls and boys and angry dorm managers. There's teachers having affairs with students, students having affairs with each other, someone's boyfriend boinked their housemate and that's gay shit. He's a faggot and she's too fat and desperate.

I've got a story—not of weekend benders or one-night stands. That could have been me—said no one ever. Because every student I know had their fill, their year or two or four of binge drinking and waking up in an alleyway or a stranger's bed. Except me—perpetually single, perpetually under-developed and alienated and behind and inadequate.

When I think of the stories I can tell, who would listen? *You're selfish, lazy and unhelpful. You act like a three-year-old. I can't support you any more—you should have picked a real degree.* And those are the stories from the good place—the place I ran to so I could get away from—*this is what you get for hurting your sister! You're a selfish little bitch! Your dad doesn't love you. No one will ever love you like I do.*

I could tell them what I think of the future—there's no future in the Arts. I'll drown in debt and if something goes wrong, I'm on the streets. No art = no future. No future.

But it'll bring the mood down—*not every disagreement has to be a big, moral stance, you know*—and I say nothing.

So we say ‘Cheers!’ like we're passing pints in the pub. Beer's always been too bitter for me. It reminds me too much of my father.

I like to think my father is a sensible man, even if he did vote for Brexit. So when my mother held my head underwater so she could kill me, why didn't he come for me? Or when my mother was drugging my sister to keep her docile? Why didn't he take me out of that house?

I can't go to clubs because I'm always searching for the exits. And I don't trust men—men like my father who have a veneer of respectability, of friendliness. And they disappoint you again and again and blame you for being disappointed—*well if you hadn't acted the way you did...you know how your step-mum is...you're being a drama queen.*

And I don't trust young men, either, with their piranha smiles. Young men with their rape porn, Tory jokes and aversion to female body hair. Young men who will turn a girl inside out and leave her rotting on a mattress.

And even when I'm cuddled up in bed—safe, destructive—reading comics—the men in those stories tender and violent all at once, I'm thinking about Trump starting a war with Iran and Boris and his Bully Boys running through parliament on pig-trotters calling Muslim women letter-boxes and saying poor people are drunken and violent and nose-diving the country into a self-realised armaggedon.

Our country. The Lion. Great Britain—England with all its domineering authority. My granddad—who reads the Daily Mail and thinks his Asian neighbours are terrorists—wants to take Britain back. I agree. I want it back from greedy, ham-fisted politicians. I want it back from Farage and Britain First.

I want it to mean something to me. This austere childhood— was it worth it? An underfunded social services meant I languished in abuse for close to a decade. And my mum is to blame and my dad is to blame and the country's to blame. And yet I've saddled the blame for years now—been told of my problematic behaviour. Pour through my reports and you'll hear I was a smelly child, unkempt, rebellious with low school attendance. Who knew, those traits were more important than the bruises and the pain and bursting into tears and sobbing into the bath for no reason—aged eleven. Then being told I'm not depressed, not ADHD, entirely at fault, entirely to blame for my own suffering.

Who's to blame? For a crippled NHS—not the fat cats making millions. Not the companies slicing and dicing and upping medicine prices and syringe prices and anesthesia prices. It's the immigrant—those selfish immigrants, who sink in dinghys and die in the back of lorries.

So all the students finish uni with their £80000 degrees and we all work in Tescos or petrol stations or else join the Army where we can shoot and rape other poor people for money and oil. Because poor people are supposed to die. That's what we've been taught.

A homeless man freezes to death in his tent and everybody walks over him. Grenfell burns and the Bullingdon Boys laugh.

And you can't say anything bad about the Prime Minister or else you're a traitor. And you can't say anything about the President or else you're a leftist cuck. And they think they can't say anything because of the PC antifa army. And the ones who really get hurt have to keep their heads down.

I'm standing on a bridge over the M6 and I'm waiting for a sixteen-wheeler to flatten me. Except I'm not—because I never make the jump, never step up onto the railing. Instead, I just lean over—eyes glazed, thinking about everything I have to offer, the world has to offer and everything we're losing and have already lost.

London's calling. One day I'll pick up the bloody phone.

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# POETRY

it does not glitter, does not  
shine  
it makes no promises of warm  
sunny days or awakening flowers  
—or even  
hope

Its gray skies and damp breath  
bite at early morning  
tears  
sending the parting birds to a  
place that I can only remember  
with squinted eyes

a place best forgotten

only in November  
when the world is black & white  
ages from the drama of colors  
and song

that I can  
breathe &  
in the mornings of  
gray hopelessness  
I feel at

peace



I wish you wouldn't smoke so much, she says as I lean over  
the old white stove to light my joint

*her*  
white stove

I know.  
I wish you could stay longer,  
I say reaching for her blue floral housecoat

her  
hands so familiar  
to my own

Does your father know we still talk? I want to have dinner  
with him but it might be strange

her words  
so close

No, he doesn't  
but I wish I could tell him. I can't though. I know  
people will call me mad  
—again

her face, sad now  
looks out the window by her old wooden rocking chair  
with the gold etching  
and sees a rundown yard & tired old tree against a wooden fence  
held together with zip ties

things are so different now  
yes, we agree  
as I blow a smoke ring into the  
ceiling fan & watch as the small paneled room clouds over

You're hard to see now, I say  
You're hard to see now, she says

as I look at my own reflection  
in the full-length mirror  
wearing her blue floral housecoat

*(wishes, continued, stanza break)*

her hands  
my hands

my hands  
her hands

holding a joint

I wish I could call you  
I wish you could have spoken the last time you called me  
two hours after you died

I wish I was

clear

Linda M. Crate  
**something i must do**

you want the mercy  
that you wouldn't give  
me,  
and a better person  
may give it to you;  
but not i—

you wanted a villain,  
and this is what i'll be;  
sing to the moon  
all in vain  
because today is the day  
a wolf will be slain  
by the damphyr  
without apology or remorse

you can't run and you  
can't hide from my rage—  
she will find you with  
her glowing red eyes,  
and long black claws;  
fangs white as the moon  
will make me devour  
every ruby from your veins

& though i know  
i won't like the taste of  
your wickedness

this is something i must do—  
one day i will find the sweetest blood,  
but it is only after your name is  
erased from the book of life.

-linda m. crate

Linda M. Crate  
**i build them taller**

i won't beg you to stay  
go, if you must go!  
i am going to be fine  
with or without you  
because i have always  
had the ability to stand  
on my own two feet,  
and i don't fear being alone;  
i have spent so many  
years by myself i have grown  
to like my own company—  
“you're too young to be a hermit”  
they tell me,  
but sometimes people afford me no  
mercies  
only nature and solitude do;  
people are exasperating and needy  
don't want to be dragged down by  
the weight of their wants and demands—  
some of them are well intentioned,  
but you know what they say about  
good intentions don't you?  
the way to hell is paved with them.  
so if you can't help me,  
the least you can do is not hurt  
me;  
i am so done letting people in  
so they can try to strip me of my dreams  
and mold me in their own image—  
they tell me to let down my walls  
i build them taller  
not everyone deserves access to me.  
-linda m. crate

Kristin Garth  
**Beast That Bleeds or Freshly Fed?**

Crystal doorknob cool in your hand, hallway  
parquet on bare feet you stand when cries send  
a shiver that splits in two where vertebrae  
end, legs could carry you — if they would bend,  
lift their own weight. Knees only knock as you  
hesitate, rattle the knob while fingers pulse  
with nervous distress. Elastic sinew  
compressing your convulsing chest, impulse  
whispers retreat is best. While you will feet  
to move, drop fingers from knob, the need  
to prove things, absolve — just stay alive. Fleet  
knob spins. Door swings wide. Is she beast that bleeds  
or freshly fed? Her spectral chin wears mortal gore  
that drips upon you, fallen on the floor.

i fell in love with San Miguel in Swansea,  
between 3am FaceTime calls and 3pm internal  
debates on unsuspecting hotel elevators. it's  
colder now than those times you gave me  
butterflies on train rides. i say i'll never believe  
that fragments colliding are happenings of  
chance, but we'll carry on masking those days  
anyways.

together we work to reduce something to nothing  
so well that it feels like fate when at the end of the  
day it somehow makes perfect sense the way that  
most things have never really had to.

Sarah Mackey Kirby  
**Dropping Blueberries**

I stand contemplating the significance,  
watching blueberries drop  
to kitchen floor.  
Entire carton, now released.  
Rolling like pool balls  
from a perfect break.

An ominous signal  
of soup-dribble lap.  
Lipstick to trace pressed collar.  
Feather to adorn my curls.  
A green marker streak  
to decorate my face  
with no one mentioning it.  
All day.

These happen-together things.  
Pepper-teeth pairs  
with squeezing shoes.  
Lost keys with running late.  
Bird-gift windshield with  
stay-still traffic.

Worrisome foreshadow.  
Historical reference.  
Superstition shunning logic.  
Or surface-simply-what-is.  
Blueberries sprawling tile  
as sun paints morning window.

Richard LeDue  
**Wish I Was Braver Than This**

Fear tastes of absent water,  
tongue pasty, mouth open  
as a window, trying to let  
breezes into an empty room.  
Fear smells of a crowded bus,  
face masks fail to hide scared eyes  
that blink at every cough,  
driver focusing only on the road.  
Fear is a boney hand  
reaching out towards a fevered  
hallucination we hope  
to never meet. Fear is  
the silence of grief  
beyond words,  
puny as this poem, voice  
drowning in fluid filled  
lungs. Fear is too easy to hide  
behind smiles that betray  
yellowed teeth, proving how slow  
a process death can be  
sometimes.



Richard LeDue  
**An Ending of Sorts**

Leafless trees wave at me,  
greet my thinning hair  
as if I'm their poor cousin  
about to ask for money.

Winter air reminds me  
of my overdue heating bill.  
Sunlight a comforting lie,  
night the devastating truth.

Left my bed unmade again,  
would rather sip on coffee,  
listen to morning news.  
The weatherman on channel five

forecasts colder days.  
He has already retired twice  
from two different stations,  
so I believe him.

Office furniture is not comfortable  
for long shifts. But when you are  
tired and your apartment is empty,  
and the electricity is turned off  
for the second month in a row,  
you warm to the 58 degree temperature.

Welcome the itch. Soften to the angular  
corners of the desk. Excuse the missing  
wheels of the rolling chair. Forgive the  
outdated carpet. Ignore the light that  
flickers on and off. Because tomorrow  
you will have to do it all over again.

And nobody likes it when women complain.  
Especially if they are black women. So just  
relax your shoulders. You are safe here for now.  
At least until the late morning, when the men arrive  
in cars that their wives hate but girlfriends love.

As you start your shift, everyone leaves and  
the only sound you hear is the vacuum from the next  
cubicle over. Somehow this brings you comfort.

Below your feet you see your daughter sleeping.  
You've brought her to work twice before  
but you neglect to tell the boss.  
He won't mind, you tell yourself.  
You don't want to be that employee  
who asks for favors.  
who is clearly a single parent mother  
with no other options.

You don't want to be.  
But you are.  
And yet, you are so much more.

*(Graveyard Shift, continued, stanza break)*

For now home is here.  
Underneath the flickering lights.  
With furniture that is not childproof.  
And a fridge full of expired food  
that has somebody else's name on it

Home is missing a wheel.  
Home is 58 degrees Fahrenheit.  
Home is the little girl underneath your desk.

To give in to the light is to suffer,  
Silhouettes shape shifting into  
humanoids. The house is a woman,  
The voicemail is hell peopled  
with ghosts, sgraffito walls castle  
the dead. In the night terrible night-mares  
echo without. Haunt me, I'd go outside.  
It haunts me, and so I give in  
to the seeing. Who remembers a  
wreath, whispers, reoccurring.  
Cats get into trouble fighting  
over dead rats. Earth, cycling  
everything, stops us dead. Until  
Forget me nots are whitening  
somewhere else in April, the  
interrogation continues. I want  
the sublime to continue, to be  
occasional like gleaming city cars  
in rain. I want the twilight to be  
schopenhauerian. Treelines  
like socrates shadows, when  
children set anything on fire.  
At the mercy of cain, I was driven  
out of the ordinariness of my own  
life, and occasionally, I would arrive  
backwards, into that rose-water  
dream puddles, like apparitions do.

Sun-drained busy street  
Day I ate and drank soda where

All sank into ground, you  
stood in that dress, and at

the center of the plaza,  
you looked away, August, 23.

Consciousness dawns, and  
withdraws, two fingers in

distress. I'm just as  
pretentious as any poet.

Waning on the boulder over  
crescent moon. Scribbles on

the phone-screen, he reveres.  
What becomes a poem

in the morning like thoughts  
concerning loss, missing the

kind of attention that hangs  
light on the ceilings, the heat

expands in February, cemented  
floors crescendoing. The paint peel off

the walls, I repaint it with my  
bloodied fingers — dust-riddled

louvres shut for two weeks.  
I'm high on promethazine, I'm

schizophrenic, texting no one.  
I'm listening to Japanese Breakfast,

in hell. I romanticize the sirens  
at night, so fun can disappear.

*(Brage Crossing Silhouetted Shorelines, continued, stanza break)*

So that she can disappear.  
when the night is cold I philosophize  
  
what I can't define. Bats landing on  
phone towers in disguise of a definition.  
  
What I remember is that I held on too  
long, that what you became, just a  
  
basement of voices, silhouetted  
storefronts, barges, trees and smell of rain.

To suffer and wander like  
cain, three years ago, to  
  
grapple at candle waxes of  
what we became  
  
in this room everything  
remains a memory dotted in flowers  
  
love what is sane love just  
like the loss of it, burns  
  
at the bowels, heavy jaws  
proclaiming what misses us  
  
as we disintegrate, as  
we retire into something  
  
otherwise, into nebulas, stars,  
me and this aloneness,  
  
Grieving the absence  
of a sensory ending.

It is a gift for sleep to elude me, for  
    providence to present me as witness to  
    its early morning dress rehearsal.  
The wind whistles with the wooden  
    twig-flutes your arm in sleep stretches out

reaching for the trees reaching for the  
    deer we saw mere hours ago dutifully  
    mingling with audience members who  
    have now deserted nature's amphitheater. I  
    dare not rouse you from your slumber.

How shall I tell you of the mountainside's  
    ballet? How shall I paint for you the  
    bobbing of the aspen branches joining  
    together into an arch above the lead red  
    spruce's solo? I am your window into enchanting

mundanity. Your dreams unfurl behind  
    closed lids while I make dreams of things  
    I see. Branches of balsam fir lowered in grace  
    bowing for the grand finale a white down  
    confetti trickles before the curtains are drawn shut.



chants of happy baptism with  
glee proclaim this day is hers  
she sanctions it stamps the decree  
with marshmallow fists and a war-cry  
the courtiers clamor for the feast  
she waits upon her throne a faded  
fisher-price white plastic tall but  
not so tall as all the lords and ladies  
the other two attendants carrying a  
sacrificial hot-air balloon cake to the  
little ruler her chubby little bald face  
drops into the cake her crown now a  
crusty blue icing on her nose her cheeks  
her head at last she sees her world her  
subjects framed by lashes dipped in  
creamy baby-coloured memory

Lips made to thaw my body. Hold  
me upright if I lean, I'll turn into  
a puddle in your hands. You  
unwrapped me seized my spine

and kissed me whole before you  
pried me open with your fingers  
made of teeth. My juices seep  
into your pores, I live inside

your skin, your mouth I make  
a home inside your nose,  
your eyes; devouring swiftly  
done. You discard me, throw

my bones onto the street. Soon  
there'll be nothing left of me  
within the smell you loved and still  
hangs in the air syrup so thick it

almost clings onto the tongue. I think,  
the sweetest moments fade away.  
What was it dentists said when  
we were young? *the sugar'll rot*

*your teeth and fill them all*  
*with holes.* In forty-seven years,  
they'll all fall out and be discarded.  
Will that make you remember me?

**Figure out what you want and stop wasting my time**

'My head is a mess' you say  
'My minds all over the place'  
I picture a real mess  
red all over the place

My weight against yours  
suddenly I'm moving too fast  
You fall head over heels but  
not in the good way

and with every blow  
I open your skull  
So different to how  
I usually have you spilling

all white while your  
mind is blank walls  
Yet your mind paints the carpet  
brains splatter furniture

head all over the place  
blood wets my cheeks  
'I just need some time' you say  
a red haze I walk away

On a different morning  
You aren't in the other room sleeping it off  
We're sitting on the porch, drinking coffee  
Quiet audience to bird sounds

By a different lake  
The neighbors aren't crass  
Flicking live cigarettes toward trees

In a different Anthropocene  
We are seldom angry  
Living and breathing  
Simul(spon)taneously

Around a different sun, I think  
We just might have something

When I knew it was a dream I spun  
/ Around /  
Everyone vanished  
I yelled the name I have for you  
and you, too,  
were gone

The hotel bar shined  
/ Reflection /  
Stained glass & chandelier  
Dustless diagonals refracted  
Foyer marble & wooden dome  
Tables on the red plush  
Rapt empty chairs  
I followed an aisle-like path  
North, to the 9th

A guide appeared lamenting steep stairs  
/ Sheer /  
I couldn't fly  
I couldn't jump  
Short-tempered I ran without breathing  
I had to ask you something before  
/ Rooftops /  
I was wordless

I looked out on a flimsy creation  
/ You / Me / All of it /  
Hollowing

I brooded over empty buildings  
Waited for the box to close  
I felt the isolation of knowing  
and not being able to unknow

I

We are at my brother's football practice when Mother teaches me how to walk for the first time  
and I, in size- five heels, am stuttering on sunburned track  
hammered flat by cleats and expectations.

"I promise he'll like you better  
if you stand up tall, suck your stomach in,"  
like all the pretty girls.

II

Mother says it's all my fault.  
The glass of milk wobbles on the table,  
my lips shuddering over thin white teeth.

Those pesky growth hormones—originally meant for the cows.  
No one in the family ever had tits, though hers  
beg to differ—swallowing the space between us,  
swinging heavy in the aftermath of her fourth child.

III

Beating mashed potatoes, Mother and Babcia reminisce about the good times  
defined by skinny jeans, tennis shorts... the men they never married.  
"I used to be so skinny," as if it's an accomplishment.  
"I used to be so thin," as if it needs to be proven, again.

That night Mother stands up tall, starts running  
until her thirty-seven-year-old frame slides back into her wedding dress  
until my large-girl jeans button snug above her hips.

IV

That night I slide half my dinner in the trash.  
I tuck the cream puffs in the freezer,  
run my fingers along their lumpy, crumbling cellulite skin.  
My mouth steals sips of Mother's flat, sweet wine.  
My body eats poetry about my body  
until it feels a bit better.

V

My friends say I have one of those “disastrously gorgeous” bodies.  
The kind the most beautiful characters are modeled after,  
the kind men masturbate to when they can’t get girlfriends;  
the almost-perfect solution that leaves the bed a little too warm.

In the streets, they tell us how much they love us  
their whistles long and low not to scare us  
insist they’re doing us a favor, our bodies begging  
for a bone—I can’t see any of mine.

VI

We start having family gatherings without Mother’s cheesecake.  
She knows by now I’ll eat half the thing myself,  
pressing each fallen Oreo crumb to my tongue,  
finger scraping filling from the empty plate.

Dishes were always my least favourite chore,  
dumbed down to a mechanical routine:  
scrape off the fat, pick clots out the drain,  
tuck the evidence into a grimy bin—  
tasked with ridding everyone’s excess  
until my nails shatter.

VII

Sticky with summer heat,  
me and my bitches tear open the freezer.  
Our nails scrape ice,  
snatch every container we can find...  
leave them to rot on her tiled floor

Cream puffs in hand,  
we pay no attention to the sweet paste  
oozing through our fingers,  
staining our arms with threads of milk.  
Signing our names on the kitchen counter,  
we trail white drips wherever we go.

*(Learning to Walk, continued, stanza break)*

VIII

The garage door slams quiet compared to her footsteps.  
Our cheeks bursting, lips stretched tight  
against the tips of grinning canines,  
we listen to Mother's heels tap on milk and tile;  
I stand tall and hold the Tupperware tighter.



Danielle Solo  
**In Which My Grapefruit Looks Too Much Like Me**

I stab my spoon into the wedge  
dusted with a thick layer of sugar  
the granules wet—a sudden, thin burst  
an almost-pink leaking across the mound.  
I watch everything bleed,  
clump together. I force it out,  
spoon cutting as clean as a scalpel  
a gentle curve to the outside,  
sharp slice to the inside,  
thrust it underneath.  
Ah, that semicircle of sweet flesh  
watch me pop it in my mouth.

I'm just a little hungry,  
searching for what they all were—  
just a little bit of juice to show  
I'm not doing this entirely wrong.

It's enough to justify  
one layer devoured,  
then a second,  
then a third  
then I'm moving too quick,  
a spurt catches me in the eye  
like a small act of vengeance  
but I keep going.

The hallowed half stares up at me,  
pip speckled chin, pale forearms dribbling  
in a weak effort to replenish  
its layers of thick, translucent skin  
exposed  
collapsing on each other  
like a bitter torn vulva.

There is no fruit, yet  
I have eaten nothing.

Danielle Solo  
**You Should See the Way He Looks at You**

we have grown accustomed to this:  
our noses stacked like paper  
the tenderness of your hand bent  
to the shape of my pulse  
my mouth gently pressed against your scar

I will write you two poems,  
repeating lines to mark the passing seconds  
until like sand I feel them slip between my closed lips.  
I open my eyes to see you stretch,  
a magnificent beast in the absent sun.

I wonder, does it make a difference that I am awake  
or is it enough that I am a girl,  
half dizzy with the warmth of you?

the sensation of you breathing  
a boxer stretching on his gloves

the cloudy purple before dawn curls around us  
like my brother's fist, grape bubblegum  
on a forefinger, smoke leaking from my empty mouth.

Ellora Sutton  
**On Sylvia Plath's 87<sup>th</sup> Birthday**

The moon is a gravestone with half the name keyed off  
and none of the flowers matter. A yew tree,  
nursing the light like a horse breaking hot air,  
is a boot-print on the neck of the dark.

I fold the pressed linen of my hands into a swan.

Outside, the wind howls red hair,  
stretching her throat out like a rabbit over the horizon.

Ellora Sutton

**A homolinguistic translation of 'The Drowned Woman' by Ted Hughes**

Millionly-petalled, full,  
her head trashed,  
welcoming the burning stake,  
the thirty-year-old ms

prowled the park fumey  
with wolf and breeze and no man  
where the children howled  
in the smudged, meaty sun.

With hoop earrings, strong teeth,  
a face moisturised and coffee-blooming  
fresh-floured and daubed whore,  
her fist stuffed

with house keys and hangers,  
one whole river, a manifesto  
that smoked like a long rifle.  
Sit next to her

this flesh-and-bone monument  
would poetry a sunrise,  
would body a goddess,  
unsheathe and offer lipstick.

I never left the womb, locked in,  
locked up and my hair for a straitjacket,  
tended like a garden. Vervain,  
rampion, lavender, all the nothings  
my mother conjured me from. My mother,  
saint in the window with the world in a basket.

Patron saint of pills and milk. Patron saint  
of tulle and the smell of rain. I stick my head out  
and lick the stone wall. She calls me mad.  
It tastes of her hand in my mouth,  
counting my teeth.

I have conversations with the leaves  
scratching the scalp of the tower. The bats  
in the eaves become knots in my hair.  
I can repeat every verb of the brush  
as it tightens the locks. My hair

wears me like a stole, head a dead afterthought.  
My hair is a debutante, is Princess Margaret in Dior,  
the gilded pages of a Bible, golden frogspawn.  
My mother ecstasies in it and I lay,  
still as a knife,  
shackled with blonde.

the closest I have ever come to love or bliss was being touched on the arm as I pulled away. a single finger under my coat, which was red & faux fur. my pelt. beckoned out of my skin & bones, to leave myself in the streetlight. werewolfed. to run down the street throwing garlands & limbs. howling. shackled to the galloping trees. her elbow. her finger.

a sprig under my cuff. I took it home. crucified myself to the bulb with it. early hours. my eyes. fluorescent & aching with moths. my ceiling lashed its tongue. the belly of my arm trawled with a seam of silver. no, tin. mine. there's something deeper. left there like a violet

I dreamt. the meaning of my name fired out of your fingertips. when you say it. what does it mean? supermarket popcorn. we eat the cracks in the pavement for lightning rods. look. here. for you. my insides. or. the promise of my insides. should you get cold. here. here. my skin. here. my warmth. let me blood you.

Ellora Sutton  
**For the hundredth time, Grief**

The vicious hole of the sun is stuck  
to the roof of my mouth like a word

or a lost name. Christ. My throat is blooming  
horizons. Red with over and over again.

I count flying geese by their necks. Stretched  
as though in supplication. *More sky, more sky*

until they disappear. There's something further, I know.  
I can hear it. The road. The trucks carrying bricks.

I love like a dead goose in a wicker basket  
with parsley and fresh bread. Handed over, still

warm. There is a use for every single part.  
The eyes. The webbed feet. The wings, folded.

# FICTION



They sit in the Dodge, Steve and Nick, eating hamburgers and chomping on fries. The engine is running and the radio plays Blondie's, Out in the Streets.

Steve is in the driver's seat, peering down at his food. Next to him, Nick is chewing and staring out the passenger window at the First Federal Bank. An older man with a cane wanders up to the doors and a woman with red hair and a blue dress holds the door open for him. The older man nods at her and slips inside; the woman follows.

It feels warm in the car, and Steve turns down the AC. He picks out another fry and jams it into his mouth.

"It's a good day," Nick says, eyes still glued to the bank.

"It is," Steve says.

Nick takes the last bite of his burger, crumples up the wrapper. He tosses it into the brown bag the food came in on the floor by his feet.

The parking lot is nearly vacant except for the employee vehicles and the customers patronizing the adjacent shops. To the right of the bank, a woman in the window of a flower shop is arranging long-stemmed roses in variant colors: yellow, white, red, pink, placing them in equally brilliant vases.

Nick wonders about the last time he had brought home flowers, not that Sally cared for them. "They're not my thing," she'd say and would rather have him bring her cigarettes, and she'd sit at the small wooden table they kept outside their single-wide trailer, gray smoke dancing above her head like drunken ghosts.

The car reeks of meat and salted fries and stale cigarettes. Nick cracks open the window.

"Hey," Steve says.

Nick looks at him.

"The AC's on," Steve says.

"Yeah. So?"

Steve swallows the last bit of his fries. Says: "You don't open the window when the AC is on."

"Who says?" Nick takes a sip of his Coke.

"Everyone knows that," Steve says, pitching the wrapper at him. It bounces off Nick's shoulder and

lands on the seat. Nick rolls the window back up. "It'll stay cooler in here," Steve adds.

The Blondie song ends and The Who is singing about My Generation.

Nick says, "What day is it?"

"Thursday," Steve says. "Why?"

Nick shrugs. "Feels like a Friday."

Steve thinks it feels like a Thursday because on Fridays he's usually at McCallister's about now, shooting pool and tipping back a cold one, while he tries to score with Donna, one of the servers, but ends up scoring with Lacy instead. She's older than Donna by a decade. She has long black hair with streaks of gray in it, and prominent lines that bracket her mouth like parentheses. She lets him pinch her nipples and stick his tongue in her mouth. He can taste the chicken with barbecue she'd had for dinner. They do it in Steve's Dodge like horny teenagers, and when they are done, Steve pulls away from McCallister's before Lacy has a chance to get back to her car.

"Sally's pregnant," Nick says matter-of-factly.

Steve glances at him but doesn't say a word.

"We're going to be parents," Nick says.

Steve turns and looks through the windshield. A mother pushes a stroller up and over the curb of the sidewalk. She's young and pretty, hair tied back away from her face in a ponytail. It bounces against the spot between her shoulder blades.

Steve thinks to himself: How will they ever manage a baby? They can barely take care of themselves half the time, what with all the arguing and fighting and Sally calling the cops on Nick, and Nick always between jobs because God forbid, he keeps one for more than a month.

"Happy for you," Steve finally says.

Nick nods his head. "She's pretty excited."

Steve can picture her sitting in front of the trailer, barefoot, the bottoms of her feet black from walking back and forth on the dirt road that leads from their mobile home and the cluster of faded mailboxes at the entrance of the park.

Nick glances at his watch. It's two in the afternoon. "Beau," he says.

Steve looks at him.

"That's his name," Nick adds, "if it's a boy."

Steve wonders which of them came up with the name. "What if it's a girl?" Steve asks.

Nick says, "She wants Doreen, but I'm partial to Michelle."

Steve nods once and looks out the window again. "It takes a lot of money to raise a kid nowadays," Steve says, letting the words sink in.

"Tell me about it," Nick says.

All that formula and diapers and insurance and clothing and saving for college Steve wants to say but doesn't. You'd have to be a goddamned Jeff Bezos to afford it. He doesn't know how these people do it, some with two, three, four children, in fact.

The older man with the cane exits the bank. He walks past the shops and disappears around the corner.

Nick fires up a cigarette, cracks open the window again, blows the smoke out. "We hittin' McCallister's tonight?"

Steve thinks about it. He thinks about Donna and Lacy and if returning to this town after his release was the right thing to do because not much has changed, that's for sure. Not in twelve years. The people are the same, all doing the very same things. No one lives here, he thinks to himself. They just exist.

"Aren't you tired?" Steve asks.

Nick glances at him. He's not sure what to say.

"Of all this?" Steve adds.

Then it dawns on him what Steve means. "Yeah, of course I am." Nick exhales the smoke. There are three cigarettes remaining. He will bring them to Sally, even though he'd prefer to smoke them all now, one after the other.

"You really want that baby?" Steve says, and this catches Nick off guard. He shifts in his seat, turning in Steve's direction. "What do you mean?"

Steve shakes his head. "It's a life changing event. Is it what you really want?"

Nick thinks about what Steve says, his eyes focused on the worn leather seats. He tosses his cigarette out the window.

"I thought about it," Nick says.

"Yeah?"

Nick's eyes meet Steve's. "I want it."

"OK," Steve says.

"I love her, you know," Nick says.

Steve hesitates, then says: "I know."

“I’m not saying I ain’t scared though,” Nick says, that wry smile beginning to form at the corner of his mouth that Steve knows so well.

Steve nods, cuts the engine off. He removes the keys from the ignition. In a few minutes, the vehicle will get warm again.

Nick takes a final look at the flower shop. The woman in the window is gone. He thinks about bringing Sally home roses, after all.

“You ready?” Steve says.

Nick nods, and they climb out of the Dodge together. Steve walks back to the trunk. He pulls out two ski masks, hands one to Nick. Steve reaches inside again and hands Nick a Mossberg 500 Tactical shotgun. It feels heavy in his hands. Steve grabs a Desert Eagle .50 Caliber handgun, shoves into the front waistband, and pulls his shirt over it. He slams the trunk lid closed.

They exchange a look. Nick takes a deep breath, slowly lets it out. Nick looks at his watch again. Sally would be outside their trailer by now, hanging the day’s linen on the line, and as they approach the bank, Nick thinks to himself that maybe the name Doreen isn’t so bad.

The local laundromat: a perpetual cleansing spot for the city's dirt and shame.

At night, the neon sign above the storefront glows half-enthusiastically, so much so that most of the letters are completely burnt to their end. The remaining ones spell out "Land rat" — a welcoming endorsement for a place where people come in to wash the crumbs off their pants.

Cheyenne just hangs in there. A few bucks an hour and a few thankless looks for mopping the linty floors, picking up left-behind underwear, and getting lost a little too deep in her own thoughts.

*Do bed bugs drown in the soap and water? Do they feel pain? Should I even care if they feel pain?*

*What if all the missing socks in the world magically transport to the random shoes you see on the side of the highway?*

*Why does that guy's shirt have a wicked bloodstain on it? Or maybe it's just ketchup. I hope it's just ketchup.*

It's 10:55 PM, so the neighborhood night-roamer with the drinking problem stumbles in on the dot, as usual, to spout a series of incoherent-isms. Cheyenne decides to give him the rest of her gas station sandwich. It gets him to leave, but she also feels sorry for him. She wonders where he sleeps at night.

Before closing up the place, Cheyenne does a thorough sweep under the machines and scrounges up just enough coins to catch the bus back to the thin walls of her mildew-tainted studio apartment.

And the cycles continue to spin.

I could never resist the windows. They drew my gaze every time I passed them. There were seven of them altogether, all at different heights along the pale green walls of the corridor. Four of the windows had watercolour designs painted on the glass, weaving together pinks, purples, blues and greens and distorting my view of the world outside entirely. I liked those ones and I know I could have spent hours staring at them, observing how they changed the world outside. As it was, I was granted only minutes if I was on my own and scarce seconds if someone was with me. Two of the other three windows were empty and worked exactly as windows should but the third window was the one that held my attention the longest. It was just like the others, a perfect circle contained within a wooden frame only, the glass in this window was marred by the perfect imprint of a hand in the centre.

At first, I thought it was a child's hand. This window was the lowest and was almost the perfect height for a small child to reach up and press their sticky little palm against. I imagined that poor child's mother calling to them, hurrying them along while that child was as entranced as I was by the watercolour images in the windows. However, on one particularly quiet afternoon I found myself alone in that corridor for longer than a moment and I was able to look closer at that handprint than I ever had before. The palm was larger than I had initially thought, the fingers were longer and the gaps between them were wider than my furtive glances had indicated. As I stared at it, I realised that the handprint was just slightly too large to belong to a child. I remember that I reached out towards it and my fingertips were just inches from the glass when a nurse rounded the corner and asked me if I was alright. Startled, I pulled my hand back from the window, turned to face her and smiled before nodding. I could feel her staring at me as I walked down the rest of the corridor and into the lift. I remember jabbing that number seven and holding down the door closing button on the lift until the metal doors slid shut and the lift shuddered.

On the seventh floor I got out and entered the ward, squeezing liberal amounts of hand sanitizer onto my hands and rubbing it in as I walked. That day I was stopped by a nurse who told me that he had been moved into a private room. She said it was to give him some privacy as he'd been here for so long. The lie was obvious to us both but I thanked her anyway and followed her instructions, turning left instead of right at the end of the corridor. I paused outside his door that day, took a breath and then I pushed it open. He looked up and I smiled, like I always did, even on the days when he was asleep or in too much pain to know that I was there. I took my place in the seat next to his bed and reached for his hand. He let it sit passively in mine, making no attempt to return my reassuring squeezes until our eyes met and his face broke into a smile. He had gripped my hand then, holding onto me tightly as if he were afraid I was going to pull away.

'Karen! You finally came to see me!'

I know my smile slipped then, becoming something else entirely as I slipped my hand out of his. I stood up and turned away from him, reaching towards the cards I had displayed on the windowsill gradually over the last few weeks. I pretended to rearrange them. Occasionally I caught glimpses of his

face reflected in the window. I would see his eyes staring at my back, see his smile as he watched me work. It took me a long time to turn around and look at him again.

When I left the room that day a nurse pulled me aside. She asked me about Karen, asked me when she was going to come see him. I told her that Karen wasn't coming. When she asked me who Karen was I felt my throat tighten and I shook my head. I walked away, back into the elevator and back to the ground floor. As the steel doors slid open, I sought out the windows. I could see them at the end of the corridor and with each step I took towards them I felt myself breathe a little bit easier. I picked out each window in turn as I passed, taking in the colours, allowing myself to slow down but not stop entirely. When I looked in the last window the handprint was gone. The glass was smooth and shiny, like it had been newly cleaned and I let out an involuntary cry that I quickly smothered with my fist. That day I ran from the hospital.

It took me four days to talk myself into coming back and in those four days I successfully convinced myself that I had imagined the handprint in the window. I told myself I could hardly be upset at losing something that had never really existed and when I walked past those windows on my way to his ward I was almost relieved to see that the final window was entirely empty of handprints. I laughed at my silliness as the elevator took me to the seventh floor and when I emerged on the ward I smiled at the nurse who had asked me about Karen. I was still smiling when I entered his room and this time, when I took his hand he remembered who I was. We spoke about our days, he told me how dull he found the hospital, told me the food was bad but still better than my cooking. I remember I swatted him playfully for being so cheeky and we both laughed. He didn't mention Karen and neither did I. Instead he told me stories about his life, like he had done years before when we'd first met. I sat, entranced by those familiar tales, holding his hand in mine and memorising every detail until finally the light from the window died and he declared it was getting late.

I stood up to leave, bending slightly to kiss his cheek before leaving his room and getting back into the elevator. When I got out at the ground floor, my eyes sought out those windows again. This time I knew there would be no handprint and I made my way down the corridor slowly, running over all the details of his stories in my mind. By the time I got to the windows I was beginning to quicken my steps. My eyes picked out each window in turn before settling, as always, on that final window. This time I stopped when I saw it. I blinked hard before opening my eyes and focusing on what I had anticipated would be an empty pane of glass. Instead, the pristine shine of the glass was marred by a solitary handprint in the centre. I know I let out a small scream as someone turned to ask me if I was okay. I felt her hand on my shoulder but I didn't look at her, I couldn't bring myself to look away from the window. I'm certain it was the same handprint, the fingers extended across the glass in the same way as they had days before.

I desperately wanted to reach out and touch it, my fingers itched to feel the coolness of the glass beneath the imprint of that hand but instead I stood still, staring at that window and trying to understand how that handprint had reappeared. The woman who had her hand on my shoulder asked me again if I was okay. Her grip had tightened on my shoulder and her previously calm voice now had a slightly hysterical edge to it. I remember turning to face her and telling her I was alright. I felt her grip on my shoulder loosen as she moved her hand and let it rest between my shoulder blades. We

walked down the corridor like that, with her pushing me along firmly but gently, ensuring that my feet kept moving.

I went back to see him again the next day and every day after that. Sometimes the handprint would be there and sometimes when I left him it was gone. Eventually I realised that when he remembered me, when I was able to take my place next to him and hold his hand that I would inevitably find the handprint waiting for me when I left him. On those days he would talk to me for hours and I would listen. When he eventually grew weaker and it was harder for him to speak, he would simply say my name and I would take my place in the chair beside him. It was the days when the handprint was missing that I dreaded the most. On those days he would ask for Karen and the seat beside him would remain empty. I'd busy myself with small tasks, I'd rearrange his cards, refold his clothes or refill his water jug. I'd stay there, avoiding him in that small room until exactly sixty minutes passed. Then I would say goodbye and leave, glancing at the window as I left to confirm that it was empty. On those days there was nothing in that window and even the colourful windows with their beautiful distortions of the world outside failed to keep my attention for longer than a few seconds. Instead I would race down the corridor, away from him and his memories of Karen.

This morning when I went to see him, the handprint was there, sitting in the centre of the window. When I saw it, I smiled and I know that I smiled until I opened the door to his room. His eyes were closed but he wasn't asleep. As I took his hand he let out a low moan of pain, pain that he felt despite the drugs that were being fed slowly into his veins through the drip connected to his arm. Nurses flitted in and out of his room all morning as his breathing became more laboured, each breath louder and more pained than the last. He gripped my hand, like he was afraid I was going to let go and I squeezed his hand tightly in my own, silently pleading with him not to leave me. I've seen people die before. I know what it looks like when they fight it and I know what it looks like when they lose. He drew in another breath and his lips parted like he wanted to say something. I leant closer to him, my ear inches from his mouth. A tear splashed onto his cheek and I wiped it away carefully with my thumb. His voice was weak but I heard it. He uttered just one word, her name.

He breathed in once more, I held his hand as he did so, watched his face and he slipped back under the haze of the drugs. I felt his hand go limp in mine and I watched it fall onto the blanket next to him as I let him go. A nurse came in and she silenced the monitor which had stopped beeping intermittently and was now emitting a continuous screech. She stood before me, told me what I knew already, told me I could stay as long as I needed, to let her know when I was leaving. She told me where I could find some leaflets, reminded me I could ask her for help if I needed it. She said she was sorry. I hate her for that. I got out of my chair then and I left his room, walked down the corridor and into the elevator. I stared at my reflection in the steel doors until they slid open again.

I stepped into the corridor, my gaze seeking out those windows, my feet almost running towards them. I saw the way that the watercolour windows distorted the world outside, saw how beautiful the paint made the cold grey walls of the hospital look. I looked at the final window, looked for the handprint but it was empty again. It shouldn't be empty. Not now that he was gone. Not now that he couldn't remember me again. I stepped closer to the window, my hand outstretched. I felt the cool glass beneath my fingers and I pressed my palm against the window as I started out at the watercolour world. I pulled my hand away, satisfied I had made my mark, and I looked down at the glass. The pane was still empty. I pressed my hand against the glass again. I pulled away and again, there was nothing.



I couldn't understand it. I slammed my hand against the window and I felt the cold unyielding glass push back against my skin. I pulled my hand away but the window was still empty. I felt my mouth open, a scream tore its way out of my throat as I hit the glass again and again, the watercolour world was distorted further as I began to cry. I felt hands on my back and on my arms. I felt them pull me away and I fought them, pushing them away as I continued to beat my hand against the glass. I felt someone grab my wrist, felt them pull my hand away from the glass. I felt them twist it behind my back, felt strong hands push my face forward until I couldn't move. They dragged me away then, but I kept looking over my shoulder, staring at the empty pane of glass inside that window.

The wind played the empty window arches like an instrument, howling and whistling its own symphony into the grey sky. Like old friends the wind and greyness occupied the space that anybody else would find miserable to be in. Everybody but the lone angler sitting by the river shore. He sat huddled into his own figure, staring across the water. He didn't see the fishing rod stretched out in front of him. He didn't notice the wind. He didn't mind the grey, miserable day. He just sat there. Staring. Unable to remember when he made the decision to be there that day.

This was his spot. It had always been his spot. He didn't like the large, empty, concrete shell that the wind was playing its symphony on. He had been here long before the monstrosity had sprung up. He intended to stay. The howling wind was like a friend, a messenger that belonged to the time of emptiness that was drawing to a close. The angler could feel it. There were no workers in the monstrosity today. One day soon they would return. One day soon they would finish their work. The monstrosity. Then people would come to stay. The emptiness would be pushed further away. Away from here anyway.

The angler didn't think of these things as he sat there in silence. He refused to. He sat and stared and the wind played its symphony. His head was filled with blissful nothingness. He had hours of thinking nothing ahead of him. It was the reason he came here. Fish were a rare thing in the river but his non-activity wasn't about fish. He never expected or even intended to catch anything. He came here for the miserable nothingness that left him alone. He put the shiniest, most tempting lure on the hook and threw it into the dark green water where, as far as he knew, the sparkle would attract nothing. Every so often, the sun sent rays of light deep enough into the water to catch the lure and sent flickering lights back up to him for his own entertainment. That was it. Other than this small display of light that he brought to the place there was nothing to see.

There wasn't much sun today. No dancing rays to catch the lure and make it sparkle. Any sparkle he did see on the water therefore must be just in his eyes. He knew that perfectly well. Probably tired, even though he didn't feel it. His eyes, he thought, must have tired of the view and added the sparkles he could see now. There wasn't light enough to create them. It was all in his head. Knowing this did not diminish the beauty of what he could see before him. He sat still and stared, enjoying the sight.

Then he felt a tug on his fishing line. Gentle, like a knock on the door that's trying to get his attention. It took him a moment to realise it was even there. It was so rare to catch anything that he'd quite forgotten what it was like. It took him a moment longer to remember what he was meant to do when he caught a fish. Slowly, as if he had just awoken from a dream, he got up, stretched his legs, rolled his shoulders, then walked closer to the river's edge. His toes hung in the air above the water as he looked down. Seeing the water this close he remembered he didn't have to get up for this part. The fishing rod was designed to reel in the line when required. He smiled to himself. No matter. He reached for the fishing rod to reel in the line.

The tug got stronger, more pronounced, like it meant business, as soon as he started to turn the wheel. The thing that wanted his attention a moment earlier changed its mind. With a strong pull it tried to get away. But the angler now had invested in the catch. He might still let it go but it had to be reeled in. It had to be seen and acknowledged by him. So he kept pulling against the increasing resistance. He never noticed when his attempt to reel in the line, to catch the fish that must be at the other end, became serious. The world around him disappeared. Long forgotten the monstrosity watched behind him. Even the wind had lost its own pull on him. He did not notice the ground beneath his feet. He did not notice the river. All of him was focussed on the fishing rod that threatened to pull itself loose from his hands.

He would not let go of his hold. He would not. He didn't really want the fish but he didn't want to lose the fishing rod that was the embodiment of solitary peace to him. The pull on its other end grew stronger still. He had no choice but to follow it. He never realised how close to the edge he stood. He barely noticed his own falling. His first thought was surprise at how deep the water was this close to the shore. The concrete that secured the shoreline where he sat had never entered his mind as a necessity, as something that was for a reason. It belonged to that spot as much as he did. As he sank into the deep it occurred to him that the artificial shoreline must have once been put in place to save unsuspecting visitors from falling into a river that was immediately deep water rather than a gradual descent.

Of course, he could swim. Much as he refused to fear water he had always respected it. But he'd never had to swim holding on to his fishing rod before. As peaceful and useful as the device was on land, it turned into the most awkward item to hold underwater. He did not want to let go but he had to secure ground to stand on now. He had no resistance to offer the pull that was still at the other end of the rod. He was pulled along with the rod now and he began to wonder when his breath would leave him. He couldn't understand himself. The fishing rod was replaceable, of course. Why wouldn't he just let go? Well, of course, there was the thought that the poor fish was probably stuck. Surely, getting hold of the line's end to free it was in both their interests? Still, he was being dragged under by something not willing to let itself be helped.

A thought popped into his head: 'Let go of the shiny,' it said. He didn't know where it had appeared from. Maybe his mind had suffered too much lack of oxygen. Maybe he was losing consciousness. Maybe it wasn't all that extraordinary that a fish strong enough to pull him under was a sentient being. Another thought came: 'I'm not a fish. Let go of the shiny.' He was either losing his hold of reality in a very consistent manner or whatever it was that pulling the fishing rod was communicating with him. He wasn't quite sure which of these options he'd prefer.

It didn't matter. He didn't let go. At this point, it was almost compulsion. Maybe he should have let go of the fishing rod when it dragged him into the water. Maybe then. But now? Now would be pointless. Again and again the thought rang through his head. Again and again he ignored it. Then a sound found his ear. Like ringing. Then he was surrounded by light. Everything was brightness. So bright he couldn't see anything. He didn't know why he was even expecting to see anything. He just knew this wasn't the light signalling the end of his life. It had a more artificial quality to it. In his mind he saw a room lit by large, crystal chandeliers. It made no sense to expect such a thing underwater. When his eyes finally adjusted, he saw that what surrounded him was even more magnificent. All this light was millions upon millions of diamonds reflecting off each other. The effect was the brightest

light where there should be nothing but darkness.

He still held on to the fishing rod but the pull had stopped. As if the thing on the other end was giving him time to take it all in. It took a moment before he noticed the thing at the other end of rod, the thing that had brought him there. The creature had been right earlier, it was no fish. At least, it wasn't like any fish he had ever seen before. The only thing fish-like was a green, scaly tail that seemed to hold the creature upwards as it was facing him. That green tail seemed to morph into a grey, slimy body, devoid of any scales. It had two arms but it did not look any more human for those. The hairless head didn't help either. Even though he could see it clearly now it remained a thing to him. The muscles in the creature's face moved into what he thought might be intended as a smile and another thought entered his head: "Mermaid. The word you're looking for is mermaid."

He tried to laugh but no sound came out. He had to have gone mad now. The creature might not have been a fish but it did not look very mermaidly either. Even if it did, there was no such thing. And really, he couldn't be alive anymore after all that time under water. At best he must be hallucinating. That, surely, was it. He shook his head in disbelief at his own stupidity, shrugged his shoulders and held up his hands in defeat. Without realising, he'd let go of the fishing rod. It slithered away from him silently. Just as the creature picked it up, he noticed. He didn't try to speak again. He just thought: "What is it you want with this? It's worthless." He thought the last few words looking at the bright wealth around him. To his surprise the creature turned and took the reflector off his fishing rod. A tiny, cheap thing that could barely do justice to the light reflected all around it. Discarding the rest of the fishing rod, the creature took the reflector to a wall behind it. He couldn't fathom why it might think that adding the reflector to all the sparkle around it might be of any use.

Then, finally, he realised. Even though the fishing rod was gone and the pull had disappeared, he was still drawn towards the sparkling lights. He moved as if by divine force. Further forward still, though nothing was pulling him. He had no power to resist. He had become the fish drawn to the lure against its will. Survival lost its meaning in the face of all the beauty he could see. "All you had to do was let go." were the final thoughts in his head before the brightness turned to darkness.

# CREATIVE NONFICTION

Zach Murphy  
**Before My Very Brown Eyes**

When I was a teenager, I got jade-colored contact lenses in an attempt to look more beautiful.

I always despised my brown eyes. I thought they were deeply unspectacular. Dull. Dark. Boring. Growing up, I never heard anyone say “*Wow, look at those pretty brown eyes.*” They aren’t the color of a vibrant sky or a vivid field of grass. They aren’t one of the colors that show up in a bright rainbow. They aren’t the color of the eyes of Hollywood stars that are usually on the front cover of magazines.

But the jade-colored contact lenses never felt right with my soul. The brown shone through the umbrella of haze. I wore the jade-colored contact lenses for exactly three days, and then decided to trade them in for the clear contact lenses. As I placed the clear ones on, I stared into the mirror at my eyes and saw them in a new, spectacular light.

My brown eyes are the color of the earthy, Hawaiian soil of my birth land. The soil that yields vegetation and nourishment and life and wonder. My brown eyes are the colors of the tropical tree roots and the tropical tree branches that provide shelter and habitats to many magnificent creatures. My brown eyes are the color of the delicious chocolate that makes your taste buds smile. My brown eyes are the color of the highly-coveted coffee beans that make the world go ‘round.

Now, I see more clearly. Now, I am more beautiful. Now, I love my very brown eyes.

Skyler Jaye Rutkowski  
**What It Might Be Like to Believe Something**

I'm watching a Singaporean woman burn incense, silent, bowing her head before placing it in a giant urn shaped like a lotus flower when I place a wrap around my bare legs. I'm nearly too concerned with cultural appropriation to appreciate the beauty of the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple.

I don't believe in anything. This temple sheds back it's golden dress each morning, glorified in belief and virtue. I do not know what my godless hands hold, here.

The man that greets everyone at the door helps me tie the wrap around my waist. While I fumble, my fingers recognize that I've never been anywhere too sacred for my bare flesh.

An Indian child is gripping her mother's leg, whispers loudly. Excitedly, together, they walk into a room trimmed with Buddha statues and elements of the Tang Dynasty. They had to wrap their legs, too.

As the monks are chanting, and my eyes cast to the wall with painted dragons  
and fish, pink and gold gods-tales, I want to know if everyone there has goosebumps or if it's just me.

The man at the door says, "Go in. Enjoy." He tells me, "Take pictures so your friends can see how beautiful. Just no pictures on the 4th floor." I wonder who else could feel the faith embedded in the tiles beneath their feet.

I walk the first floor, slowly, diligently, one thousand different Buddha statues make up three walls, I'm reading their meanings, each having their own good fortune. This is what it must be like to worship a deity that shows love with love.

The second and third floor aims to teach history. They feature a museum of Buddha's relics and wisdom from over 2,500 years ago. Miniature statues of Buddha's actions towards compassion line the wall. The history is what I came for.

I've made it to the Sacred Light Hall on the fourth floor, quiet but sounds of Omns, bare feet and a sacred Buddha tooth relic stupa made of 1,000 pounds of gold. I may have held my breath. This part, I don't remember.

I am painting my eyes with the art of something holy. I walk the rooftop garden, with its Pagoda and the world's largest Buddhist Prayer Wheel, and notice my heartbeat has slowed the entire time.

I try to understand what it might be like to believe something.

As I left, the man who first greeted me took the wrap from my legs, placed it back into the bin where hundreds of these wraps are placed. Waiting to welcome visitors.

He says, "Can you believe how beautiful?"

I smile, "Yes."