

## Letter From the Editor

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Hello, Friends! So glad to be here for another issue. I hope you all are in good health and staying safe. To our black readers and contributors, we stand with you. We are here for you, and we will forever be a safe space for you. To our LGBTQ+ readers and contributors, we hope pride month has been a source of light for you, and we will always welcome you here with open arms, out or not. We love you.

This submission period was especially hard for me due to everything else my emotions have been dispensed ~~to~~ to, but I am very fond of the work here and am, as always, proud of every artist present in this issue. I hope you enjoy the work you find here, and I thank you for your support.

All the best,



# *The Things Herein*

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# POETRY

Haruna Abdulmajid  
**WHEN A MAN LOSES A CHILD**

With him, you come to learn that when a man loses a child, he comes to lose all of himself. His name is no longer his. Neighbors refer to him as the man whose child was drowned in the river. His words are incoherent and hold no meaning. *When will my child come back from her vacation?* There are lumps of sadness erupting inside a body that has coagulated a clot of grief for long. He wants to regain himself, but every time he tries, he finds new shoots sprouting from the stem of his scars. Some pains are like the elevator, they take you from one floor of sadness to another.

I went to college to discover myself, I came back as someone else. Until when they placed the painter, the programmer, and the entrepreneur in the same class, I didn't know I was in the wrong place.

We sat arranged in the class, like files in a cabinet before a man we were made to believe is a towering fountain. Every fountain like him is a god on his own. The rivulets cower in their presence. Little ponds like me are expected to bow with trepidation whenever we walk past them.

It was not long before a sphinx was placed on our tongues. No one survives in this place without learning how to parrot the words of the gods. Most times, the revered masters, they force stale and unsavory lessons down our throats, and sometimes all they do is grind and regrind our minds on a quern, until when our passions and hobbies are purged from our bodies.

Take me as if I belong to you. I'm afraid  
I like it. Stand behind me, press closer.

Lean into me as you wrap your arms around  
my hips and take the phone from my hand.

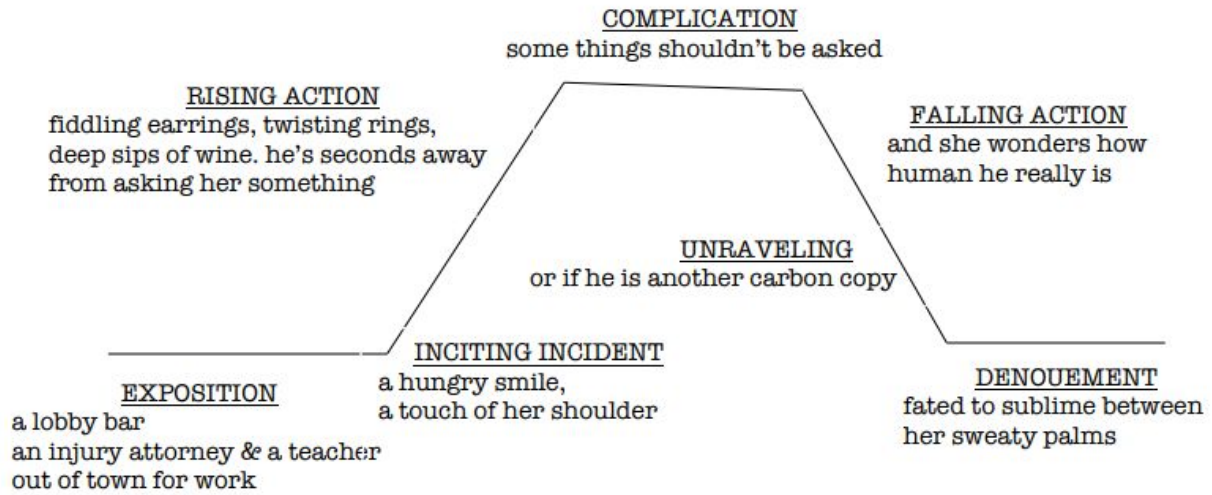
Set it on the table, leave my reply to him an empty draft.  
Walk me toward the couch, our bodies touching step by step.

Remind me of childhood, of innocence,  
of dancing on my father's shoes.

White cotton on a wood floor. Hold me to you.  
Hold me, hold me here. Keep me. Dance with me.



Blake Bell  
**Aristotle and Freytag Walk into a Bar**



Blake Bell  
**We are Dancing Dancing**

we are dancing we are dancing around our kitchen  
and you are swaying you are swaying back and forth

you are clasping your hand in mine twirling  
twirling me around then burying yourself

in the curve of my neck and falling and falling and  
i'm failing to keep you keep you sober and healthy and happy

(it's true it's true what everyone said and said over and over again addiction works like this and  
like that so why why does it still still hurt so fucking bad why do we warn anyone about  
anything)

but you hold on you hold onto me  
so tight anyway and we are still dancing

Blake Bell  
**Ro River Elegiac**

Elements come together to form cool water droplets,  
beads on pale skin. Refraction and attraction work  
simultaneously to roll down my legs. The river  
pans out in front of me, a winding path to follow.  
One foot then feet inside. Beauty knows one faltering step  
could send my body down a different, darker way.  
I come here often, where my feet are never still; water rushes  
over them, causing small movements,  
reflex against current. The push and  
pull hums around my calves  
up my thighs into my center,  
bracing against a fall.  
My body surprises me, fights to hold on,  
presented with a chance to let go.

Robert Beveridge  
**A HORSE IN THIS RACE**

Sightless eyes fixed  
on an arbitrary point  
between stucco peaks.  
Fleshless fingers twitch,  
twitch, twitch against  
the wall of the jello  
pudding cup, so fragile  
it might tear at any  
second. The TV nothing  
more than a distraction  
for the occasional nurse  
who comes in to see  
if she can decipher the dance,  
so familiar yet performed  
differently by everyone,  
if this charge needs something  
to keep him comfortable

I'm at the club, grinding  
coffee beans for the dogpile of drunks  
buckling the sodden wood of the bar.

Many miles and years separate us.  
It's quiet this side of the border,  
safe from the flailing arms, the invading  
fingers, at least for now.

Once in a while a barstool  
silently keeps me company  
or splits the air and  
shatters my jaw.

Once in a while I reassociate  
with my body and the saxophonist  
softly beating in my head is murdered  
by another bass drop, caving in their skull.

But I barely notice the red stains  
on my cheeks, the smell of old coins  
on my hands.

When my shift ends I sit for a while.

Please take your arm  
out my ribcage.

We want to know one another,  
but this is too fast,

I usually leave exploration  
of the chest cavity

till the third date;  
can we go back to biting

each other's lips and calculating  
how many Newtons it takes

to make us bleed?

The orange sun rises above palm trees.  
The open sea swells large its light salted-

green water. Three pelicans skim its surface.  
Already fishermen are wading in casting nets,  
casting lines. Foamy waves swirl around  
their sun-browned legs.

Up on the main street into town, past the stalls  
of seashell crafts, a woman carries upon her head  
a tin sheet of black-striped silver fish.

≈   ≈   ≈   ≈   ≈   ≈   ≈   ≈

Mid-morning I walk down the beach to Tiger Sandbar.  
All along is littered the bloated, spiny bodies of frog fish,  
their eyes glazed by death. One's black eyes are still clear  
his gills heave with each gasp. Upon a piece of driftwood

I carry him to the water. With each wave he washes again  
to shore, then ebbs back to sea & to the glittering sand again.

Once more I lift him & wade in thigh deep & throw him  
as far as I can into the blinding water. The strong currents  
tug at my legs. I wait a while to see if he returns, then continue  
my way up the sea-cooled sand.

≈   ≈   ≈   ≈   ≈   ≈   ≈   ≈

On a Sunday afternoon, in the glare of hot sunlight,  
four strolling musicians stop at an *enrramada*.

One holds a large bass guitar tightly against his paunch.  
Another strums his guitar with a lighter voice. A tall,  
thin man embraces a delicate harp. The violinist awaits  
his part, tipping his hat with the bow.

*(AT BLUE BEACH, continued, stanza break)*

Sand kicks up around the bare feet of a middle-aged couple  
dancing. Their song floats above the wash of the waves.

Past those breakers, at times smooth & others ragged, dark  
men bob on ready surfboards. One catches a hopeful wave  
but soon wipes out.

~        ~        ~        ~        ~        ~        ~

Early evening brings a cool breeze that dances with the palm  
fronds. The lowering sun paints the sky rose-orange & purple  
just before it is gulped by the blue-silver ocean.

~        ~        ~        ~        ~        ~        ~

In the still blackness of night the Evening Star & constellations  
pierce the sky. Moonlight whitens the seafroth. Far out  
on the invisible horizon, the lights of fishing boats.  
& on this night's high tide, a man will wash ashore.



These Christmas Eve streets  
echo with the mournful  
song of a blind  
man's accordion

These Christmas Eve streets  
beneath the dim light  
of a waning crescent moon  
yet to be arisen

These Christmas Eve streets  
echoing with the footfall  
of families going to mass

announced by silent bells  
the cry of a new-born  
babe in a manger

in a parish church  
bathed in the perfume  
of palo santo

The silence of footfalls  
upon centuries-old  
wooden floors

the silence of prayers  
before the crèche broken  
by a baby's cry

These Christmas Eve streets  
echoing with the silence  
of the departed blind  
accordion

Because, silly, we are just  
Masquerading a ball,  
And I just lampshaded my heart out  
And you didn't even cum.  
What do you think that makes me feel like?  
I cannot a-sexual my day after day  
Just because you said, *i do*,  
But meant, *i don't*  
Because they all said, *you better*,  
And then expect me to live  
Happily ever after in this salty sweaty nightmare.

So, let me just resign  
My way out the door  
Because lover, not really,  
because loser, you just made the right  
Spectacle of yourself  
And well, fuck it,  
I just know I am special,  
And years from now when  
I am the only one that believes it,  
I will have the romance of myself-attraction,

And that little tingly thing  
In the pit of my stomach  
That says, yeah,  
*You hit it right out of the park*,  
Whatever that thing is that went flying,  
I'm the one that will name it  
Over and over and over again.

Break the sober in two  
And watch the angry

Sureness of failure  
Fall onto the pavement

Oh, if the cracked  
Could only self-mend

They would call  
Dance their home

It begins in the morning  
but not natural as in gentle or gradual  
rather electric and swift  
as a sudden blow to the head.

It has a form:  
darkness or scattered light  
and a stumble grumble  
to water uses, advertisement products,  
climatic garb, memorized language,  
transportation rumble.

It is less than stupid  
as the most profound people  
somehow fail to manipulate it.

It is awesome.

It allows time only for food or sleep,  
grudgingly slow for ritual tradition,  
forces man, woman and child into different patterns,  
captures the young at an earlier and earlier age,  
haunts the aged and ignores the dead.

It will kill you.  
You don't care.

I know the dial tone smile  
of your soft tongue words  
and wet lip sighs.  
You call to see if I'm really home  
but I'm not.  
I want to be there  
still somehow  
I'm always an hour  
behind myself.

Next time,  
be patient -  
wait for me.

R. Gerry Fabian  
**And Ever So Slowly She Walks In**

looking for Romeo or Holden Caulfield  
with her headlights on high.  
With bar whiskey eyes  
she smiles and settles.  
The music revolves  
in a language  
that evokes a poet's touch.  
The second song  
thrusts an ache  
that is too familiar  
to her  
yet she hums along.

Now,  
what matters to her  
is the mixture  
of memory and regret.  
She is alone and wishes  
to stay that way.  
Someone will spoil it.

You are an eyelash i have plucked,  
lying on a blue vein  
on the back of my hand  
as i whisper into your neck.  
You do not stir.  
You latch.  
You breathe with me;

You are the night whose eyes i've rubbed,  
lying in the blue light  
with the hands of a clock  
in mine as i pull you closer.  
You do not rest.  
You resist;

You are a horseshoe smile i've hung,  
lying on a blue wall  
with the truth in the dirt.  
as i gaze, your pupils dilate.  
You do not blink;

You are the practiced words,  
lying on my blue lips  
while the others are cold  
only in snow with red noses;

You are the better days,  
lying in my blue eyes  
in a tomb beneath tears; yet

You are *my* mind, *my* voice, *my* sight,  
lying to a blue girl.

You are this letter that I write.  
(with hope that you will write me back)

The universe is dense with time and some starlight is so ancient that its source no longer exists. Moons, planets, stars are moments of light memory. The dark between reverses meaning.

You think of all this as you place one foot in front of the other and walk on the dicey soil north of Chernobyl. This stopped moment is what the pretending makes possible and is dangerous. Time stretches and collapses here and all that you see on either side of this vanishing road will soon not be here, if it is even here now. Don't look for a purpose in time nor the sacred. You are worried about radiation exposure as you step along this humped grass. What's shuttering now down into your bones and settling? Becoming?

You reach the abandoned village and each ruined building is lost in the trees and leaks meaning. What happened here is the result of what happened in Chernobyl. *All particles exist by accident and what collapses also expands. Look, you say. See how grass gives way to shrubs and shrubs give way to trees and trees should give way to hills or mountains.* But there are no hills or mountains here.

*That is the proof you seek.* Your presence here makes this village viable but as soon as you leave it will become again what is left. Halfway between. That is all. *Halfway between what?* you ask. *The floating.*



*March 3, 2020*  
*Foul mouths infect*

In these rushed weeks since the first infections it is not certain what humanity has accomplished against the indifference of molecular biology and that possible drop to nowhere. Infections multiply like setting eggs in a row, dozens and dozens of them. What will be made of this years later when the questions are different and those looking back will see in framed glass what got paused and what didn't.

A virus is chemical machinery and is like a slide in an elementary school playground where kids line up and go one at a time to the top. From above the playground appears sped up. Children running about, zig-zagging. None of them alone. Then, each child at the top of the slide sits in place and gets ready for that brief plunge. Those who keep their eyes open see the view drop with them. At the bottom each child giggles and hurries back in line. Viruses are how nature forgets and remembers. Like the lineup for the slide it continues and repeats.

Do not fall over. Do not stand too close to a rushing river. Do not lean over the railing for a better photograph. Do not diminish or make small. There are deaths and losses and all this confusion presses forward. The living. The living. Viruses are not living organisms. They are ingredients. They invade healthy cells and require healthy cells to replicate. They enact a progression.

In some ingrained future it will be possible to disassemble every second and explain and diagram and praise and even punish but right now there is the surviving. Press a thumb to the spinning day and stop it. That is where you will be. For years to come all of this will be studied and anecdotes shared. Our meagreness be known. Right now, the actual future is but one of many.

There are many heroes, and most don't start the day planning to be heroes but become so because of what is in them. *The glory, the everlasting glory. Amen.* *Oh. That virus*, some will say years later. But of course, that will be a bluff because history shimmies as much as it shines. There will be other viruses. Such is nature's gamble. A virus is pure greed and biological machinery honed chemically by the urge to persist. But most don't and eventually fail. Imagine if God came up behind someone and hollered *boo. There he goes.* Someone else would then say. And because of that brief encounter the workings are made visible. This virus is proof that lightning is nature bound and doesn't originate in deeds.

In doss houses in England in the late 1800s some of the poor slept on lines of robe strung across an open area. They had to kneel and then leaned over the rope, so that the rope supported their arms and head. They slept like that. It was all they could afford. Even a crowded bed was too expensive. There had been such harshness. It was not an easy posture to sleep in and most woke several times during the night. The older sleepers' arms went numb and their armpits were rubbed raw.

Some who slept on rope beds dreamt they were hanging and others that they were choking on a piece of meat. Others still dreamt they were out to sea and a great storm raged around them and bucked the ship, and they lurched from side to side. In those dreams some of them made it to a window or to the main deck and searched the night sky until they found the elusive moon. The storm had abated by then but still they lurched. All woke certain for a second or two that they were waking to a better place than in their dream but then soon realized that wasn't true.

More fortunate ones slept five or ten to a bed in rooms with doors and windows. Others slept in coffins lined side by side in long rows. Room enough for one body and even in those sometimes they slept in pairs with a head at each end. The human animal is most cruel. It hoards and amasses and seeks revenge for the smallest of slights. Our history full of many indignities.

What does this have to do with radiation or particle physics? *Everything*. Rope beds are proof that misery is not the work of particles nor atoms. The particle world is graceful unlike the larger dreary one. The attraction of particles and particle locking don't form rope beds. We do.

Wealth is a snake trying to climb a cement wall. It can't be done and yet it will try to scale it because it has a memory of already doing it. Particles acquire purpose through us. Become characters in stories become animals become birds become eggs become the enameled surface of an abandoned sink. To know of the existence of rope beds is to know the human calamity.

How deep do the flaws run? Rope beds are inhumane and yet they existed. The atomic age tells lie after lie. Rope beds are part of the migration here. Rope beds might be gone now, but that doesn't mean for good.

Robert Hilles  
**390 Million Light Years Away**

The largest explosion in the universe occurred 390 million light years from here. A star was sucked into a black hole and the resulting explosion burst sideways. You close your eyes and try to imagine that. But can't. Internally you are too possible. What exists here and now you comprehend but not that. Beyond the pulse and jangle of it. The best you can offer is the strumming of a string instrument, a ghost stuck in a doorway, this arrived at present. Here is never here but always there. Try to fathom the gap of that rather than an explosion of such magnitude that it is a vast stretch across time. Stories don't help and poems describe mostly the difference between separation and embarkation.

Your beloved has her head pressed to a pillow as she chants. Love is not meant to be vast but is. 390 million light years from here the largest explosion detected occurred but that can't be depicted in this poem. Instead your beloved finishes chanting, and you don't mention any explosion.

Ghosts have ghosts and any given watermark contains the world. A droplet of sudden is no vaster than a glass of water or the asparagus on the counter. To blame rain for love is to blame the burst shadows for what passes. This morning in the brightest sunlight you leaned toward me and I leaned toward you. Love is a gathering not stitching. It is the path from our house to your parent's. I walked with you to your parent's kitchen and later we searched for the key to your motorcycle and found it in the same jean's pocket as yesterday. Patterns are but doorways to the shaped. I help you to find your motorcycle key and each day clings in us.

Later, I think of the Cathode Ray tubes I studied in electronics shop in high school and how independent that was from what I watched on TV. I knew not to smash them open because that would let the radiation out. Years later I scrolled through poems on a CRT screen and struggled to get the right progression of words.

This brings me back to primary colours and searching for your motorcycle key. I find instead the hidden pulse in everything. Ghosts have ghosts. Shadows have shadows. Whatever is turned off can be turned back on. What is, what is, what is. *Love. Don't blink.*

Ann Howells  
**Dallas**  
*after Young Smith*

Tower-city of mirrored facades,  
urban cowboys, sweat-soaked nights  
and searing noons, give me your melody:  
auto horns, tire shuss, curses  
in myriad tongues, plus sign language.  
Give me a congested interstate, writhing

bumper to bumper grid, one-way streets.  
Give me your exhaust fumes, Saharan dust,  
and Mexican smoke, mansions and shacks,  
flooded homes and businesses,  
when the Trinity overflows. Give me  
city parks atop freeways, live oaks,

cottonwoods and mesquites. Give me  
DART trains and busses, cabs and limos  
moving us around; black gumbo soil  
fracturing homes and ankles, potholes  
blocked by sawhorses and orange cones,  
broken sidewalks. Give me streets

named for heroes and also-rans, statues  
of common people doing common things,  
and homeless pushing grocery carts  
heaped with black plastic bags, tent cities  
beneath I-35, cardboard lean-tos. Give me  
boiling streets: fast food lunches,

business conferences, shopping, banking,  
margaritas and martini bars, heat strokes  
and heart attacks, night club shootings,  
police shootings, drive-bys and road rage.  
Give me tornadoes, hailstorms, ice storms,  
and temperatures hovering at 107 for days,

*(Dallas, continued, stanza break)*

and when I dream of temperate climates,  
when I long for nights without gunfire,  
days without sneezes, give me fruit ice  
peddled on street corners, poet voices  
resounding under Mobile's Pegasus,  
Reunion Tower twinkling the firmament.

Twist and turn  
under a reverent grasp.  
Deadening warmth—  
Seep  
through attentive fingertips.  
A lucent attraction;  
A giver of  
Life.  
Pull from the depths  
The remnants of Being.  
Encased forever within  
This delicate coffin.

Can a bullet whisper  
a lullaby to a baby fighting sleep?

Can a bullet say "I love you"?

Can a bullet shake hands  
when it meets someone for the first time?

Can a bullet be color blind?

Can a bullet dance on graduation day  
after thirteen long years of school?

Can a bullet make a joyful noise?

Can a bullet rush to judgment  
free of generalities and stereotypes?

Can a bullet choose a beautiful casket?

Can a bullet tell the truth  
and nothing but the truth so help you God?

Can a bullet read a poem?

Can a bullet pray for the safety of its child  
And be relieved when its child comes home safely?

Can a bullet be punished?

Will a bullet say "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you?"



Mario Kersey  
**Haiku CXLVII**

When tears are falling  
Do they know which ant will drown  
Padding their landing

**that night we listened to the singer you tutored once and could see the moon through the window**

when the stars race across  
the sky (no one sees this but  
me) I watch you fall into  
your comedown;  
come down  
and take my fingers off  
my skin; hold them up in yours until  
they talk in shadows thrown  
by evening light and silence

always sleepless, always waiting to  
be saved from day, I  
twist and sizzle, stare at  
you to read which way  
my bones should point to  
steer you. Your gaze is  
far, stuck on the horizon beyond  
the walls that encase us.

we lay together, loving  
separately; mosquitoes buzzing out  
the cries of flesh at night – I mean  
I too would like to feel pretty.  
instead I cannot get the blood to boil,  
dilute it with the wine, now  
dripping everywhere. light leaking  
from my eyes, pooling where  
I miss you. pooling  
where the air at dawn is freshest.  
pooling where I drown you.

Danmi Lee  
**you know you're left when night reclaims you**

I touch the space until your face, and think  
it's very well broken; think  
the night could pass between us  
but now there's nothing in it; think  
how it never gets dark around here.  
or quiet  
even though the walls are still now.  
up at night, I'm upside down thinking  
of everyone  
even the stranger I didn't see for  
fear he add another crack  
where love's already leaking  
out; see  
I miss your freedom more than anything.  
you smell edible, you said  
and took a chunk out of me  
my thighs still shudder, think  
of how your hands could turn them  
into wings, we flew through skies  
torn open wounded mended; bleeding  
for a lack of tenderness.  
I drown into the night, and think  
at least the stars look peaceful now.

we didn't start a war, i wasn't worth  
the fight. Instead we stayed home & closed our windows,  
homes flooding with a heavy, dark  
emptiness, the kind no sun can penetrate.  
the rays out to burn us, layer by layer  
make us less. layer by layer,  
the past recedes. layer by layer,  
each day heaps on more discharge  
that will become me.  
we slammed bodies like doors;  
Shut. no breaths escape  
the lungs; & the wine isn't thicker just because  
it looks like blood.  
the sun feels different now, and doesn't  
know it. the city brutally marching on;  
drenched in memories, it will not drown.

**everyone has a first moment of romance, and i keep going back to it**

night destroys the day once more, as blood flows from my eyes into dawn and beds remind me of the cold smell of fish drowning in sunrise; climbing on the tops of hot dog vans; and promises you'd show me *American Beauty* one day. with your hair on my thigh and your poetry on my lips, ah

we could have been wild then.

what do they become when they grow up? you ask,  
watching sparrows as they hop and look cute.

what do we become in each other? I dare  
to paint myself into a womanhood I don't understand.

my mind, strewn across you face and chest, tries to become  
a protest against another silent heartbreak but

my naked body only knows  
to hop and look cute.

Giovanni Mangiante  
**Until death pulls me apart**

Death's face is a splattered cockroach on the sidewalk  
being washed away by heavy rain  
down into the sewer alongside the cigarette filters,  
beer caps, used condoms, soda cans and dirty needles  
of a thousand splattered human lives.

Death's fingers are strangers smiling at you at a bar  
a few minutes before closing time  
when there's nobody waiting for you at home,  
when there's nobody calling to know if you're fine.

Death is the person you love laughing,  
smoking a cigarette to a Michelle Gurevich album  
after fucking someone else in your room  
as you look for coins in your pockets,  
and miss the bus.

She came to me in the shape of a plane ticket,  
a travel bag, a backpack,  
a black leather jacket, a black pair of pants  
a black t-shirt, a black pair of sneakers  
with green details,  
5'8"  
blue eyes and pale skin,  
red dye hiding her dark blonde hair,  
a smile, a hug, a kiss,  
an immortal first photograph  
an immortal first night.

She left in the shape of another plane ticket,  
a red luggage, a travel bag,  
the black leather jacket thrown in the trash bin,  
a new pair of black pants, a black dress shirt,  
the same pair of black sneakers  
with the green details,  
immortal 5'8"  
immortal blue eyes,  
immortal pale skin,  
immortal dark blonde hair,  
tired smiles, desperate hugs, desperate kisses,  
an immortal last photograph  
an immortal last night.

I pat the side of my bed, wait, but it doesn't happen anymore.  
I pat the side of my bed again,  
but only a few specs of dust answer me back  
saying: "Forget it. It's over", and soon  
they are gone too.

Somewhere outside  
intertwined with the murmur of the night,  
amongst the buzzing of flies around a dumpster,  
the solitude of a light post lit up in an empty street;  
a dog barks, and that dog isn't mine.

I am alone with what's left of me,  
under the bed sheets, with a fever  
hammering my head, closing my eyes  
and patting again the side of the bed,  
silently asking the universe  
and the ancient gods of Socrates,  
to make the sound  
of tapping paws on the floor  
running towards me  
real again.



We search for you  
in ourselves  
when our own words hollow out  
parts of our ego  
when our own words become  
hoary  
when our own voices are in need  
of sanctification

We cry to your words  
when we find our fathers  
in your father  
our fathers who show emotion  
with heavy sighs, door bangs and  
impatient ways of eating  
when we find our mothers  
in your mother  
our mothers who love with tough words,  
ancestral receipts for food and medication,  
and a reprimanding gaze  
when we find our truth in your truth  
our truth of being renegades  
in stagnant homes

We find our blackness and femininity  
in your blackness and femininity  
a blackness that yearns for justice  
a femininity that yearns to be seen

We search for you  
in ourselves  
when our voices  
and many other voices before us  
need to be heard.

I

Without complaint  
an enduring nightly routine  
of lullabies sung  
in a low gruff voice  
to calm the weary infant,  
father's ardent emotions  
of pride, hope and love.  
The beginnings of imperishable bonds.

II

During the pandemic,  
unwavering daily connection continues  
with loyal son seated outside  
of aging father's closed hospital window  
speaking to each other with mobile phones.

Liat Miriam  
**On saying sorry to people who hurt you**

Today will be different. I will sit with a closed fist, clutching a parpar. In my ears the words to the music that you like. Tomorrow will be the same. I'm envious, you see, how the words flow from your lips; pursed and blowing gray punches in rhythm and rhyme.

Why is the city still sleeping? When I'd no longer call it early outside and the sun isn't hot for the first time in weeks. I sit and think about HaReshet Street, how they never understood what I was saying and I thought it was how I spoke. How minute my problems were then; how narcissistic that beige uniform made me, how under appreciative.

I might never see him again in this lifetime. And that's okay, I tell myself as I turn up the volume on the red watch app. The weather forecast predicts rockets, and Vered says we're overdue for a war; she says until I've smelt burning bodies I won't understand what it means to be here. Maybe when the sky opens I'll stop trying to sleep with the enemy.

I keep distance; taking deep breaths from the spice buckets as I follow you through the twist and turns of the bazaar. *What would it be like to grow up on these streets?* I wonder aloud, and you laugh at my naivety.

My spit tastes of olive oil and coffee grounds, aching for you to pull me into a cutout above the city and taste; take my hand and prep to leap. Foaming waters crash underfoot, spraying our skin salty as we debate what it would mean to jump under.

When the air is right I sit and dream about running away - somewhere it won't matter if we stand or we kneel; how we cover our hair and touch each other's waists.

To the right sits two decapitated lamb heads; this isn't normal, you say; an excuse to calm my beating chest. Perhaps I am too guided by symbolism, by what things would mean if life was fiction. How much easier it could be *if*

I wrapped my scarf the right way, *if* my accent didn't laugh. We'd still be strolling through the labyrinth of incense and ore. If there was no G-d, maybe, people wouldn't stare when we talk.

The steamy window hides  
the grey and grizzly sky  
creeping ever nearer –  
The oven has been on for too long.

A marbled silhouette remains  
on the hot, rumbling baking tray  
signifying the time  
to stumble in a rush of feet  
to reach the treacly, beguiling mess  
of apricot slices: caramelised,  
intertwined with cinnamon  
and the melancholy prickle of ginger.

Later, in the cold kitchen –  
the smell of hot water bottles.

The girl in the pictures belongs  
    among the flowers. She's lovely, you see,  
though she has yet to grow into her eyes  
    & nose. Look at her smile—  
she smiles like she hasn't seen the world, & she'll  
    sing any song for you, especially when  
    she feels alone. I hope you don't mind  
keeping her company.

    I left her behind  
    years ago, but I still find myself scrubbing  
her from my roots in the shower, scraping  
    her from my nail beds. She circles the drain  
only to grin at me in the filmy mirror.  
    The teeth bite differently now. At breakfast,  
I taste her laugh  
    along the rim of my favorite Christmas mug,  
    but all I can do is pour in extra  
milk & swallow.

    Yes, I still think she's lovely.  
    Sometimes I question why  
I crafted a coffin for someone  
    still so alive, for someone I could still be,  
    but I have seen too many years  
    to smile like she does. Though I have  
grown into her eyes, almost grown into her nose,  
    wearing the same name is only a burden.  
Bring her to see the flowers,  
    will you? I think, in the future,  
    she will love the color orange.

When you come home for winter  
    & step into the house through the garage,  
you see my family's

calamansi tree huddled close  
    to the rest of our jungle in a sincere  
attempt to keep warm.

The tree sprawls, as old as earth  
    as it presses fragrant blossoms into  
the ceiling like a blessing,

as it blossoms with a hundred  
    promising spheres. Imagine  
something between a kumquat & a

mandarin orange. You'll observe: *so, like*  
    *a key lime*, & I'll untangle myself  
from you. Say: *no*.

Inside, the fruit is golden & full  
    of love. The tree has lived  
longer than me & will live longer

if my parents are lucky.  
    It is the third child who receives  
only gentleness

& frequent, careful repottings,  
    who returns only the  
most honorable fruit.

Calamansi juice agrees with  
    everything from instant ramen  
to my birthday *pancit*,

(—my mother snips the thin  
    noodles with scissors as she  
cooks over gas, though I'm told

*(the third child, continued, stanza break)*

long noodle lengths  
    represent luck for an equally long life.  
I wonder—)

but it's early & your mouth  
    isn't warm enough, so I slice  
into honey flesh.

We squeeze the not-key lime into tea.  
    The fragrance reminds me  
I'm home,

& I kiss you again to forget.  
    Your smile is as tart as your surprise  
at the unexplained sweetness.



Kenneth Pobo  
**The Moon Over Little Lake St. Germain in Wisconsin**

Back in our suburb I rarely  
notice the moon except  
when taking out the garbage.  
On some nights it's a chubby student  
in a floating classroom. Here

in northern Wisconsin, I stand on the pier  
and ask the moon personal questions.  
It's none of my business,  
but I ask anyway. Moon,  
when were you born? Moon,  
have you ever fallen in love?

Moonlight on ripples.  
Moonlight on a dead perch  
not two feet away.  
I wait for answers. They can be lies,  
or funny stories, anything  
to close the gap between us.

Mustards, for instance,  
are puny,  
packing punches in your throat;  
shooting spiciness  
down your windpipe.

Or some toddlers—  
questioning  
life's meaning, purpose—  
scrutinising,  
driving nails into minds.

Even humans, if you will,  
negligibly smaller  
than towering dinosaurs,  
yet sharper  
with greater footprints.

//

I think about the sun burning out,  
peeling like an onion, layer by layer,  
becoming a new sun every million years.

I think about how my body  
quietly replenishes cells.  
*A new person every seven to ten years.*

I imagine the world starting over  
every so often, giving humanity  
second, third, fourth, fifth chances.

I would only be a poor father,  
a useless husband, for just a little while.  
I could try again after the world resets.

Dearest Parthenos,  
No wonder you sprang fully armoured  
Seconds old in a world that expected the world of you.  
Donning an aegis to cover  
what you cannot wash away.  
As if being born already made you guilty of a crime.

Grey eyes hide storm clouds  
You, that taught men that  
Anger is power.  
Holding a spear or spindle.

Bones broken, lip split, arms bruised —  
Cannot carry a sword.  
Then, was it a mercy to turn hair into serpents?  
Slithering from root to tip,  
A venomous defense awaiting a hand that takes what it thinks it deserves  
Before the tongue asks  
Or ears listen.

Did you weep afterwards because you had no choice  
With the eyes of your uncles, cousins, and brothers who joke about the nymphs that are terrible at  
running  
away  
Are **ceaselessly** starring?

Is that why you crystalized her face, slipped it into your pocket,  
Emblazoned it onto your shield,  
So enemies would be reminded  
Wisdom comes at a price that will be paid  
(un?)willingly.

Feet like roots of an olive tree  
Anchored in place lest you move out of line.  
and femininity become your foe.

Oh, bust of Pallas upon my chamber door  
How hard must it be—  
Always needing to have all the answers.

Carly Madison Taylor  
**Snow on the CU Boulder turf football field**

You died alone, I have decided  
and it is the saddest thing. I was  
alone, too, the night I heard.  
We stood together when I broke  
in, the balance broken. You  
left the door open, when you left  
the light on, when you'd gone.

Carly Madison Taylor  
**Rush & Hurry**

*with gratitude to Hollow Knight, developed by Team Cherry*

I work & live inside the dark dripping labyrinth of a former bug utopia,  
work a relative term because all I do is scurry. Live relative because  
it's been dark for years. I dodge. I wrap my cloak & brandish my rusted nail.

I bustle my bug body across chunks of missing scaffolding, slip, slide,  
jump out of harm's way again, again. It's not far now to the city. Blue light  
flickers off the domineering statues of kings, just down a well

& the decayed gilt world of this fallen bug kingdom fades, Chicago  
erupts up on every side. A newsstand I've never noticed. The first time  
I've wanted a copy of the paper in forever, the first time the air

is not too wet. I'm reaching into my cloak hoping bug money  
holds up in Illinois. Hoping the river won't kill me if I misstep, land  
me back at a bench on the other side of wherever it is I came from.

You rattle my shoulder like the thunder of trains in the air with one finger  
against shrouded exoskeleton. Too much rush & hurry & not enough touch.  
I don't know who apologizes first but I remember our labyrinth

without a map: how you were the best travel companion & kept away  
bad guys on the way to get food, how it felt to rip my voice out  
& throw it at your face. What do we say after? What is there?

You pay real Chicago, Illinois money for my paper, help me wrap the plastic  
tight enough to keep out the water where I'm going. *Do you have a flashlight?*  
It's sweet of you to ask. It's been dark for years. But you said you were sorry.

You let me say I was sorry. I have to go, I need to sharpen my weapon.  
I have to dodge. I have to keep moving, keep moving, find another corner  
of the maze. I don't need a flashlight. It's not as dark as before.

Headed nightly from library toward dorm,  
she unweaves arms from warm sleeves,  
backpacks her books to tour banyan trees  
of shimmer-green, moon-dripping lights  
lining paths around Lake Osceola.  
Ageless angels smooth the brick way  
when she wanders her cornerless nursery.

As wind off the lake turns spokes  
of weathervanes stirring time into the dark,  
she *pirouettes* in pinwheels of open arms—  
blessed with new beginnings,  
she narrows her own direction.

And though she graduates college weeping,  
she'll learn to find joy in contentment,  
fearing not the quiet moments to come,  
joy that adventures will always fill her mind,  
dreams will never leave her,  
will never be fully explored—  
even when her soul one day outruns her body.

Our room collects moonlight.  
The glow makes puddles on our carpet,  
and the whitewashed dog curls like a fog  
around harbors of floating fishing boats.  
\*

You breathe sweet and deep.  
On my side of the dark I slide from bed,  
hold myself close in the corner so I'm  
blurred to the eye by the shadows.



I was baptized too young,  
raised in services long and boring.

So I taught myself to scale the grand wall behind the pulpit  
and shuffle hand to hand along sanctuary molding,  
leaping to a ceiling fan, swinging by its blades.

A secret grew in me while I sat beside the youth group girls.  
But he got too big to hold in. Then I escaped,  
racing elbows under rows of oak and crawling to the exit.

# FICTION

It all began when Mark mistook a raisin for a pest problem. I still remember the day quite vividly. We were cleaning our balcony: I was sweeping near the balustrade and he, with a broom in hand swept away at the veranda, without care. It had been some time since either of us had thought of cleaning the balcony, but as we succumbed to procrastination, the porch became harder and harder to look at. One morning, I asked him whether we should clean the balcony. He said he was thinking the same thing. And so, we decided that we would do it that evening, after arriving home from our respective jobs.

So, that evening, we talked about our jobs, cursed our bosses and went off to complete the work we had both agreed upon in the morning. It was then, while sweeping, he stopped, stood still, and asked, 'Jenny, what is that?'

'What is what?', I asked, without turning.

'That.'

I turned and looked to where he was pointing. It was a dried-up raisin. We had had a packet full of them, and I assumed that one had just gotten away somehow. 'It's a raisin.', I said.

He stood silent for a while. He was- and I derive no pleasure in saying this: hard to look at. He had boyish features- soft hands, flimsy skin and absolutely no hair anywhere on his body. He even dressed childishly: a tee-shirt, baggy pants, all of which shared the same colour, and a shock of frizzled hair.

'No, that isn't a raisin, Jenny. Look closer.'

I bent and looked closer, 'What is it then?'

'Well, it seems like rat turd.'

'What!?'

'A rat turd', he repeated, 'I think we may have a pest problem.'

'I haven't seen any rats around. I'm sure I'd have noticed.'

'Huh', he mumbled, 'I'm sure that is a rat turd. Even if it isn't, there's no harm in taking precautions.'

I nodded.

'We have rat poison, right?'

I nodded again and continued sweeping. He did too, and after we had exhausted ourselves, we decided what we needed was some sound sleep.

We live in a one-bedroom apartment, the bedroom boxed in from all sides with thick, white compact walls, making it seem like an asylum. Since childhood, I've suffered from acute claustrophobia. Moving into this apartment- especially the bedroom- was nothing short of a Herculean task. The only relief is the bedroom window and the sliding glass door, beyond which lies our balcony.

As we were getting ready to tuck ourselves in, Mark asked me to close the door and the window.

'Why?', I asked.

'Because we don't know whether the rodent has gotten in. All we can do is speculate. What if he is still lurking out there somewhere and decides to jump in through the window?'

It was a possibility, had there been such a rodent. Nevertheless, I played along, 'Well, you know that I'm claustrophobic, don't you?'

'Yes, I know that Jenny. But that is a risk we'll have to take.'

*Would you have said the same thing had you suffered from it?* I thought but kept quiet. 'Well, what if I feel boxed in?'

He sighed that petulant sigh of his. 'Can't you pull through tonight?'

I stared at him. This was not new, I told myself.

'Fine.'

The next morning, I found myself bathed in sweat. The sheets, too, were drenched in cold sweat. Overnight, they had developed an obnoxious, almost pungent smell. I got up, washed my face, brushed and woke him up. After that, we bathed, dressed, shared a kiss goodbye and went off to work.

'Jenny', Mark called, ready to leave.

'Yes?'

'I just wanted you to know that I'll be home early.'

'Ok'

He began again, 'You closed the doors and windows, right?'

'Yes', I said.

'Ok. Bye.'

'Bye.', I said and left.

When I came home late in the evening, I found Mark sitting on the couch, watching television. I made a little conversation, changed and then headed toward the kitchen.

'Don't go in.', Mark called out.

'Why not?'

'I sprayed rat poison all over there.', he said.

'In the kitchen?', I cried.

'Yes.'

That's where we keep our food! How am I supposed to make dinner!?', I screamed.

'We'll order takeout.'

This was it. The last straw. 'You ruined the entire stock, you moron!'

'No need to scream! Better to throw away the rat-infected food than eat it!'

'There is no rat!'

'Yes, there is.'

'Oh yeah? Where is it? We have not seen any such rat!'

'Yet', he broke in.

I slumped down onto the floor, my hands curtaining my teary eyes, 'Why did I marry you?', I screamed at myself. 'There was no rat! There is no rat, Mark! There isn't one!', I rambled on hysterically.

He fell silent. After a brief pause, he came near and held me in his arms. 'Ok fine. Maybe I was imagining it.'

I looked up. All this seemed like some bizarre dream. 'Can you please let go of this? Please?', my voice was broken.

'Yes.'

Later, getting ready to sleep, we kept the door and the window open. He kissed me and told me he loved me, to which I said nothing. This has happened before, I reminded myself.

It was about two-o'clock in the morning when my slumber broke. All I could hear was a strange sound coming from the hallway. I rose, and to my surprise found the window and the door closed. Unaware, I slid out of the bed and crept toward the living room.

The room was draped in complete darkness. The only light- was the flashlight, clasped in the hands of my husband, who was crouching low- trying to find something that wasn't there.

Surrounded by tall prairie grass, the rusted remains of the piper cub baked in the afternoon sun. The plane's right wing lay half-buried in the dirt a few feet from the fuselage. The tail section was missing as was the left wheel. The plane tilted to the left and the tip of the left wing rested on the ground. The chrome yellow paint that had once covered its fabric and steel had been worn away by the extreme seasonal weather on the plains. The seat and stick remained in the cockpit but the gauges on the dashboard were smashed. The windshield was cracked in several places and covered with dirt. Although covered in rust, the plane's propeller was intact. Bird droppings covered the wing and the exposed part of the fuselage. The skeletal remains of a deer lay in the shadows under the fuselage.

Connie's two children played on a bare patch of ground five yards away from the plane. As a result of a lightning strike, the dirt was black and the grass that surrounded the edge of the patch was burnt. Thomas, age six, jabbed at the ground with a twig, trying to divert the direction a line of ants were taking. His sister, Marie, age four, sat in the dirt and rocked her doll in her arms while watching a garter snake winding its way through the blackened grass stalks along the edge of the patch. Connie had her back to them as she stood near the plane drawing a sketch of it. Drawn to the short, melodic chirping of a meadowlark she looked up from her sketchpad and saw that the bird was perched on the broken trunk of a small tree. When it flew off she watched it until it disappeared in the hazy distance. She turned to look at her children, and not seeing them, thought they had wandered off into the grass. She called their names several times as she walked to the bare patch of ground. Their feet and hand prints were in the dirt. She dropped her sketch pad and pencil and frantically searched the area all around the patch, making increasingly wider circles while screaming out their names.

She searched for them until the purple and pink colors of the Badlands formations became more pronounced in the shifting colors of the twilight sky, and then nearing exhaustion, she staggered through the grass to the gravel road where her car was parked. There she discovered her keys weren't in her skirt pocket where she had put them. Bordering on hysteria she scanned the area of prairie she had just walked through and thought that finding her lost keys would take too long, so she began running down the road toward the highway that led into the Badlands. Thirty minutes later she stumbled onto the pavement and fell to her knees.

The man who stopped his car and quickly got out asked, "Are you okay?"

"Help, my children are gone," Connie said hoarsely. Then she passed out.

#

The room was almost perfectly square with a two-way mirror along one wall. There was a door but no windows. The room was painted battleship gray, including the floor. Connie sat in a metal chair in front of a metal table, hugging herself, fending off the chill in the air. Recessed lighting in the ceiling bathed the room in a harsh white light. A large fly buzzed around her head. The door opened and Detective Bryce and Detective Kline entered, both attired in dark blue business suits. Detective Bryce's

skirt was tight and as she walked to the table she tugged on the material. She carried a manila file folder that she tossed on the table, and then she sat down across from Connie, while Detective Kline leaned against a wall and nonchalantly crossed his arms.

“Do you want to tell me the story again?” Detective Bryce asked, a steely look in her eyes.

Connie swatted at the fly. “I’ve told it to you and everyone else a hundred times already. One moment my children were there and the next moment they were gone.”

Detective Bryce snapped the fingers of her right hand. “Poof. Gone. Just like that?”

Connie sighed as a shudder coursed through her body. “Yes, like that,” she stammered. “Why aren’t you out looking for them?”

Detective Kline uncrossed his arms and looked at his fingernails. “We cut the grass a half mile in every direction around that plane, had dogs and hundreds of volunteers scour the area for miles around it, used helicopters and drones, and not a sign of your kids anywhere. Where else do you suggest we look?”

Tears streamed down Connie’s face. “I don’t know what else I can suggest. You also tore up my home and yard looking for them. You’ve treated me like a monster who would kill her own children.”

“Are you sure you don’t have something to tell us about what happened when your children disappeared?” Detective Bryce asked, her voice cold, her eyes locked on Connie’s.

“I took them with me so that I could sketch that plane. That’s all there is to tell you,” Connie replied angrily. “They’re my children. I loved them.”

“Loved?” Detective Bryce said.

“Love.”

#

Around the piper cub short stalks of prairie grass poked through a thin layer of snow. A steady wintry breeze had kept the snow from collecting on the outsides of the plane, but the seat and dashboard were wet. Scat and clumps of brown fur on the cockpit’s floor were the only signs that anything living had been near the plane for several months.

Connie stood on the spot where she had last seen her children. The hair that curled out from her knitted cap was tousled by the wind. She patted her gloved hands trying to keep them warm. Hearing their squawks, she looked up to see a skein of geese flying in V formation across the cloudy sky. When the birds were out of sight, leaving a deafening silence in their wake, she turned her attention back to Evelyn who was standing by the plane with the palms of her hands on the side of the fuselage. Connie stomped her booted feet on the ground, wondering if her toes were frostbitten.

Evelyn turned, hesitated for a moment, and then walked to where Connie was standing. “You know nothing about the history of the plane and how it ended up here?” she asked.



“Nothing,” Connie answered. “Before my husband died he said he and his friends used to play here when they were kids, but no one in town knows how it got here.”

Evelyn tightened the wool scarf wound around her neck. “The pilot was a woman,” she said.

Connie glanced at the plane. “Does that tell you anything about what has happened to my children?”

Evelyn shifted her gaze to the haze that surrounded the Badlands formations. “No. I get no trace of your children being anywhere near here,” she said. “Why did you bring them out here?”

“I felt this urgent need to bring them here,” Connie said. “Something was pulling me, maybe the memory of being here with my husband. We used to come here for picnics and I’d sketch the plane.”

“Did you do any sketches of your children while you were out here the day they disappeared?”

Connie closed her eyes for a moment, reliving that day, remembering. “No. I only sketched the plane.”

Evelyn glanced at the piper cub. “Some souls leave imprints behind for a very long time.” She then looked down at the ground where they were standing. “And some souls leave no imprints at all.”

Connie looked at the plane and watched a sparrow fly into the cockpit, settle on the seat for a moment, and then fly out and away. “What do I do now?”

“Keep searching, but remember there’s not an answer for everything.”

#

The spring air was filled with the aromas of rain-moistened earth and sprouting green prairie grass. With her sketch pad tucked under her arm, Connie trod across the soft earth to the front of the plane. She opened the sketch pad and took a pencil from her skirt pocket and began to sketch the plane. She worked fast, filling the page with several images of the plane. Then she walked to the side of the plane, turned the page, and started anew. She circled the plane, drawing it from every angle. Walking to the last place she had seen her children, she began to sketch them as she remembered them just before they disappeared. As if her hand was being guided by another hand, she drew the children with wings. She drew them rising in the air. She drew them flying away.

Dear You – can I use your name? Am I allowed?

The first time I saw that blue suitcase with the random scarf tied around the handle, ('so we can recognise it afterwards' you'd explained), was the second happiest day of my life. We were dressed up in shiny new gold earrings and pristinely pressed outfits from 'Mumbai Streetz', remember? I never understood why we were dressed that way just to go to India and buy the same style outfits at a fraction of the cost, but it's what Mum wanted. Seeing your family didn't fill Mum with the same excitement as me, Seema and Raja. She was constantly half a second way from losing her temper ever since you booked the tickets. But regardless, we went.

I was twelve and anxious. Would your family like me? I wasn't sun-brushed like you, I was sun-savaged. I had a deep brown skin that you told me was ugly.

But I had nothing to worry about, your family were as cocoa kissed as me. Well, your mother was at least. Your Dad was probably a lot paler, considering he'd been dead for three years before we went. You wept at Bibi's feet as if he died a second before we landed though. Mum rolled her eyes; did you ever know that? She knew you were a fraud, but you'd battered all the defiance out of her way before I was born. She told me that's just what men did 'back then'.

I loved that holiday. Meeting Bibi was special, she had the same down-trodden aura as Mum when you were around, but when it was just me and her – she was alive. I thought I'd understand you more, if I spent time with your mother but it didn't help. It just confused me more, you were so unlike the woman that carried you for nine months. You didn't have the loving core that she did. You weren't always bad she said, it was your Dad that made you this way according to Bibi, but I think she was just making excuses for you.

The way parents do for their sons. The way you do for your son.

The happiest day of my life was when you and Mum came back from the hospital with that little package in your arms. The sleeping seedling who'd validated my mother's worth as a wife with the presence of his penis. A little brother for me, a trophy for my father, a triumph for my mother and a slap in the face to the shrivelled aunties claiming my mother had sinned in her past life. I promised to love him forever that day. It was when you were pouring whiskey for your family downstairs and I was helping Mum put her pyjamas on. I kept my promise. Tell him.

When did he become so like you? No. When did YOU become so like you? You weren't always so mean. I know my White friends would have found your behaviour horrific, but it was normal. My Brown friends knew it was part and parcel of being in an Indian family. The strict rules, awkward exchanges, over-bearing control and looming threat of a slap if we found a voice. But you would also make us laugh when you'd make your toes fight each other whilst stoically watching television, as if your feet had a mind of their own. We'd laugh raucously, and I'd see your mouth twitch too. Mum

looked on happily when you were in this mood. Remember every Friday you'd go to Jagg's Chippy to get our usual order of three chicken burger and chips, a large spicy chicken pizza, one small battered cod and a bottle of 7UP. You'd come home and every week you'd do the same 'I forgot your burger' routine with Raja. I'd laugh every time.

You even did it the Friday before you killed me.

You had taken the suitcase down from the loft an hour before you left to get our dinner. I laughed at your comical searching of the clearly empty carrier bag. You laughed back at me. We had that moment together, that connection. I was thinking of how young you looked when you laughed. You were thinking of how to snap my neck, so I'd fit in the suitcase. Precious family moments.

Raja turned into an entitled, spoilt bully during his early teens. He'd watched you sit on your behind and command us all to run around after you and thought he could do the same. He could. You let him. You shouted at Mum when she was too tired to make him the toast he decided he wanted whilst the rest of us ate the fish fingers and beans she'd cooked. You called her a '*kuthi*.' A bitch. Why did you do that? Why did you always humiliate her in that way? She is a good wife to you. A brilliant wife, by the archaic Asian standards you and your family kept. Have you ever done anything for yourself?

You made Raja do what he did. I refuse to believe that sweet little boy who would cling to my leg whenever he heard the hair-dryer, became a callous, bigoted monster alone. It was you and your backwards brainwashing.

There were only a few years between me and Raja, but it felt like four decades. I coddled him, we all did. I'd feed him jelly baby sweets and juice as he sat happily in his high chair waiting for the mush that Mum was warming up for him. On my sixteenth birthday I made sure he sat right next to me as I was hugged by a conveyor belt of aunties, uncles, cousins and family friends. All pushing £5, £10 or £20 notes in my hands. I split it all with him, it's how he got the new trainers you hated. The bright red ones with the white laces. That was the last cute moment we shared, as he ventured further into his teens he became more and more cruel. Do you see what you did? Or are you proud of him?

I imagine you to be proud when he would run home and wait for you to come back from work. Wait for you so he could regale you with tales of me and 'my boyfriend'. That one day when I was in year nine you confronted me when I was a few minutes late from school, you were so sure that I was the 'whore' you kept screaming at me. Your face when I told you that James was gay, and we were just best friends was hilarious! You still belted me another three times and told me not to speak to him ever again. Is that when you planned to get rid of me? Because you had assumed I was filthy because I dared to speak to a man? A gay man at that?

Raja spent the next year telling you of all the different times I was seen speaking to a boy at school. He told you I was flirting with the shopkeeper when I would buy my snacks for breaktime. You made me start taking biscuits in a food-bag from home. He told you when I was speaking to a teacher too long. He told you when I would take my school jumper off when I got too hot. He told you when he caught me hugging a boy goodbye. You almost broke my wrist that day, the way you dragged me up the stairs to your bedroom to fetch your belt.

I used to scream 'I'M SORRY' time and time again but it was pointless. Would anything have made you stop? Would you have stopped beating me if I told you I loved you? I like to hope you would, but this is reality and you're a middle-aged misogynist who would see 'I love you' as seduction.

The day that my fate was determined was when I made a fatal mistake. I kissed Luke in public. Raja saw. I knew as soon as it happened that I would regret the day I said yes to Luke's shy, almost whispered question 'Come cinema with me this Saturday?'. I'd told Mum I was going with him, she told me to be careful. We told you that I was going with a group of friends. Seema pretended she was going too, instead she went to Priya's house and practised her make-up. She wanted to be half-decent at it before she started University. Me, Seema and Mum with a secret from you. A female alliance against your male dominance.

I'd been seeing Luke for only a month. It was exactly four weeks of stomach-churning fear mixed with painfully conscious flirting and heart-fluttering teenage love. We swore we'd be together forever. Me with my strict Brown father who'd prefer to die than to let me be with a White man and his strict White father who'd voted Brexit to get rid of people like me. He hadn't worked out India wasn't part of the EU. You and Luke's dad would have got along famously if you'd been the same shade - ignorant bigots that you were.

Should I have been punished for having a boyfriend? For doing what every other girl gets to do? For finding my own way in this confusion that collided two cultures together and spat me out. Indian parents in an English city. You show this letter to my cousins, my uncles, my aunties and they will agree that I should have been put down. You'll bask in their sympathy and revel in the insults they spit at my shameless mother for raising a 'whore'. But ask yourself, did I deserve to be strangled by your belt, shoved in the suitcase and thrown in the nearest body of water you could find just because I held hands, shared popcorn and had three awkward kisses with Luke?

You'd planned for weeks, knowing you would kill me. You'd waited for half-term, the excuse when I didn't show up to school wasn't even original. Didn't I deserve something other than 'she's moved to India?' You'd got the suitcase down, you'd got the Chippy tea, you'd brought a brand-new belt, you'd emptied the boot.

The way you slapped me across the face and then pulled me by my hair to the middle of the room as Raja began kicking me in my back made me weep. Not the violence. But the coldness. I wasn't anything but a spoiled vagina to you. You thought at least. Don't worry(!) I am 'pure', I died a virgin. Because what greater crime is there to be a brown unmarried girl who knows what pleasure feels like. You slapped Mum as she tried to stop you. Raja pushed her to the floor as you both swore at me. Calling me a 'slut', 'shameless' and 'dirty'.

I watched her as you choked the life from me. I knew somehow that she'd trade places with me if she could, but there were flickers of something else in her sweet brown eyes. Something like 'why couldn't you just be normal? Why couldn't you just suppress your desires and marry someone we met through the family and spend forty years wishing you were dead like the rest of us?'

You trapped my hair in the zip, even after everything else it was this that struck my heart the heaviest. You couldn't even put all of me in the suitcase before you hastened to zip it up and throw me out of your life. Did I really disgust you *that* much?

Banning Brown girls from love but expecting us to lay with strangers because we 'married' them. You had my mother, a motherless sixteen-year-old with a likeness to Zeenat Aman. She got you, a balding, tubby, grown man. Is that what you wanted for me? To be a maid, sex-slave, punching bag and scapegoat for every mistake or misfortune that happened in the household for a man who would drink himself stupid every weekend.

Is that the life you planned for me? I wish you could have spoken to me. I wish I could have spoken to you. You never understood me. I never understood you. We both spoke the same two languages, yet we never found the words to say to each other.

Seema's gone. She's somewhere forever ruined by what you did to me. She'll never heal. Condemned her to a tortured life of keeping her mouth shut and never speaking my name again just because I had a boyfriend for barely a month.

I'm not alone here. I'm surrounded by hordes of girls, killed for honour. So many of us wasted. So many of us brutalised because we dared to love.

Will you recognise me when you see me next? My dead, suffocated face. I'll recognise you. The one meant to protect me. Meant to love me.

My story is already old. A thousand more girls have 'gone abroad'. A thousand more have been raped, beaten, murdered because of lazy teenage kisses.

Was it worth it? Did I deserve it?

Forever, despite your best efforts, yours,  
Your daughter.