

Letter From the Editor

Hi. Hello. It's MK. And since I said MK, let me just say that is, in fact, my preferred name. I mean you guys ^{*} can ^{*} call me Madison, but if you do, at least say the whole thing. Madison Kolia. Anyway. This issue is like a comet in that there are lots and lots of comets, and they come around at calculated times and no matter how many you see, they're spectacular every time. Also, generally visible at night. Which is to say I will likely always publish at inappropriate times of night. Again, anyway. I hope you all love this issue as much as I do, and I hope you like the new site. KTHXBAI.

All the best,



The Things Herein

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POETRY

Cacophony of brushstrokes
Rattling in their store.
Will she come free us up?
Will she ever draw?
Rhapsody of rainbows
Overlapping reds and pinks
Overflowing yellow well
Smudging pristine sinks
As paints slide over boundaries,
A lost muddying mix
Reminds me of creative, fevered fingers
Rooting through leaves and sticks.
Deep down dirt find pigments
Of ochre, dust and clay.
Now to retreat home and dabble cave walls
And immortalise the day.

Luke Bateman
The Ghost of Lockdowns Yet-to-Come

I think this house might be haunted.
Sometimes in the night the floorboards creak,
Darkened rooms washed in blinding TV static.
No matter how much washing I do, there always seems to be more.
Howls wind through the passages
Lamenting a life being lost,
Searching for a completion that might set them free as
Misty handprints mar the windows
Despite knowing desolate streets offer no aid.
Worst of all,
Sometimes when I walk past the mirrors
I catch a glimpse of the ghost,
The only eyes that ever see him.
Bit by bit he fades away.

Testimony of the Person at the Bottom of the Wishing Well

Lost, I was, in a wishing well chasm, fallen like a coin,
Discarded for your wishes to come true.
Plummeted and plummeted into the dark heart of the planet
Before I splashed against the water like a body against a bed,
Sinking into an oh so welcoming rest.
What it took to tread the water,
In the vestiges of moonlight bleeding around your silhouette.
Time to think and wait and feel
The pitter patter shower of coins
As other optimists sacrificed to their naivety.
Sometimes that shower paused,
And was replaced by two glistening coins,
Your eyes, peering down, wondering if I was still there.
You would call my name and I would call it back and
You would think you heard an echo.

Robert Beveridge
The Child Who Swallowed His Parents
Content warning (CW): Violence

“...it is thus that *they* see that ‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.” —Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

At five, he pulled the wings from flies
rejoiced in their final screams

poked holes in leaves
which kept him occupied
all afternoon.

His favorite food was lasagna.

As he grew he would scare
his friends behind
the abandoned barn, hang
from his sneakers above
the old well.

His parents made sure
he had no holes in his clothes
but otherwise let him do
as he pleased.

Once in biology class
he tried to dissect a frog
with his teeth.

The psychologist
said it was just a phase.

At home he said the lasagna
tasted funny that night
and he laughed to illustrate.

His first girlfriend was six
years older, wore blue
eyeshadow, orange lipstick.

(The Child Who Swallowed His Parents, continued, stanza break)

She played bass guitar
and hated lasagna.

He never tried to dissect her
but she asked him to use
his teeth one night and he did
left rings of crescent points
on her breasts three weeks

encircled the purple rose
tattooed on one.

At dinner before the prom
he ordered lasagna

and compared its surface
to the scars on her
half-exposed breasts.

She smiled.
“I still won’t eat it.”

That night they were arrested
for trying to dissect his father.

Robert Beveridge
It's Not Champagne, It's Martini and Rossi Asti Spumante
CW: Flaying

If you wait until there's no more pain
in your wrists, you'll never get anywhere.
If you remove the skin, the body will
drain faster. If you head west on Route 2
till it ends, dig. If you render the fat
from the bacon, saute the chili vegetables
in it for extra flavor. If you go to the movies,
buy the popcorn, it keeps them in business.
If you uncover something, be cautious
when you open it. You never know.

Frances Boyle

Maneuver

*Previously published as "Manoeuvre" with Vallum Contemporary Poetry
CW: Film-noir frightening scenes*

Don't pause, don't let the momentum
fail to carry you forward. Keep rhythm,
urgency fueled by the tick-tack, thud
and reverb, metronome footstep music.
Feel of a follower, slow motion, filmic.
Movement seen from corner of your eye,

dark car pulling away, pale fingers dialing
down the light. How to know if you're awake
or dreaming? *Pinch me!* they cry in movies
but you always feel the pinch; too tight skirts
that restrict your steps so you can't run, couldn't
run, but you don't know why you'd need to run.

You don't dare disbelieve their urgent
deceit, their flippant lies but rather question
your own memory, your own sanity. Gaslight
turned low, there's a gasp in the dark you're sure
you heard, a silenced scream. They tell you
you're lost, but they won't help your feet

find the path, so you slip on scrubby grass
and loose gravel down the hillside, uproot
weeds, bend stripling branches as you grab,
afraid, for what might be the only truth you know.
You try to let go, calm your hammering heart
your seesaw breath. Find a place where your mind

feels inside itself. But you sense heavy breathing
beyond your peripheral view. Shadows
ominous, full of menace. That's all
in your head they say, all in your
fevered imagination. Turn your head.

my father stole some pens from a grocery store
one summer. a pack of six I think,
medium tip Bics. he cried when he was arrested.
couldn't explain why he'd done it,
but he could easily explain the shame.
that unthinkable shame of others finding out.
he picked at a need to have new things
and got caught.

my mother stole my sister's life. bottled it up,
and set it on a shelf in an unused room.
there are smudges of her short life
on the windowsill where the daffodils die.
just like her, they leave behind a soft buttery glow.
my sister is long gone, but my mother is made
of dense matter. in her hand she cradles Neptune
and in her heart a thousand black holes.

my uncle stole my youth with his hard mouth
that soured me for human touch. he ground out
my body and my will to live with his rot.
both took years to rebuild, cell by cell,
brick by want. now I hold memories
in the soft creases behind my knees,
while the rusted knots in my belly thicken,
remind me my body was not meant to do that.

We both are teeth and
white noise; eyes rolling
back into the easy spaces.

I place one hand below her concrete
jaw to feel it tighten. I let
her growls pool in my pale palm,
in my clavicle and eardrum. Someone
stands and yells noiselessly; it's
just a game of body language.

My father, he clicks his teeth, too.
He is speaking in sighs. It
takes my brother three tries to
get her still; we've been watching
all year as her mouth peels clear into a
confection of trauma. It's no one's fault and

everyone's problem. Too loud, too proud,
too big, too here and now. Who's
to say it's not from loving too hard
or knowing too much that she
rattles her mouth like railroad spikes?
After all, it can be out of a lonely love that my father
lets her loose on a lead, lets
her yank and jerk and rage against her
feigned freedoms. What are children
 and children of children
if not a litmus test for impact? What is
a German shepherd if not a
radiator resisting winter? What is a hand
if not the soft band of flesh stapling
our days shut like a suture?
Yes, we are bloodletters the longer she squeals and sings.

I place a hand over her heart and

(Dog Bite, continued, no stanza break)

steal our shared panic. My father's growl
carves a hollow in us both; our respective leads tighten.

Over many days we are skin and bone, but never
the same. Still, we are what rises to the surface under
tooth-taught pressure. We both are heat and
white noise; bleeding in the night.

The year is 1978, which is an
anagram for *molecules* or *head wound* and a
boy just said he
cannot love me anymore
Love is something saved for
evergreens and milk
saucers and troubled bay waters with their
bleating eyes
His molecules and my
molecules simmer in the peak of November
because it isn't safe to speak here

[A lone cable car wails at the hill-backed moon over San Francisco]

The year is 1978 and it's a splinter-cell of
front pages swept to the
back of red districts The day is an open ground-floor
window gasping for relief. It welcomes him [once in the wrist, twice in the chest –
two more in the head at close range as if to steal his dreams]
Did you know that love
licks its ego like a
body
face-down on the floors of City Hall? When did
he stop loving me?

The year is 1978 and it's feverish as an obituary

We ride this train with no conductor [she's identifying bodies]
and feel the tracks shake loose I still think
about the boy who
cannot love me anymore and the many
boys who are told that they'll never go home again and how
this double-desecration eats our sun alive
with a scream of gold teeth
and White Nights and
molecules soundproofed against

(The Year is 1978, continued, no stanza break)

a world of exit wounds

[My body shudders across courtroom hills and I'm one
of many boys singing his mouthless song tonight]

The year is 1978, which is
a slant rhyme for *tragedy*

Dry brown leaves skittered across the boulevard, their tips scratching the blacktop like the claws of runaway squirrels. I was there, but also far from there, a reverie having lifted me to an Andean spring near Quito, astride the equator, half north and half south of the middle seam of the world. In my memory, I felt the place ineffably strange, infused somehow with a wild geometry shimmering just beyond reach, as unsettling as the auras the trees had, mourning clothes, along the road the day the man came too early for anything good and spoke to mom, who urged us out of bed and dressed, and drove us all to where there was nothing to be done.

I whisper to myself that there's nothing to worry about,
and internally I know that; recount the things that make up me.
Shape me into the human being you say you love.

I am blanketed in the identity I see in the mirror;
the version of myself captured in your single-reflex camera,
developed in a dark room, enlarged on photosensitive paper.

I am printed with light, my visage burned into the surface,
developed with scientific precision to be preserved in a frame.
I look at your photos and see my wet face, dripping chemicals.

Even in this process I am retouched.
Manipulated until I am the perfect version of myself.
I wonder which version you see in the glass of the camera.

When I leave the dark room
back to the land of incandescent light,
I study myself in the mirror and survey the imperfections.

I see the darkness under my eyes; my sad eyes.
The irises carry more than I want to admit,
and lashes hold back tears on the precipice of my eyes.

In the morning you'll hold me close,
kiss my cheek, and whisper that I'm beautiful.
It's only been five years and yet it is fading.

Small lines are showing, the kind you blur out
with pieces of paper on your workstation.
Erasing them as easy as chalk on a board.

How long before my skin looks as sad as my eyes,
and you falter when you look at me through the lens,
the applications of potions proving useless?

I want to believe you will love me,
keep me cradled in your arms under the California sun
as we forget to capture this moment in time.

Lauren Busser
Lies You Whispered in the Night

Unforgettable is how you describe me; and I believe you. I hover in the corner of the frame of your life, cut off by the camera to the point where decades later someone asks who that is and you can't remember. All the things accumulated from our relationship are gone from your world, tossed away without significance. I wish I had known then how easily it would be to disappear into you, to find myself lost in your blue eyes, my thoughts swimming only in your wants and desires. I listened to your voice as you said you loved me; I kissed you with fire and passion because I desperately needed to believe that you cared too and that I loved you too. I pushed down the thoughts of half-truths and lies; made you my everything. But I was erasable; easily edited out of your experience. Our story dissolved and recut itself together until it was unrecognizable. It was easy to disappear from your narrative, start piecing back together the version of my life that I'd abandoned for you. I reconstitute myself bit by bit and yet there are still parts of me missing waiting for you to reappear. I don't believe you will.

Clive Collins

To One in Her Seventies Who Talked of Time's Decay

Yesterday
when we spoke of our bodies'
mutual decay and fading
there was a thing
I wanted so to tell you
but could not say.
Which was the way in which
to me despite the years' erosions
the batterings of time and circumstance,
you are as you were that day when
I first saw you, years and miles, miles and years
away: lovely. Lovely as the trees we all but
lived beneath; lovely as the waves
through which we swam, the sands on which
we lay. Lovely as the fruit bright in the market
ladies' baskets on the pavement outside
the Swiss Cold Storage Company's shop
Lovely as the way the world blushed
pink each day at sunset. Lovely as
the pale flowers of the frangipani
you plucked sometimes for your hair.

honey dripping from your lips
 nothing could be more delectable
until
tiny stalactites bloom from the drip drip drip
scoring valleys bubbling with fat and blood
running rivers down your chin
 quick, have a taste in all its purity before They dress it in sugar -
you kiss your mother with that mouth?

peeling back Crest white strips that rip
your teeth from your gums and die
dye
charcoal swirling the white basin a brilliant sunset
 tiny stars of pomegranate seeds
your father used to buy on Sundays

isn't this wonderful? cubist faces
leering up your skirt stained
by your mother's meat sauce
 babies pounded into crumbles
abandoned overnight atop the stove sprinkled with
the corpses of her succulents
 wash it down with a hearty glass of slush scraped from the tires of your best friend's car
 dress it up with salt scooped fresh from the water softener

rotten words strewn across your chest splattered
with ink
 maps of the stars
fingernails bent back at the beds as roots
springing from your childhood journal refuse to be crumpled by your fists
marred by a boxer's bruises

refusing to lick your lips for fear
that life grants us only ephemeral moments
of sweetness.

Ashley Escobar
I'LL HAVE THE MOON

The moon was never mine to keep
Neither yours, it falls asleep as we slowly
Rise on opposite sides of the same street

Heretic visions you let overbreed
like waves, they leap, like the conception of me
Hours on the telephone & flowers aren't so cheap

The city drenched in saturated hues
Three am fog, long overdue, you traded generosity for the
Morning dew, bartending on aching feet

--I'd leave you alone

You dreamt of a man
who sacrificed feeling to
Become the moon

Cessation,
Early tidings
(Joy ridings end too soon)

You'd see me every evening
You'd joke

It isn't just the heavens--
I think the moon cries, too.

I did not have sexual relations with that woman. Wrapped tightly around her face, you say? Not these thighs. Never said her name with her fingers inside of me. Snuck into her steamy summer shower to give her a taste of what was to cum when she got out? Wasn't me. Never licked oil from her body after a tender evening massage. Looked into her eyes in torment and said *choke me*? Not I

I am the holy virgin mary, but holier, for there will be no baby. I am chaste and pure. Never tied anyone to my bed in crucifixion; never let you swallow me whole

I'm an imposter, a wolf wrapped in skin
frail and taut. There's caramel where my blood
isn't running. Sticky inside and out,
but don't worry, sticky wolves can still tear
flesh when they're trapped, when they need claws not nails.

There was a cupboard without doors, one bed
low and crisp and shrinking in a corner.
Stared at by a fire safety map squinting
from the fog-crested door. My eyelids creaked,
un-oiled for too long. I couldn't recall

how much blood a person-shaped thing should have,
how many eyelashes. How few deep breaths
should be kept in jars, just in case. Compress
my fingernails, lilies between pages,
leftover sweet things from the night before.

Quick-bitten knuckles glow raw, judging my
bared throat, and it's like a constellation
has found its way into my lungs. A bright,
brittle vacuum enticing laughter and
chattering vigils of breath. Fork-tongued, still.

pussy's for men, sweet lemons, and other lies we tell ourselves

I leaned up against the porch beam and looked out into the field
the aromatic musk of aging mahogany and gardenias floated in the summer air
breaths of wind heaved in and out, billowing through the grassland like a song
and there you were
in the middle of it all
knotted in the sunlight and the gracillimus
wearing my favorite outfit- topless with stems of lavender sticking out of your Levi's
you were what I needed at fifteen,
you were the color green,
the opening note to a Phoebe Bridgers album,
the first hummingbird to rest on my shoulder and dare to suck the nectar from my hand
things I didn't know I wanted until after they already happened to me.
I want to taste the raindrops on your skin forever
like the midwest sun, I burn for you.

I could guarantee that there were lots of women-
smooth women, whose edges were blurred
who were not ceaselessly bound by their own atrophy
women who fulfilled a dream-like reverie
by being gold plated
while simultaneously personifying exploding sunshine
I didn't radiate with blessings from the sun.
I wasn't perpetually interlaced in a waltz through life
in a dewy morning where hallowed tranquility was my partner
accompanied by righteous virtue
I was the one ambushed at bay within a cavern
trapped between rolling stones that sought out
to bulldoze my being and state of mind
I was webbed to the walls by adversely lamentable seams
of havoc-wrought destruction
and perennial aloofness
I was cemented in this jocular subterrane
and I couldn't unearth the compulsion to give a damn.

Perpetual scent lends itself as a sickness of dahlias,
cupped petals filled with gasoline tinged rainwater.

I, solid, touch hardwood, solid,
but fingers pass through regardless.
A perpetual grit of unsweetened cocoa coats my tongue.

I have never lived in the desert,
have nothing but resentment for the polarity of hot to cool.
With bite of sand and pebble upon my callused heels I
cannot endure the absence of wet clay between my toes.

Decision is poison injected directly into the spine,
an endlessly descending spiral staircase.
Driftwood is but an anchor to the rocky shore.
I never feel the impact of the surf but the coarse hairs
on my legs are stiff with salt nonetheless.

Strip me down until I am pure carbon,
soft pencil graphite rubbed between warming fingertips.
I want to be the written word,
the formation of language itself.
I want to know what it is like to melt under body heat
until I fill the ridges of another's whorl.

This time, let me be ache with meaning.
This time, let the definition finally follow the unspoken.

Spoiler Alert:
Auggie and Annie
don't end up together.

I know this
after binge-watching
five years
in a single week.

I thought if I
watched episodes
quickly, skipping
recaps and sleep,
I could fix

what the years
do to romance.
It didn't work

for Mary Shannon
and Marshall Man
either. I tried

with us, too.
Fast-forwarded
through fights;
paused & slow-mo'd
when the sex
was good; rewound
every kind word
you ever said.

The upside
to bingeing—
it only takes days
to reach the end
when everybody
else waits years
to learn the truth.

Consider the body
that sits in the chair;
consider the chair
sitting under the table.

Consider the table,
dressed with plates.

Consider the plates,
covered in food.

Consider the hand
holding the fork.

Consider the fork,
carrying food from
the plate to the body
that sits in the chair
at the table. Consider

the mosquito, how it's
only the females
that bite. Consider
how females feed,
taking blood from one
species to make sure
their own survives.

Consider how any
mother might spill
blood to protect her
eggs, how she might
feast to save her young.

When I'm at my best
All it takes is a look
To make you laugh
Or at least get one back
And I put my fist on my hip
And I walk that way
And I pirouette and look your way
And what I give you is me
And when I'm at my best I'm happy to give it
And it's a bit of fun, finding ways
To steal intermittent moments for each other
Away from busy shift work, or flash flooding
Or some space thing that only happens
Once every thousand years

What if we were honest with one another?
I'd say: the way you make me laugh and
roll my eyes simultaneously,
or how you challenge me and continuously
prove me wrong,
especially how you twitch and talk in your sleep
even if you nearly strangle me and it keeps me up.
You'd say: the way your hair dries
naturally curly, and how you throw your head
back when you laugh too hard;
how you don't take life too seriously
but you can be so serious
and mostly how your heart is so big
that I worry it'll kill you.

I'd ask you, what are we?
And you'd tell me we are seeing each other
and it would be enough, for now
because I'd feel the warmth of your embrace
and your regard for me.

But one day, you'd finally say: I don't think this is working out
I felt it once, but I don't feel it
anymore
And I'd ask: Is it something we can work on?
You'd say no because you'd wanted it
to work but it wasn't enough
I'd say thank you for being honest
and I'd be devastated but so grateful.
And though my heart will say: this hurts
the way of the universe tells me: it will pass.

It's time
Red sky at night; shepherds delight
And what a delight it is to feel
the sand between my toes as your
fingers are entwined between my fingers
Rooted in time and place
under this white floral archway to forever.

I do not know you yet –
what you look like, who you are
not even your name
But I know you fell in love
with the glistening waters, the sea air, the silence
the peace, of here
How could you be for me otherwise?
Here *is* me
My being, my heart
Where I go when I fall asleep
And now I have someone to listen to the give and
take of the sea with as we drift side by side
into peaceful slumber.

I heard nothing from you, from anyone,
for a year. Then one thing. It's bright enough
to see by the moon. I remember the chill
of that soft blue light; you could sit
on a park bench and read until dawn. But
who would want to? With the state censors
always looking over your shoulder.
Here everything not black is painted
a dirty white, matte like stage makeup,
sticky as stripes on urban trees.
Were Turandot reigns there is no illusion.
Everyone learns what to want, as children do.
(Or do they? If the child wants one thing,
to touch the burner's concentric glow,
is it the desire he unlearns? Or, once
burned, does he cling to it harder,
bury it deep in impossible domains?)

My name was not my first choice
but I'll answer to it, here where even
comedians side with the state. Where
Harlequins arrest us. Their laughter
only serves to remind that life is
carried on by others, far from here,
and cannot really help or hurt us much.
I shall have to spit out a name like a piece
of bitten tongue. If to live is to grasp
but never reach, then no one here is living.
In a land of two colors, the third
must be blood. So I strike the gong,
try to get what I want, don't get it,
can't have it, want it worse, stand in line
as we all do, for the curve of the waning
crescent, its pale blade poised to drop.
A blue light floods me: your message

(... dove regna Turandot ..., continued, no stanza break)

flashing in the night. I think I can guess
what it says. I delete it without a glance,
try to calm in my ears the hammering
systole, diastole, the eternal pronoun,
the verb:

I WANT WHAT I CAN'T HAVE

I WANT WHAT I CAN'T HAVE

I WANT WHAT I CAN'T HAVE

Up late, writing something
again. As I do when life
delicately refuses to be enough,
shrugs the silk off its shoulders
to reveal nothing beneath.
A black void blooms where
a letter should be. The stream
empties into a hole in the karst
where it is cold, where blind
salamanders writhe. I start
to winch up my idol. When
I am too scared to strap myself
to life's skeleton bobsled, I cower
at the hilltop, kneel out of force
of habit. *Ye ask amiss, that ye
may consume it upon your lusts.*
But this is true of every request.
Request denied. Stay thirsty.
Art does not imitate life; it replaces it.

Taking the long view, I'm dead
already. Might as well cut the tether
of the unwilling cosmonaut. Nothing
is *really* real. So of course I am going
to lose you, have lost you already
while you sit beside me. I regret
allowing myself to imagine otherwise.
No, I don't. Anyway, on a sunspot,
nothing is illegal. Every man is
a straw man. Might as well contest
that illegitimate ticket (that is, every
ticket ever written). Slap the judge,
ignite his periwig. Like Jonah, I too
curse god when his invisible worm
gnaws down my shade. You left me
just as I hired a biplane to float
a banner across the sky with words
to this effect: *to every one of my heart's
famines, you, my darling, were the Derg;*
parents put hands over the eyes
of their children, but it was too late;
they had seen their Four Sights,
watched me velcroed to my crucifix,
wrists and ankles slathered with Campari.
Uncomfortable, yes, but just a little,
and more than a little embarrassed.

Be bold, grasp anxiety's hand,
find truths beyond assumptions.
Handle nightmares with care,
let them instruct you
and when they clear, see hope,
revealed uplands drawn out at dawn.

Cherish your crushed heart
fresh from trudges across claggy landscapes
and mundane struggles with crossed paths –
your widdershins meanderings.

When young, you were immortal,
trashed your own frontiers
and denied death.

Now, stand still. Listen
to shimmered breezes
whispered notes to counterpoint
clear, clarion bells.

Be bold, hold anxiety's hand.
You will expand. Sing descants,
with polyphonic harmonies
in spite of your shy, stoppered self.

i was the one crying wolf, you were the one with wool between your teeth

it's autumn,
and everything is burning.

we can run,
you say, looking down at me, your eyes dark.
we can run.

i take your hand.
let you pull me onwards and away. remembering the first time i had held it, when i realized that none of the lines etched into its palm was the one i had been looking for. when i had pretended it had been there,
anyways.

you look back at me
as we fly through the woods. move your mouth into a smile, all teeth. *it's us*, you say as flames begin to crawl up the trees around us. i grip your hand tighter, allowing it to become an anchor.
for always.

warmth fills the forest,
and we continue on. i cling to you, keeping my eyes on the back of your neck. even with the glow from the flames drawing near, you still remain in the dark, as if you could not be touched
by their light.

suddenly, i stumble.
you look back once more, but this time you falter. for a moment. for just a breath. in my hand, yours shakes and i remember looking while you had been asleep, tracing my fingers softer than a whisper over the skin of your palm; feeling for what i could not see.

it's autumn,
and we're burning.

you slow to a stop,
and i begin to choke. around us, the world starts to fold in while i fall to your feet. above me, you stand. your arms at your sides; claws where there

(i was the one crying wolf..., continued, no stanza break)

should be hands.

i reach for you then,

as smoke fills my lungs. through the haze, i watch as you move your mouth into a
snarl, all teeth. *it's us*, you say as the flames draw in.

for always.

Crushed, at last, by the longing
that was also a beginning,
you stepped out to where
the morning was falling over the street,
stumbling with her buckets of rain.
There would be no bread for another decade,
only those thin wafers of light
with their blue crucifixes
etched into the middle,
and the promise of something better
disintegrating on your tongue
with the taste of paper.
In those days the birds
were merely symbols for what
you couldn't achieve,
their beautiful, colorful bodies
beating in your hands
like captured hearts.
And nightfall only signified
the world responding
to your own darkness.
How were you to know
that the very love that led you
to those cages, would eventually
draw you out into a landscape
vaster than you imagined?
That when the door opened
it would be the same wind
returning with yesterday's flowers?
That the past would creep into the present,
altering the weave with her hushed fingers,
braiding the forest of memory
with fresh addendums, a post-hoc abundance?

A poem is just a poem.
You want it to feed the hungry,
light candles for the dead,
capture the glistening wing
as it turns over the water.
At best, it promises satiation,
memorializes, turns blue.
There are many inadequate things
in our search for perfect love.
The bicycle breaks. The road goes on.
We settle at a waystation and call it home.
Whoever you are, it is getting late.
The light fills the golden wheel
of clouds. The hand, once luminous,
grows dark. Footsteps turn into flowers
on the distant hill.

Tripping up the half-finished stairs
at daddy's house, a forgotten

staple unzips my hand leaving
a scar my son traces, dirt under

nail, twenty-odd years later. The
ripping haunts my nerves, flesh

memory. The blood; a hot
metallic snuggle drooling each

fingertip, sprinting from the new
mouth scribed into my

un-calloused palm, pooling the
slender seams of the staircase

as I wailed. Daddy came running
down steps he'd told me to walk

defying his own logic for sake
of me, or fearing momma's

cocked-pistol-temper making
more holes in more bodies

upon her arrival. He scoops me up,
climbs the companionway-narrow

flight; rubies escaping my clutch
and flinging about, finding rest

in the freshly laid high-pile. Filling
nine terry towels before the gush

halted its rush, I apologized for
his new wife's new carpet

and once white walls, smiling
though lightheaded.

The lilies are coming up in the garden—
maybe garden is too generous

a term for the yard bordered
by an overflow of perfumed plants.

Garden implies tending,
curation, care, but we inherited

this tangle of humid green stalks,
and have done nothing but watch

blooms unfurl like wounds:
cat-tongue pink of bleeding

hearts, now dried, given way to drooping
purple bells; lilies shooting up like traffic flares.

There was an armed robbery at the corner last night,
just after midsummer light slipped

away. We huddled around the third-hand sofa, barely
clothed to ward off sticky heat in sleep.

When the last of us emerged,
none of us wanted to tell her why

red and blue were blooming
against the shutters,

why dog-whine was floating
through the screen with heavy evening air.

Could the dogs smell the lily buds hiding
in their ochre cocoons?

The lilies are coming up,
all fire and marmalade,

and maybe this yard was a garden once;
someone had to bury the bulbs.

a toast to getting pulled into days passed, based on the way the sun settles around the trees / to the words I've learned and forgotten / to the lines on his palms / to the way my friends' laughter never wavers as the years grow / to holding my arms tightly around your stomach as the dirt bike flew down back roads / to keeping every card from every holiday / to celebrating Valentine's day in my elementary classroom / to forgetting birthdays but remembering each fiery spark in their eyes / to bonfires uphill from the dam / to sneaking fettuccine alfredo and breadsticks into the movie theatre / to every person who's path has crossed mine, you helped make me / to watching him skip through the grass to make me laugh, even though he's dislocated his left knee three times / to the green hoodie I will wear until it's thread barren / to driving to a 9 to 5 and listening to the same songs I did in high school / to looking in the mirror and seeing someone whole

Kelli Lage
Birthday Cakes of My Lifetime

five years old / I blow out the candles of a cake decorated in dalmatians / my grandfather to the right of me / I peer into the lines of his face / and lean back with ease

eight years old / chocolate cake with chocolate frosting / I share the day with my cousin / who celebrates his birth three days before my own / I am filled to the brim with wishes / of living in a treehouse

twelve years old / red stools filled with my classmates / my birthday party closed down the diner / before I make a wish / I look those who grew alongside me in the eye / each one / they tell me to hurry before the candle wax drips on the cake

eighteen years old / my best friend's hair as golden as our preschool days / all the years / a thread between us / we celebrate our adulthood

twenty years old / I move on to red velvet / and I know the self I see in the mirror

this year on the evening of my birthday / you'll find confetti strewn across the floor of a cozy home / he will gather the dirty sunsets I discarded / and lift me with cheers made of them / the remaining years send a folk song back in time to me / the sweet taste of love on my tongue

Kelli Lage
I Remember

when the stars buzz / I think it's because they know / I've walked on this ground before / and craned
my neck back one too many times / recalling the hymns they spilled in my youth / the tune warms my
legs / nights they guided us passed the outskirts of town / finding our hiding places / by the growl of
our stomachs / placed one shelf above the sins of wolves / how they dimly lit the backroad / so we
could find our footing / but have to hold each other to make it down to the river / tonight / I see an
outline of my old Pontiac in the constellations / I wonder if they ever look up / and see it too

Kalyn Livernois
Most Days
For Jack, in Ireland

You'd greet us on the road most days running out through
the open gate as we'd pass on our walks, me with coffee
in hand balancing a mug with my hellos, and you behaving
like we're old friends—your paw pressed to my shoulder
I attach memories to the golden buzz of your fur
as you sauntered home and left us to our meanderings, and why?

Because you sing of the whole damn time, Jack.
The long conversations wandering between cow fields; the horse
in the pasture beside the house. The cut flowers littering the space
by the sink and the way love sprang forth while painting
the walls and saved me again & again. A place that's hard to write now—
I am no longer swallowed by its land but rather am eaten by its shadow

Kalyn Livernois
Elegy for Insects

Rain has flooded the yard again forming
a swimming pool in the neglected garden bed

—or that’s what I’m pretending to avoid the truth;
all the insects there have drowned

abundance can so quickly cross
into ruin

time can so suddenly march
toward decay like

leaves moving backward through the rainbow
as they age, green deepening into warmer hues

I preside over the bugs in their watery grave
sipping coffee from a mug bearing clouds

soft-white & void of rain, placed
beneath a backward rainbow beginning in blue

then green, yellow, orange, and red
correcting the procession of time

golden hour in a field of wheat
while hazy autumn hangs by spider's threads

final sunset rays slipping through slits
in old barn panels, falling onto bare shoulders

firelight when darkness drowns
the house til dawn

her laughter exploding into the night
ripping through fields of lavender
until everything alive in a four-mile radius
has heard what you call music
and called it music too

the monarch, wings bordered
in black; how gently
that butterfly lifts into the air
—all effort invisible

the fading of the day
as the spine of the sky slips
a glowing orange disc
and all goes dark
til dawn

shake some salt into my tea: the acute, perverse
agony you know i've grown to love, a salve to scare
me into submission, make it through until morning.

no pleasure's invoked without a past begging
for its sweet relief; indulgence is the contingency plan.

deliver me the gut-punch of vermouth and watch
some primal instinct kick in: pupils dilate, cheeks flush.
a glimpse of who i might've been hard and sharp
like a spade driven firmly into virgin soil, enunciating
the "k" in fuck, dress hiked up just enough to show some peach fuzz.

he's a sucker for the first signs of summer
and i know it—call it a wounded woman's sixth
sense. i know when the vacancy sign is on.

it's a desperate scramble, lunging for the devil i know:
a few glasses of tanqueray down, predictably sloppy, flashing ones
and twos at the cards table to anyone who will look my way.

no match for the sharks— i can't keep my composure.
far from prom queen, i'm the common fool in the boys'
bathroom again, crawling around on the floor in a drunken stupor—
wet elbows, skinned knees, puppy-dog eyes gazing under the stall
doors—looking desperately for what i've already lost.

that's where they'll find me, after the last dance: silently
hemorrhaging, half a woman. first-time drinkers will step over
my body to get to the trash can, screaming for mercy
as their insides tumble out. someone will find a phone, call in the triage.

she'll look at me, convulsing of my own accord—is internal
bleeding not still bleeding? —and make the call. ketamine
over klonopin, every single time.

we're your unidentifiable breeds,
your basic mutts, parents' divorces
and too-young widows muddying the roots,
equal-parts our grandfathers' rage
and our mothers' neuroses, blind followers
of the religion we condemn. someone's busted
kidneys ended up in you, someone's weak lungs
keep me alive. bodies that don't make sense,
failing in ways we don't know how to deal with.

oh, to be entirely comprised of breakages:
of things taped back together too late or glued
too soon, turned upside down, facing the wrong direction.

there will not be any monuments
built in our honor. when we are dead,
we are gone. our children's children
will not know us in stone, but in yellowed
photographs, jcpenny studio prints of the
dreamers our parents wanted us to be.

from below us, years later,
they will ask why and we will
never have a good answer.

we tried to do better, get faster,
but blood runs.

i'll do anything to keep my outline in your sweet
memory. remember me, your double entendre:
the heat that made the wallpaper peel and curl,
the string wound tight around your ring finger.

no more saturdays in bed, flesh on flesh, dead weight
aching to be resuscitated. instead, we're day-tripping
at the look-don't-touch museum. i resist, heels digging
into the dirt, but you're persistent: dragging me
to the art, zip-tying my hands to my sides, wondering
why i'm foaming at the mouth.

no more asking strangers on the red line
if they fall asleep in silence, too. no more pity parties,
choking down enough cough syrup to dare to look
at myself, unrecognizably swollen with fear,
in the full-length mirror. i don't want to slide
with age, end up complacent by our forties.

i want proof there's a hell while i still believe
in final destinations, to be pressed up against
the gallery wall, all eyes on me.

instead, the reminder that my body is expendable
and always growing older. it's amorphous in your room,
jelly-like without the steady hand of passion propping
it up, sitting it down, and stuffing things in its mouth.

i tell myself i'm writing odes to overstaying
my welcome— it's more romantic. nobody
wants to read about estrogen anymore.

lucy went as a bluebird for halloween and here
we are, static things. i ask when the train is stopping;
flag down the conductor, i want to get off.

Meg McCarney
you've stopped going to birthday parties

you bite your nails to the beat
of songs on the radio, close your eyes
and wait for the other shoe to drop—
instead, an anvil falls through the ceiling
and lands at your feet.

nobody cares whether you've made it five days
without thinking of the sea, the bridge, the car.
people call to say *i'm sorry*, scarcely getting
the words out before they hang up.

i'm sorry means *that's too bad*, an admission
of the fact that your struggles are those
of an overgrown child, an incompetent adult.

those little sleeping beauties with brushed hair,
they'll never know what it's like to be stripped naked,
to be caught molting, halfway to neurosis,
to be known as the mortifying creature you are—
not someone who throws parties, but somebody
who would leave them twenty minutes in,
the threat of wandering eyes too imminent.

you're entertaining spacemen, airheads, people
who don't know the difference between the ground
and the wall, the one you hit first and the one
you save as a back-up plan.

you can't talk to people like that, let alone trust them—
people who speak of knives as things that stab *the other*,
foreign struggles that could never reach their doorsteps.

you can't trust people who don't spend their lives running—
it's all right there, in the backyard, behind the streetlight, in your chest.

it's only you, in the dark, feeling for the light switch,
just as it will be only you in fifty years, still in that room.

(you've stopped going to birthday parties, continued, stanza break)

there may be people watching, but they're bit parts
in a seventy-year long epic, gentle mouths to kiss
and warm hands to hold but people who,
nonetheless, draw a blank when you ask them
to point to where it hurts.

there's a sink.
there's a razor.
somebody bleeds.
somebody shaves.
you're certain of it now.

lapping up the good times like dogs at a puddle,
you're slaphappy, summertime tipsy. with the psychedelic
furs on and your inhibitions further deadened
by the heat, you leave memories outside to be sun-scorched
by mid-afternoon and pronounced dead by dinner.

it's a future you're not dragging your feet toward,
but the long, winding road that paul sang about—
the alternate route you travel forever, never letting
one another go to bed without stale-breath kisses.

the second half of your life, where you tie off
the loose ends and teach your nervous system how
to sit still, is foam on the back of the throat,
a gentle buzz that never fades away.

you stop picking at the lines in your face, slow
down your breathing. he shuts doors instead of
slamming them, learns to whisper. you're hands-off-your-noses
breathing underwater, staring at each other,

resolute.

Snow Reminds Me There are Wonders I'll Never Control

The silent, static hum of our baby monitor. All our kids have launched into the falling snow outside, looking for something to find. The tips of their gloves pinched between their lips. They weave knee-deep paths in oak and cottonwood, spotting squirrels with withered claws, digging out whatever they've buried. My hands stoke the kettle, drawn to what could burn. I see my bulbous reflection, steel and steam, rust like scars under my eyes. I'm tired. All searches are less what we try to find, more the self we leave behind. Opening the window, the fresh snow scent like cucumber and cabbage. Their knit hats snag in gaggles of thorns, their exhales ring like the sound of swords. Single branches break as their mittens knock off the hoarfrost. I reach out, let snowflakes gather on my hands. They connect arms, like a one-line drawing of their faces, crisscrosses and zigzags like tangled hair tucked behind their ears. What happens to me, happens to them. Last winter, we fell down a drifted ledge holding hands. Today they want to film slow motion videos of cold explosions, so they can watch each crystal ball they fling sparkle with light into separate shards.

- I. He didn't like it when I'd sing- no, singing was *his* thing. I should just wash the dishes and clap the saucers together in time; shatter glasses only when the cymbals aren't working. When the sauce jar'd drop I'd look up to his pointed finger scowl and fall to my hands and knees to lap up the mess, glass shards splintering my tongue. He liked me like that, patella grinding into the linoleum, spitting red.
- II. When I opened the door to the garden after nightfall cockroaches would dance over my bare feet. We grew cacti on HaReshet; pretty, deadly little things. I'd run to him and leap, hoping he'd catch me in his slender arms. If he dropped me I'd lay there until morning, using my teeth to pick needles from my skin.
- III. There was only one way to do things, and that was *his* way. I should sew the holes in the drywall back together with a needle and thread, and hope the jukim don't slip through the cracks. There are things men do and there are ways to fix them, that can only be done when he's gone.

In her palace windows open from one
room into another. Some glass was smoked
by sin. Some was shattered, leaded—not stained
but laced—seams held cracked glass like rain.
Her eyes see through it but she cannot look—
Classrooms haunted by mechanical nuns—
Dry laundries—Broken playrooms. Memory
is her house, littered with blue-dusted guns
and pages from unwritten books. All drains
are blocked. Air is heavy with words in strange
alphabets. She will (someday) learn to read
them. She's certain they're prayers and she needs
to pray for a road out of memories.
She's afraid of all the rooms that remain.

I told the world I didn't love you. Why?

A fear of what comes after flesh and bone.

An oath, an affirmation, and a lie.

A mouth that promised once, now gaping dry.

The night comes in and queers the telephone.

I told the world I didn't love you. Why?

The only word allowed me is Goodbye,

but I can speak three things with that alone:

an oath, an affirmation, and a lie.

This mouth malfunctions, set to falsify;

my other mouth's a monster I disown.

I told the world I didn't love you. Why?

Saint Apollonia sings a lullaby,

a shattered song through shattered lips. A moan,

an oath, an affirmation, and a lie.

The rubble of my promise chokes a cry.

Let all my mouths from all my heads be torn.

I told the world I didn't love you. Why?

An oath, an affirmation, and a lie.

Most of the city lies asleep.

A lone motorcycle
cries down the empty street.
Frantic dogs bark in the cold,
and soft footsteps shuffle
to the garbage bins.

I press my thumb to my neck
to feel the dark blood
rush through the wavering pipe,
to remind myself
I am still alive.

Palaces P.

Boiling Water

Previously published with FILTH Lit Mag

i couldn't be an actress, anymore;
touching all of those feelings, all of the time,
i felt too raw
that's the reason i used to avoid your eyes
and i cover my mouth, clench the other hand, when i abruptly recite
A Philosophical Enquiry Into
the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful

i have poems made up of
unused titles about you

I like to eat my shadow. I like
to stick my hand out the window and choke
the first bird that flies by until it turns flimsy
in my fist, melts dead to the ground. I like birds.
I steal my ancestors' ghosts from clotheslines
and wave them as if they're sudden flags. I don't
remember why. I invent yet another universe
where I am hunted to great applause. I stand
in a mirror to feel both my mouths
fail. Someone else dies and it must be
a poem. Maybe with blood. Maybe
screams. Maybe a mother and child
at a dining table, and the child is wailing,
but you never see their hands. I like to stand
outside my body and set her on fire. I like to watch
the audience's mouths split open to howl. I wonder
if the dead know we are writing about them.
I wonder if the missing girl wanted
to be a symbol. I worry that to be a poet
is to sit and wait for beautiful things
to die. To exploit distance. To steal
flight. To wring murder into myth, to retell it—

Morgan Ridgway
At My College They Call it Swooping

The lights are green the checkered floor stuck
to my shoes and I have this cup of something
that someone gave me to have a good time
and I was with some people from my floor
all of us barely eighteen bodies just bump and grind
sticky and wet and sweat starts coming off
the ceiling so somebody opens a window
and I go sit on the bench by the fresh air
when you see me there all green and wet
and your slick hands make it to my thighs
and you're breathing deep in my ear
about how you don't have a roommate
so I pick up my shivering spine and move
with you through the haze your hands find
my ass clunky in the spotlight of the lamp
on your desk and you keep biting my lip
like you're trying to draw blood and I tell
you not to bruise my neck but you don't listen
because you're just in heat teeth choking
on flesh so you enter me instead in the heavy
dark sharp and twisted you're swallowing
sounds like they do in the movies because the walls
are thin but I just thank god for my hips to guide
your seesaw frame, all shoulder, no hip,
your breath is dry and muzzled and I am still slick
and green in this mudslide wanting to be washed
clean wanting somebody's fingers wanting past
midnight when I'll wake up still breathing
with his body snoring in the daylight
rabid sun on my back.

Lynne Schmidt
Ash Wednesday
After @JAllen_Town's tweet

What better way
To remind us that we all return to dust
than to pack us into pews
masks over our faces
heads bowed in prayer.

What better way
than to pray for forgiveness of our sins,
to mourn an alleged martyr who manages
to never come back and save us?

What better way
than to preach about the sanctity of life
while people are gasping for air,
freezing to death, or dying in their cars while trying to keep warm.

What better way
than to sprinkle ashes on our faces
as we breathe the collective air
that will likely cause
our lungs to die out like a flame.

Because it is a long post
I skim the words and find the important pieces

It is with a heavy heart....

We have lost....

I look at the picture, and my heart seizes.
He lost his dog, how tragic.

I read the post again,
and again,
still grieving for the loss of the canine,
of the best friend he adopted as he ran down the street, unleashed.

I think of the last time I saw him,
the selfies I'd taken while the dog licked my face.
The photos I'd taken of him and his dog,
the way they looked at each other with unmasked love.

I open my phone to text
to say I'm so sorry for your loss.
It takes me so fucking long to actually read,
to actually process the post,
that tells me
my friend has died
and his dog survived.

During Tuesday visitation,
my father takes his daughters
to a church playground.

There is a merry go round
a statue praying for the unborn children lost to abortion
and a tree with a bed of flowers.

I pluck the red tulip because it is pretty,
and I want to give it to our mother so she
knows we survived when we come home.

My father sees this,
eyes instantly narrow as a hunter's
ready to shoot an arrow through a doe.

He screams in my face,
hot saliva landing on my cheeks.
which I don't wipe my face until he is out of view.

He demands I put it back,
 put it back
 put it back.

I dig a hole beside where the stem broke,
my sister kneels beside me, helpful hands in the dirt,

She whispers says even if we replant,
the flower is still dead.

Take your first breath and always remember who gifted you life. Keep track of the birth certificate. Make note of your surname. Middle name, too. Both hand-picked, with care. Etched on the cream parchment cardstock with care. You are one of us. Think like us. Not them. Talk like us. Not them. Grow with us. To be us. Not them. No other way. Don't ever forget it. Store the birth certificate in safe quarters. Save quarters, nickels too. Coins count. Customers prefer quarters to pennies. Children prefer pennies for fountains. This is important information. Take note. You will work the store one day. Stack coins in columns. Columns become towers. Towers rise more often than they fall. Wake early, before sunrise. Doing so minimizes the risks of falls. Watch always, before others trip you. Trips lead to falls. Trips come in many forms. Shapes too. But not all shapes are proper. The thinner the better. We do not take well to curved edges. Keep counting. Not only coins. Count calories, too. Be watchful for curves and curved edges. Calories also rise more often than they fall. More quickly, too. Say goodbye with conviction. No butter. No bread. No baked goods. Don't be blue. Baked chicken will do. Broiled fish, too. Bathe daily. Don't forget to breathe. In, not out. Always. Breathe deeply. Live each day deeply - to the fullest and always say thank you. Remember who gifted you life. Don't forget to thank them. Us.

When places move through my spine
they leave behind sounds, snaking so
precisely, leave behind spaces scaling
in skins unbuttoned, unbound. I listen
to these places often in a silent echo
of deaths, ears pressed to the coffin
of my body, its instrument awakening
a rogue desire of hesitant hymns, her
chorus a memory of places atrophied
inside unbuckled threads of minuses
I bury my places, each time I am born

Joe Sonnenblick
A Mint Left on the Pillow

Not a cure, more of a ritual
She's got the curve of the moon from the ribcage to the thigh
Serotonin levels off,
Birds dropping down the tree branch by branch
Leaves and blood,
A final guffaw and twitch.
Sitting patiently, waiting for the newness,
The change,
Thoughts not concurrent
Let me sleep
Shit mountain
Thinking of Orlovsky, Giorno, Di Prima,
Skyward.
Come to think of it that bird was more than just another of the unlucky knocking on the door,
It was a one-way conversation in a Cul De Sac
To be had over and over again
Till you are the one who speaks,
Hoping someone else will listen/

Joe Sonnenblick
You Like my Costume?

Bought and sold at the same time
I could be land,
An island unto myself
Belief in a speeding train that you have no control over
The Switch, the brakeman, the geography of the track,
The trouble with you is that you aren't me
We may share bodies,
A bed... Split the checks
What of the representation?
I'm in a battle
There are no soldiers, and there might not even be enemies,
Just love and a sense of self sabotage.
Per request of the darkest nether regions
We are shutting the ride,
We are becoming a monster
One that you will question
One that you will loathe,
Then and only then will the war be won
It's not for you to understand,
Just live through/with.

the last time
I bent over to kiss you good-bye
you held on
nestled into the downy hollow of your cheek
we swayed

your gesture stilled me

what words can you wrap around
the dying
we never talked about your leaving
you and I

this morning I see orange remnants
strewn across parched green
in my backyard

the rabbits have dug under the mesh fence
we put up together
they got in under the corner post

I want to call
and tell you this
about the rabbits
and the carrot clusters
etched against first light
how straw-burnt the grass is

it's a last minute decision
to pay a visit
there are no markings
but I know where you lie

I have no flowers
no hat, no gloves
I am not prepared

I sit on frosted turf
knees close to chest
tell you that I miss our thrift store jaunts
that last week I found six dessert plates
to match your yellow set
as well as two brass candlesticks
labeled "*sixties vintage*" —
our era of mini skirts
black liquid eyeliner

I tell you your neighbour
sold her house
and is going to move in
with her daughter
I tell you that we are doing okay down here

I miss your unsolicited advice
your need to prove you are right
your stubborn insistence
on cooking nightly for the courtyard quartet
playing outside our room in Mazetland
because they are hungry you'd say

such curious contradictions
in each of us

limbs cramped
I struggle to rise

(Benches, continued, stanza break)

why are there no benches
for those who wish to visit the departed
for those who wish to linger

The broken symmetries
of the night...
You move,
I move.

You were in the green hill,
chatting with clouds;
I kept a bar open,
wrote you a ditty.

There are little rainings
everywhere tonight.
They slip down into the graves
across the street. It sets the mood.

But I need to get out,
walk the block,
shake this umbilical glass,
join a blind fog.

The moon threatens
to escape its sweater
of noctilucent cloud,
but we're not looking.

The green night
draws a little farther in.

I'm feeling it -
Your face in the black glass,
your face over the wine pool,
your face that drifts away
from my reach
in buttons of smoke...

I'm feeling it -
The wallpaper crawls away,
the red chair moves its tongue,
the green night closes.
It's a bad intuition,
a javelin of thought,
that maybe it's less than OK.

Your face shrugs the black glass,
your face escapes the wine pool,
your face keeps drifting away
in glencairns of Longrow,
in pyramids of regret.

I close the windows
against the electric moon
as language pries me open,
as the wallpaper crawls,
& your face won't stop
drifting away.

Kate Sweeney
I never told you why I was afraid of the dark
CW: Sexual abuse

The inside of my first room was pale yellow.
Butter, he called it. The rugs, the walls,
and on certain weeks the sheets.
The bed was too tall to get on by myself.
I spent most nights sleeping on the floor next to the dog.

I once told my dad he barely knew me
because he couldn't remember how I took my coffee.
I think I saw it in a movie. How much has been
ruined on the bargain that people are this kind
of dimensionless: I'm allergic to saffron.
I gave birth on the side of the road. The last
time I saw you, you needed to cut your nails.
I wonder what we know of each other.

I've been thinking about the rifles
he kept under my bed when I was a child.
All of that violence butted up against the sincerity
of Strawberry Shortcake sleeping bags.
He hunted for sport. There's a vacuum of tragedy
inside every edgy laugh, every drunken black out,
every near rape. How that guy choked me
for a little too long after his orgasm ended.
It's almost funny now, more often than not.

In a dream you saw a way to survive, and you were full of joy

You drive me away from the swamps of Alachua
past land where nothing seems to grow. Park along
the pavilion in town, tell me the colonizers here

were treacherous, that I shouldn't be fooled by aesthetics.
Tankers howl in the distance. We live in a small lavender house
tucked down an alley, the yard brims with Buddha's.

I'm convinced that home is not a place we can name. yet,
when I lay down to engage with my heart, you are there.
We only dare mention the second arrow when you feed me

pieces of broken shell from bowls of found obsidian.
My chest cracks open, birthing a small amphibian
that slides down my torso growing with unearthly speed

until it bursts from my xyphoid process, pelvis, perineum.
The arch of my foot. The sunlight in California is what is called
cinematic, might be, what it takes a lemon to move from green

to yellow, fall off its branch, compress its fractured body
back to root. Heal. But for years the swallows didn't return.
The mission stayed empty. I take pictures of you taking pictures of bells

that don't ring. You spend hours teaching me
to tie knots in the stems of cherries with only my tongue,
reclaiming my body from its own tortured history.

She spent countless hours
in dark recesses without sunlight, surrounded
by red and black walls and tables, threaded
needles, painfully
sharp scissors, fabric
that showed up,
magically, under the whirring
of her sewing machine. Her right foot
pedalled fast and slow. I'd stand
beside her and watch her, not
to watch what she was doing, but
to watch her. I wondered how
she could focus through tear-stained cheeks,
red, puffy eyes. I'd stand
beside her. Sometimes I spoke
strings of words stitched awkwardly into
confusing patterns meant
to bring a smile, meant
to say she wasn't alone. Sometimes
she'd stop, turn off the lights; she'd tell me
to sit on her lap
and we'd rock, melt into each other,
listen to each other's heartbeats,
and breathe through the flood
we created
by choosing to live.

Danielle Wong

She is a Broken Record

(Processing Two Facts: One Near Past and One Distant)

I saw a firetruck today driving with its lights on, sirens blaring, passed all the cars and went to the highway. Is he okay? Of course, he's home. It's not him. School was good. I saw a firetruck today driving with its lights on, sirens blaring, passed all the cars and went to the highway. Is he okay? Of course, he's home. It's not him. We did a lot of reading. I saw a firetruck today driving with its lights on, sirens blaring, passed all the cars and went to the highway. Is he okay? Of course, he's home. It's not him. My friend shared his chocolate with me. I saw a firetruck today driving with its lights on, sirens blaring, passed all the cars and went to the highway. Is he okay? Of course, he's home. It's not him. I wish someone could have picked me up from school today. I was tired. I saw a firetruck today driving and I know I have told you this a few times now in the past three minutes while I tried to remember what else happened in my day. I saw a firetruck today driving. I promise I will try to make this the last time I say this during dinner, but there are no guarantees. I saw a firetruck today driving with its lights on, sirens blaring, passed all the cars and went to the highway. I know he's okay because he is sitting right there in front of me. Still, I worry because I saw him the first time, years ago. I saw a firetruck today driving and its lights were on and the sirens blared, and I have yet to understand how he can make those sounds and how he can fall. I saw a firetruck today driving with its lights on, sirens loud, and not stop moving passed all the cars and I saw a firetruck today driving, and the firemen came in our house and mom was heartbroken because the firemen didn't know her I mean he didn't know her, but she's mom. I saw a firetruck today driving and I'd be stuck with this thought even if that never happened because I saw a firetruck today driving and they are fascinating, driving with their lights on, sirens blaring.

when you point at yourself where is it you are?

your knee - absurd

your shoulder -absurd

your head - might be - but don't feel like
right

you tap your sternum - closer

getting warmer

ah! - your heart - right?

well no - more in the centre

near the top of your sternum

close your eyes - sink through it

behind it (you / me) - come back! - wait for me!

oscillate through it - closer

does it move - slightly - like an unborn child's heartbeat?

maybe, maybe

look in the mirror - point at me / you

pointing at me / you

doesn't help a lot - does it?

hey you! - what me?

now, who replied - suddenly

being you - point to that spot

that momentarily is you

before it shamelessly diffuses

confuses you

but

why should you confuse you?

what is the point in hiding

the locus of you from you?

maybe it / you do not exist

in a - 'here i am' - sort of way

ever thought if that?

hey you! i'm talking to you

come back here - - -

now!

fish scales, dark and light, silvering
the scour on the marbling of time;
thoughts from before my mother became
my late mother, and the long years
when the remembering was blank;
but now, peppered, a mixture of good and bad,
of light and dark, of smiles and tears,
that were spilled and were mopped up.

for now, all one can say is sorry,
more to one's self than to any diviner
of inner thoughts who might twig
that "mum - it's late" is not an admonishment
but an apology.

i am tapping around the room with a white stick.
all the windows have fallen out and are bricked up.
every aspect of poetry fell out and cannot return.
if i am to write anything now, where is my pen?
what can shed light on the enigma of sightlessness?
what pulse can come where no heart is?
newness alone must not be called poetry;
if anyone at all calls!
it might be orphaned at birth and misplaced.
their minds might be event horizons,
might deny the parallel word of verse,
might insist that the mirror reflects what isn't there.
that a poem's virgin birth upon the detonation of the old
will be an alien civilisation with a sixth sense called nonsense.
the bricked windows will be doubly dumb.
the voice in the wilderness will be just that;
a wildness beyond understanding.

FICTION

We came from New York on a day trip. I wasn't much past twenty so we hadn't heard of any Internet yet, our planning confined to shuffling through maps at the gas station where Dave worked.

Plymouth Rock wasn't on our itinerary, but the sign said only twenty miles, so we figured what the hell. If we were from Boston traveling the other way we surely would have taken a peek at the Statue of Liberty or Empire State Building, no matter our intended task.

Trees framed a portico overlooking the bay. Not so many people, just one group of tourists that I can remember. I had expected more. Dave parked and we walked towards the water wondering.

I looked out to the horizon and then drew my vision nearer hunting for a gigantic landmark exploding from the water's surface. By the time we reached the Roman architecture, I still didn't see it. How could I miss it? The Pilgrims hadn't.

"Here it is," Dave said standing between two columns and pointing down.

Hesitant, I looked down and there it was, caged in, like it might run away.

"Is that it?" I asked.

"That's what it says."

"I thought this was something else," I said, gesturing to our enclosure. "I never dreamed ... well, I guess this is all that's left of it."

"What do you mean?"

"This is no landmark," I said. "It's a sliver. It's like they built a palace for a flea. Who would see this and think it worth remembering?"

"Tourists."

"No, no, no," I said. "I mean back then. You're telling me the Pilgrims landed and gave this stone more thought than any other?"

"What are you, some kind of radical?" Dave asked.

I shook my head. "Do you think the fence is to keep someone from stealing it? I mean, I feel like I could hop down there, hoist it over my shoulder, and be on my way."

“It’s a lot heavier than it looks.”

“Sure. But to cage it like this. I feel bad for it.”

“It’s a rock.”

“It’s emasculating,” I said. “They put all ...” I waved my arms struggling for the right word. “*this* around it to celebrate it, but it’s nothing more than a lion at the zoo. And it ain’t no lion. C’mon, let’s go.”

“Already?” Dave asked.

“Nothing to see here,” I said.

I was already behind, but Mom had called begging me to pick up Fisherman's Friend cough drops for her while I was out. The cough drops that suck your sinuses from every orifice and leave you feeling like you'd just sat down with a spoon and a jar of Vicks VapoRub.

I told her sure, she's older and compromised, so how could I not, but she was so desperate about it, clearly the only reason for her call, that I wound up resenting her request.

It was windy and raining like hell. I had completed my own errands and was thrilled to park in the space directly in front of Rite Aid's entrance. I stiffened my hand in salute over my glasses to block the rain and trotted inside, praying for a short line.

I had on new sneakers and the rain made me conspicuously squeaky. Five steps inside a lady looked at me as though I had just shit on her front lawn. I dropped my head, hooked hard right down the next aisle, empty, and then veered left towards pharmaceuticals at the back of the store. An employee packed goods in the middle of the aisle.

He appeared angry. At me.

I glanced down at my shoes, squeaking away with the persistence of a Manhattan window-cleaner, the one just outside your window, just beyond your desk. I glanced at the employee using my best apologetic expression, yet his eyes glared out of all proportion to my crime.

Then I saw his mask and my hand went reflexively to my mouth.

"I forgot it," I said. "I'm so sorry." Stopping, I turned to go back towards the exit.

"No problem," the employee said, instantly warm now that he knew I was just forgetful and not making any larger point. "Happens all the time."

I spun and covered my mouth with my hand as I spoke (as if this would help prevent germs coming or going), "I was wondering why everybody seemed so angry with me."

"Not a problem," he repeated.

I grabbed my mask from the car and had to chuckle at how my rush had caused further delay. I put the mask on and then paused, tempted to start it up, drive directly home, and phone Mom to tell her that I had forgotten all about the cough drops. Had she even asked me how I was?

I couldn't do it. Mom's cough was bad, and she probably shouldn't go to the store herself. (And she had asked me how I was doing, I remember now!) There was one person ahead of me in line, but the cashier called for back-up help, so I was out of there in five minutes.

I co-own a yellow typewriter in Berlin. Sometimes it's mine and sometimes it's hers. Sometimes our moons align when I wake up before dawn. But I no longer live in Berlin. I would be lying if I said I did. I watch her world from the troughs.

I remember buying the typewriter with her from an antique dealer in Mauerpark. Back when our Sundays were determined by tram rides and the weather. We'd skip the flea market if it was raining, taking shelter in a nearby café where she'd feast on anything that reminded her of home—chipotle avocado sandwiches and strawberry smoothies—while I had a cup of black coffee. If it was sunny, we'd ditch the M1 altogether and ride her tandem bike to the park. It was sunny that day. My parsimonious nature led her to split the cost. I wasn't sure if she wanted to own the typewriter, to use its letters with umlauts and hear its clickity-clack-clickity-clack at all hours of the day.

It's spectacular, she had said, taking her cat-shaped wallet out immediately after I showed it to her. It must have been a child's, it fit right inside her bike basket. We pedaled all the way back to our quiet streets of Pankow.

She always argued we didn't live in Pankow.

It's Niederschönhausen, she'd say with her hands in the air.

Technically we live right on the cusp, I'd reply, leaving her to stare out the balcony in silence. I never knew if it was the nature she admired or the occasional bikers. If she eavesdropped or created stories of the passersby. Sometimes I thought she simply watched the cobblestone streets, waiting for something to unfold, as if the stones would one day rise.

She was a Pisces-Aries cusp. She blamed everything on her impulsivity, her stubbornness. As much as she loved spontaneity, she stuck to certain routines. She begged to go to KitKat on Mondays when she knew only tourists were around *just in case*. She'd fake flat Canadian accents and complain about shops being closed on Sundays to unsuspecting club-goers.

When we finally made it home that Sunday, passing the crumbling palace overgrown with vines, we discovered the typewriter didn't work. We decided to call a repair shop but neither of us spoke decent German. She wanted to wait until her friend, a bartender from a Western village I've long forgotten the name of, could come with us to the shop. It was all the way in Charlottenburg anyway.

Our Berlin was never Bowie's Schöneberg. We had the East. We partied in Friedrichshain and saw foxes in the moonlight. We ran through oncoming traffic on the bare tree-lined roads by Treptower

Park and watched sunsets from Elsenbrücke. She dreamt of one day writing all of these details down in a notebook, somewhere, someday.

Berlin was brunches in Prenzlauerberg when she forced me to come with her to a French grocer's (*excusez-moi*, an *épicerie*) to buy her favorite pistachio cream. She'd eat it right out of the jar as we strolled underneath the tenements. Our nights took us to Wedding, when we decided Kreuzberg was oversaturated with boys in Carhartt beanies and shipping crate beds. I told her I slept on one too, but she shook her head, *But you're different*.

We met the bartender at one of these gallery openings. The posters announced "cutting edge" art. I was only ever half-amused at these installations. He had the haircut of an actor I had once seen and a penchant for inviting himself into our plans. She let him into our world.

He greeted us with kisses. He didn't say goodbye. He said *ciao*. He forced me to read play synopses out loud in German as she stood there laughing. He placed his head on her lap on the train when he felt tired. I tried to ignore him. I'd close my eyes but then it would be our turn to get off.

Those days were fulfilling, I'll have to admit that much as true. Creatively and spiritually. We leapt from theatre production to film screening, but I couldn't stay awake. Dreams kept crawling up to me in the darkness of cinemas and the scent of stale popcorn wouldn't come off my clothes.

He had grown out of clubbing; he had parted from parties and preferred the company of melted wax candles in all-night cafés. So, we stopped going to KitKat, even on Saturdays. Trading disco bizarre for conversation. That night we had gone to one I had always tried to take her to. She always had an excuse. But to his request, we rushed out the door right away.

He was sitting on the café balcony that only fit two chairs. So she sat on the ledge until a waiter came up to warn her that over five people had fallen off that year. Her eyes widened but our bartender laughed and said it was fine. It was only two-stories, she would break her leg at most.

The extensive menu riddled and confused her. Her mimosa familiarity had been replaced with old-world cocktails and cheese plates. She still claimed she was vegan even though I knew the imported pistachio cream contained milk.

He ordered her an Irish coffee even though she loathed coffee, *a bitter drink for bitter people*, and it contained cream. She drank it willingly as I smoked a cigarette.

When will you learn to roll your own? he asked me, even though I had told him I only smoked on occasion. I wasn't giving into corporations any more than him and his pouches of Lucky Strike tobacco.

She realized we were finally in the West and regretted not bringing along the typewriter.

We could have had it fixed in the morning, she said, sulking.

Embrace modernity, he said. To him, our world was a shrug.

I left with an apology and haven't spoken to either of them since. I kept to myself and teetered across Bornholmer Straße, East and West, watching regional trains come and go. They were bound for the countryside, for Poland. Berlin was only a leg in their long trips. Cherry blossoms had begun to fall around me, and that's when I knew Berlin had no place for me anymore.

I was searching for my loneliness, but the city had been reflecting it the entire time. I was only beginning to see it. I couldn't bear it much longer. I stuck a cherry blossom in-between a book of Rilke and returned to California.

I explained to everyone why I didn't have many belongings, why I half owned everything I had.

It's all in Berlin, I'd tell them when they asked.

I didn't know if this meant I co-owned my heart, but I knew the Rilke and the cherry blossom petal were mine. I thought of *her* and if she ever got our yellow typewriter repaired. If she and the bartender were still friends, if not lovers, and if she even kept the typewriter at all.

I pictured it, all decrepit and abandoned, sitting at the end of our block.

Jane won't miss you, she must have told it before setting it out in the cold.

I drank a strawberry smoothie under the strawberry moon. Everything was ending, yet there I stood. I watched the shadows of the trees. At least I had that.

The room is sterile and impersonal, no cards or flowers clash with the gleaming tiles. Against the thick, starched sheets, she is delicate, skin translucent. Monitors compete with the oxygen tank for which can make the most noise.

The door creaks. A visitor. It has been awhile since anyone has come. Fatigued from bedside vigils, her family longs for the day her will would be read.

There is a lilt to his step. The dark gloom that she had seen around him in the past is lighter and more cheerful today. It reminds her of gray storm clouds. The hard plastic chair is dragged across the floor and set beside her; the piercing noise of rubber sliding across polished tile rings in her ears. He wears dark ripped jeans paired with a black hoodie; a Yankees' baseball cap obscures his face. She feels naked in her hospital gown. She has not seen him in a long time and, yet, as she has grown older he has not changed.

“You came.” She clears her throat three times before wheezing through a cough.

His face holds a lazy grin. “You knew I had to come.” His cold breath frosts her cheeks as he grips her hand.

The beeping slows and blood skitters away from her fingertips, desperate to keep the heart pumping.

Wintry eyes flit along the wrinkles of her face and frigid, nimble fingers dance across the overly pronounced veins in her wrist.

Her shoulders sag and her weary gaze skips along his defined face. He is exquisite. He is her favorite among close friends. She had stopped pondering why he chose to get to know her. They flirted and promised endless days of freedom, but the relationship had never truly turned physical.

“Is dying as exciting as being born?” She wants reassurance that there is an afterlife, that all those hours in church being told of Heaven and Hell were not wasted.

“You tell me? You’re dying. Is it exciting?” He has an inflection in his voice that alludes to his oodles of knowledge.

“It’s long and slow and, frankly, boring.” She looks toward the small window in the door. Nurses and doctors rush to save lives. “You know me; I’m always impatient to get to the next great adventure.”

They laugh softly, reminisce about their first meeting in which he had stumbled upon her adrenaline-crazed form lying in a ditch, her body turned at all the wrong angles.

He tilts her chin back toward him.

“There is nothing becoming about dying, I’ve told you that before.” He rubs circles on her palm. “If you’re asking if there is a beyond, I hope that the church tithes are refundable.”

Tears fall.

“I always hate that people try to convince others that there is a place that saves your soul if they only follow this religion or another.” His hearty laughs fill the space between them. “There is nothing. You exist and then you don’t.”

“I won’t see you.” She did not want to be alone in the nothingness.

“I suppose you could think of it as seeing me all the time.” He has a knack for being blunt and, today, she enjoys it.

“People are not kind to the sick.” Her hourglass on life is running low. “Do they get punished?”

“Life moves on.” Death licks his lips. His smile turns wicked.

He sat on the rusted park bench. His crisp pants crinkled at his waist and disdain flittered across his face. The dust settled; his linen suit now had pinstripes. The Rolex ticked away the seconds until Mark would have to return to his office and the phone buzzed angrily in his front pocket, scolding him for not working through his lunch break. He was a very important man who had better things to do than sit and gaze at an algae-infested pond plagued with mosquito larva. The fish would be happy. His security unit stood behind him. The bodyguards' eyes stalked the housewives who shrilly complained about their lackadaisical husbands. The men looked far too eager to use the guns hidden by their jackets. Mark glanced at his watch; she was late.

He sneered at a passing family, their pace quickened and the baby in the stroller gurgled. Happiness always vexed Mark. Maybe it was because he was raised by nannies while his equally important parents jetted to fashion shows and enjoyed their infidelities. Something about the naivety of joy made his gut churn. He would not have kids. Children needed love and kindness. The family stopped; their path blocked by a person whose entire personality was defined by the color yellow. Mark stared at the woman who occupied the baby.

She cooed at the child and smiled appraisingly at the parents. Her teeth gleamed and her eyes twinkled with happiness. Mark's mood brightened as she made her way over toward him. She wore a sunflower-print dress, her auburn hair messily pulled into a low bun, and a floppy, cream-colored hat shaded her flushed cheeks.

"Lovely couple, adorable child. Did you see his little button nose?" She plopped onto his lap; her hands wove into his neatly styled hair. She giggled at his grimace. Mark adjusted her so that her legs dangled over his. "I want one."

"What?" The always-put-together Mark was a flustered mess when she was with him.

"A baby." She babbled.

Her smile grew when a dusty red spread across his cheeks. Mark would give her anything, even if it meant going against his promise. His hand drew small circles on her creamy thighs. She would glow, pregnant with his child. His other hand crawled up to squeeze her plushy stomach. Her laughter pierced the air.

"Stop! You know I'm ticklish there." She nuzzled her face into his shoulder, her breath wisped around his throat.

“After the wedding I’ll make sure you get everything your heart desires.” He felt her puckered lips lightly skim his neck. Her lipstick would stain his bleached shirt, leaving her mark.

“I have to get back to work. Will you pick me up afterward?”

She leaned away from him. Her big doe eyes widened slightly as she peeked at him through her lashes.

“Always.”

His chest rumbled and he felt the surge of his possessiveness for the woman in his arms. She stepped away from him and her hips swayed as she drifted off.

“Bye, lover boy.”

“Goodbye, Sunshine.”

Mark looked up at the sky, his eyes blurred slightly, and pain seeped into his chest. When he looked down, he was no longer sitting in the park. In front of him was a large grave marker, *Sunshine* etched neatly in the stone. Empty bottles of whiskey littered overgrown grass at his feet. His suit was crumpled and covered in stains. He was tired. She had been gone for a little over a year, yet she still plagued his dreams.

“I’m sorry.” He had gotten attached and his emotions had all gone awry, his thoughts muddled.

In the car at the entrance of the graveyard, a little boy with auburn hair was startled awake by a gunshot.

You want to give her milk, but you read somewhere that milk is bad for cats, and it makes you wonder how many lies that kill are hidden in children's books and Disney films. The cat: a sweet one, tortoiseshell-back and liquid eyes. ('Hold out your hand, let her come to you. Softly now.') It's just you and her in the flat, just the two of you dancing through dust mote beams of sunlight and sometimes, she opens her mouth and cries. She is hungry and you want to give her milk, but you can't, and she would not be able to touch it anyway. (She doesn't touch anything you give her.) Does she have a name? You lie down in front of her, chin on the carpet until you are nose to pink-shivering nose and ask, politely. She sneezes, tortoiseshell-back and liquid eyes and all. Her name is gone. (The dust is still dancing.) You want to give her—No. Her tail flicks and your fingers reach for silky fur in vain. She yawns, shivering from your touch. You join her, trying to show sharp teeth and an abrasive tongue, but your mouth is sad and soft all over. You are still on the floor when the door opens. Boots step through your stomach and still you feel nothing. Your arms stretch out wide, and those feet crush your hands, your collarbones, without ever touching you. A plate of chunky meat for the cat—of course, not milk. ('What's this? I told you, she can't have—' Then, a scream.) A tortoiseshell head bumps gratefully against fingers dripping with sadness and receives an absent-minded scratch in return. Later, between moon-soaked sheets, you curl up next to the cat and the one you love, too afraid to close your eyes. (You will disappear if you close your eyes, you are certain.) The cat is safe. The cat dreams, licking her lips. On your other side, tears, and a mouth you know, as soft as yours. Your heart aches. You want to give her— There's a bowl on the counter, gathering dust like a mausoleum, and something has been curdling in it for weeks. You want— But the cruellest lie is this: A princess can be woken with a kiss.

I'm trying to get deep.

"Everything with you is on the surface." He rolls his eyes. "You wouldn't understand. This story's not all sunshine and happy endings."

He scrapes away little channels of sand creeping over the towel's edge, shakes and straightens the edges. Goes back to his novel.

I only asked if it was a good book.

It's hot. Skin is slimy, sticky with sunscreen and sweat. Heat radiates into my core. I melt like marshmallow. Flow like freedom. Closing my eyes, I could deliquesce into sand, seep into each grain, travel down the shore, the sea, and into forever. But he'd complain about mess, stench of burning skin, and the obligations of interviews and paperwork.

"Yes, she applied sunscreen, but I cannot say if she reapplied within a two-hour time frame. I was immersed in a quality literary experience. Liability obviously rests with the sunscreen production company. When I looked up, she'd dissolved and all I found was her silver earrings and phone."

So, I stay solid. My phone is running out of charge. Glare makes the screen more a reflection than my usual scroll of messages and memes. Rolling onto my back, I flick out sand, feel his disapproval burrowing into my cheek. I look straight up instead. Sky is a dome of cloudless cornflower, but I know the ocean is deep deep blue. Trying hard to get deep, I decide I should dive. Into the deep.

Beyond the crowds, the waves, beyond his eyes, I swim my strong stroke. Inhale my last and plunge through wet turquoise skin. Down, down, I dive into a dark that sunlight cannot find. Breath clenches like a fist inside my lungs but I force my air-filled head to submerge. It's trying to bob up like a grinning rubber duckie. But I'm pushing down, sinking yellow, drowning disdain.

I'm trying to get deep.

He says I focus only on the superficial. But now, a cold that only the deep owns, whistles into goosebump flesh, bubbling along my spine, haunting nostrils, and ears like whale song. I writhe. Beat my stupid head into blue. Take me. Take me down. Splayed arms, kicking feet, so desperate to propel descent, fashion me into a mad Muppet-armed intruder of the depths. But deep repels me. Silence doesn't want me here. And far below, the judging eye of metal-coloured fish, sneering sea monsters, mocks my hopeless dive. They stare or shake their ugly tentacled heads, warning me in lip-smacking muffled words. *This place is not for you, surface dweller.* Even the bottom of the ocean rejects me.

I never make it to the deep.

So, I burst back into air; breathless, blinded by sunlight. There is nothing left but everything. I swim back to shore, wade heavy-legged onto wet sand, and then lay panting, bereft, beside him. He complains I've dripped ocean and tears over his paperback. Breathing hard, soaking sun, I watch clouds drift across the blue then furrow in his deep deep brow.

Yvette Naden
Folie à deux
CW: Domestic abuse

One hand to the mirror, as if placating the glass for the intrusion, you carefully prod the bruise on your cheek. Briefly, you wonder if you can truly cover it up with a mere smattering of Foundation. Your hand pauses, gently probing the purpled skin. It is a Coat of Arms, you realise. A Crest. A Crest crafted of darkened lilac hues, blooming like an oxbow lake over your freckles.

Perhaps your freckles are the reason he did this. After all, you've never liked them either.

The mirror offers you a skeleton girl with sunken cheekbones crowned by sallow hair. Dishwater red if you're not mistaken. As if someone has poured raspberry jelly down the sink. Looking down, you spit blood into a tissue. It isn't so bad, you tell yourself.

The bruise is your symbol. Your badge of honour.

No, you realise as you hear him storming through the kitchen, screaming your name. It is evidence. It is a reminder; it is the click of your phone as it tells you to visit a friend, an enemy, your Mother, anyone. Anyone at all.

Ducking your head, you reach for the hoodie which hangs in blue on the back of the bathroom door. You slip it over your head.

There is no honour in this. No medal will be given if you make it through the next ten years. You cannot dodge. You cannot move.

You tiptoe over the carpet, treading on blown glass.

Your thoughts bunch like an over-crowded locomotive at a living museum. You smile. The Black Country Museum. The day he took your hand and led you around each wonder, a smile on his face. A smile wide enough to match the new cut on your neck from where the plate smashed the night before. Now, it is covered with a butterfly plaster. Somehow, you can still see it. Skin peeling like candle wax, as if trying to wave.

He's moving downstairs. Pacing across the kitchen. You hear him, each step like a rogue pendulum swinging into the side of your skull. Inside, your organs shiver, seem to rattle your bones. Your entire body is a sheet on the washing line, torn by the wind. Eagerly, you prod the bruise again. Pain blooms. A reminder. A stark, bright purple and black reminder.

You think of your wardrobe, where your clothes are ripped at the seams. Where your summer dress is scrunched at the back, resting languidly on a coat hanger. It is still splattered with mud from where

you fell. Where he pushed you. You can't remove it yet. You can't put it in the wash. You can't. But there is something you can do.

At first, you balk at the prospect. You stare at the ghoul in the mirror, wishing your reflection would reach out its hand and pull you into the glass. The bruise on your cheek rears its head. You know what you must do.

"Where the hell is dinner? Is the oven on? I told you to get me a beer hours ago." You hear him shrieking from the kitchen table. You wait. Only for a few seconds. But you wait them out.

"Forget it. I'm heading out. Useless," he's shouting. A moment later, the door slams. You are alone.

In front of you, the mirror shimmers, illuminating your purpled cheeks. His hand, behind you. His ghostly knuckles crack against your jaw. No, you realise. You are never alone.

Half-stumbling, you fumble for the bathroom door. Emerge onto the landing, where the salted caramel carpet is almost slippery beneath your toes. You manage to make it to the wardrobe, where you yank out a suitcase. You packed it two months ago, the third time you decided you wanted to leave. It has remained packed ever since, sitting in the dark. Slowly, you lift it out of the blackness. It is surprisingly light, and it is Atlantic blue – almost anthracite. Plain, no stickers. Your sister is the one who loves coating objects in cat and rainbow stickers. The wheels are cleaned; it has never been used before.

Snagging a coat from the edge of the bed, you begin to lug the suitcase downstairs. Your heart jostles against your lungs, your ribcage, waiting for him to return with his face flushed from beer and his fists hungry for your skin. When the kitchen remains empty, you rush to the back door.

You do not bother to close it behind you.

The outdoors hits you like a feather – soft but crammed with textures. The summer breeze seems to whistle through your ears. A ring of bells, trying to blind you. You stagger away from the semi-detached, taking the back roads through the park to the train station. The suitcase drags behind you like an anchor, pulling you all the way back, back to the house. Back to him.

A lump in your throat, you keep walking.

Sliding your hand into your pocket, you yank out the address. The paper is gnarled, almost crusty from the time you threw it out into the rain. But the address remains readable. She told you to visit, but you kept making excuses. Reasons why you wanted to avoid stepping back into her life. Why else had you traded her love for something which was meant to be akin to love but became twisted and wrong?

The train station is an angular rectangle constructed of red metal beams and glass walls. The doors are automatic, swallowing you as you drag your suitcase onto the tiles. You do your best to hide your face in your coat collar, but the ticket officers still offer you odd stares as you shuffle through to the

platform. Your train is on Platform Six, right at the bottom of the staircase, next to a sandwich shop. Your stomach rumbles, but you ignore it. You don't have time. Besides, you know if you eat now, the food won't remain in your stomach for long.

The train arrives late, so you know that this time, leaving isn't a dream. Dragging your suitcase onto the nearest carriage winds you instantly and you flounder like a fish in a desert before rushing for a chair. The seats are hard, not plush. The cushions seem to dig into your spine. You look around, wide eyed. Expect to see him coursing through the aisle, hands crushing the foldable arm rests in his wake. Even the Conductor's voice seems to scream for you to return home.

You try to close your eyes, to sleep the journey away. After half an hour of unfit full shuffling, you remain awake, staring at the countryside as it flashes by in tufts of green. Little lambs, bouncing away, unaware of the horrors which will befall their brothers and sisters.

Breathing hard, you return to the past. To your destination – the little redbrick house on the street corner, near the bookshop where you grew up, a little girl with pigtails, jumping in puddles on a drizzly April afternoon.

It isn't raining when the train stops. Instead, the sun remains pulsing like a heartbeat in the sky. Perhaps it's yours. You always wondered where that pesky organ went.

Carefully, you manage to stand for long enough to drag the suitcase out onto the platform. This station seems plastic, as if it is made of Lego. You stumble to a bench and sit for a few minutes to watch the train leave. It slithers out of the station in serpentine.

Twenty minutes later, you drag your suitcase up the steps, keeping to the left as the yellow lines dictate. Soon enough, you emerge into the spitting smog. Cars line each side of the pavement outside the station – red Ford Fiesta's, black Skoda's, orange Kia's. The houses are a mixture of bungalows with manicured gardens, crowned with detached terraces, some sporting cherubs spouting fountain water.

You know the address off by heart by the time you pull the suitcase across the road to the main street. You head up a set of stone steps, the case a led weight on your arm. Around a corner, you nearly stumble over the pavement. Around another corner and it's there. A small semi-detached, the one near the bookstore.

The driveway has been partially eaten by succulents.

You knock on the door and step back. For a moment, you hear scuffling through the letterbox. The door is opened by a small woman who should not be your Mother. She is almost weightless, with hollowed cheekbones. She is not your Mother. A ghost of your Mother, perhaps. But her skin is peppered with bruises.

“Hello there. Can we help you?” You jump, and the owner of that voice emerges. A large man with a scruffy beard steps from the darkened hallway. Your Mother seems to shrink when he appears.

“Hello,” you manage to grind out. The man smiles kindly, using the entirety of his upper lip, like a horse. He touches your Mother’s arm, which is bruised beneath her semi-transparent blouse. Your Mother flinches. Your eyes widen and you understand.

Folie à deux, you think. A madness shared by two.

After all, bruises are the Family Crest.

“Sorry,” you say. “Wrong address.” You turn from the door without making eye-contact. Your Mother doesn’t speak, and the man coos softly, gathering her back into his arms.

Suitcase in hand, you return to the station.

When I received the call this morning, there was a soft yet distressed tone coming through the other end of the phone, “Hello?” I answered. A hushed stillness wafted over the phone. I envisioned the person’s hand gliding over the speaker on the opposite end. I remained silent.

“Can you come over?”

I roll to the left side of my bed, shifting all of my body weight onto the abundance of pillows. The base of my thumb lightly scrubbed against the bottom of my eyes, wiping the morning melancholy away. I release a yawn and try to make out the voice; I couldn’t.

“I’m sorry, but who is this?” I ask.

“Noah’s wife, Natalie.” She affirmed.

“Sure, on my way!” I promptly responded.

At 10:15 am, I walked down the hallway, closed each finger in my palm, and knocked on the black door of apartment 2B. I waited patiently, listening for the sounds of unlatched locks falling and swaying effortlessly against the door before the twist of a base lock snapped.

Natalie’s face was eggshell white; the light in her eyes was like the waving flame on a candle, and my presence created a draft in the room. We acknowledged each other’s presence. Natalie placed her hand underneath my elbow, stroking her thumb on my forearm, and I, with a half-smile pushing the weight of sadness back.

“He wants to see you.” Natalie hushed.

Noah and Natalie’s apartment typically smelled of Tahitian Vanilla. This morning, it didn’t. Quietly, I nodded and walked to the back bedroom.

There were toys scattered across the floor, Nickelodeon on the television in the living room, coasters without drinks on them, and their two children, Josie and Casey, sat on the sectional sofa.

Towards the terrace, the black table was covered with a wide-spread of slashed-open envelopes, apple cores on a ceramic plate, bills and notices folding like an accordion, alongside receipts that fell over the edge of the table and into the box of old cassette tapes from indie rock bands. Joy Division’s *Unknown Pleasures* and Nirvana’s *Bleach* were at the top.

Noah’s strenuous groans grew louder.

I took a deep breath and pulled open the slightly cracked door of the bedroom; it smelled of lavender. Raising his head from off the deeply sunken pillow, clutching onto Steel Oxford Brookline sheets with tumultuous fingertips, Noah's droopy eyelids appeared at the top. Seemingly enough, he looked at peace.

I went over, swung my backpack off my back, and placed it beside the bed.

"I've brought you something," I said, smiling while unzipping my bag, pulling out the 6x4 box from Magnolia Bakery, placing it onto the nightstand.

The sight of Noah, my mentor who had fallen sick, saddened me; but still, I smiled. Not for me, but for him, Natalie, the kids Josie, and Casey, who's hunched over with despair in the living room.

"I'm leaving this world," He murmured calmly.

Silently, I held his hand, tracing the back of his leather-like skin, gazing into his eyes as they began to gloss over. The darkness of his pupils lightened to a sepia grey, and he took a deep breath, my lips pressed on the back of his hand.

I thought of looming hefty grey clouds consuming the sky outside. I thought about how they welcomed gloom and made us self-reflect on mortality.

I thought a lot, even as Noah's hand fell limp in mine and he passed on.

CREATIVE NONFICTION & VISUAL ART

Jim Young
pretending
CW: Self-harm

My ears are still ringing. Pleasure Void was extra loud tonight, especially when Monica ended the show by shoving the microphone into the monitor for a screaming feedback loop that drove half the crowd out of the club. Someday, probably when it's too late, I'll learn to wear earplugs. At least I have a long drive to let my ears recover.

It's a nice night for the drive, too. The balmy air blows through the open windows of my old Delta 88, and there are so many crickets that I can hear them chirping even as I move at 55 miles an hour.

For now, it's just the crescent moon, a dark highway, and time to think about forcing myself out of bed in a few hours to go to church. To begin another six-day stretch of the required four church services, five bible classes, one chapel service, one evening of visitation and witnessing, and five days at my christian school, learning all the ways I disappoint god, my family, and my christian community.

For the next six days, like many of the 5,840 days before this, I need to pretend. With my ears still ringing, I'll pick up the coarse, burgundy hymnal tomorrow morning and sing *Onward, Christian Soldiers* with conviction, stressing every syllable. I'll pretend I believe everything they tell me, even though I don't. But there are rumors, and they're all praying for me. They already try their best to discipline me enough to keep me out of hell.

I'll pretend I don't associate with anyone outside our church; that the devil hasn't led me into the temptations of the world, even though I've already fallen to those temptations. I'll pretend I don't sneak out to the city an hour away and see bands like Fear of Ghosts or that Ramones cover band while I still hear Pleasure Void in my head playing "The Bell Jar." I'll wear the clothes I'm supposed to, make sure my hair is cut short, try my best to be a good student even though I'm failing classes, try to pretend enough so that my mother won't sit in the pastor's office again shedding tears over my backsliding.

Or maybe I'll stop pretending.

I know that just around the next bend is a straight stretch of road about a mile long. To the right of the road, just off the shoulder, the land drops off about six feet. There is a line of strong trees and then a mostly open field with tall grass. Maybe that's where all those crickets are gathered.

To the left, more open field that gradually gives way to thickets of trees, sloping gently towards the river. There is one small gas station with two pumps, about halfway down this stretch of road. But it's closed now. Not many people stopping for gas this late. I haven't seen another car in 20 minutes.

Hitting that straight stretch, the songs of the crickets and my tires blend. My right foot presses down slowly and the car picks up speed - 58, 60.

I take my left hand off the steering wheel and push the light switch off - 62, 65.

I take my right hand off the steering wheel - 68.

The car continues straight. "Good alignment," I think to myself, and unclick my seatbelt - 70.

There's still about half a mile before the road curves to the left - 72.

Then slowly, the car begins drifting to the right, toward that ditch that lies between the highway and the line of trees - 74.

The right front tire leaves the pavement, dropping with the slightest little bump onto the shoulder. The sound of small gravel crunching under the tire joins with the song of the crickets and the other three tires still humming on the asphalt - 76.

The right rear tire drops onto the shoulder. More gravel joins the chorus, hitting the wheel well with metallic pings that sound like heavy rain - 78.

Just as the front tire is about to descend into the ditch, just before that tenth of a second where there's no turning back, I let off the gas, take the steering wheel in my left hand, and gently guide the car back onto the road. I push an overplayed copy of The Cure's "Disintegration" into the cassette player. I light a cigarette and ease into the turn at the end of the straight stretch.

I started walking around the neighborhood this year because I hate jogging or running and my bicycle had a flat tire. I thought I would get bored after a while seeing the same scenery over and over again. Each walk I took, however, added a line to my narrative about the place I lived. There was the man who lived on the corner who placed sensors in his front yard to keep the moles at bay. They seemed to be located in different places each time I passed where new tunnels had surfaced. There was the house with the concrete bunny statues that had been dressed up at Easter and Christmas. On another street was the house where a man thought we were having such beautiful weather on one of the most sultry afternoons of summer. But the house I enjoyed passing the most had a stone fountain out front with two wrought iron chairs nearby. On many occasions the chairs would be holding an older couple and the husband would always wave. It wasn't one of those polite, neighborly waves but an arm at full mast that lingered longer than most. Once colder temperatures set in and the fountain was covered, the chairs were always empty. During a warm spell, however, as I was passing I saw the man in a different chair near the back corner of his house where he could get the full exposure of the sun. I was unsure if he saw me since it was further away but I raised my arm anyway. As soon as I did, his arm shot up too, even leaning forward a little to make sure I saw him. Those few moments were as tangible as a handshake, as meaningful as if from a good friend. I've no idea his name or beliefs but we're both human and share the same space which is a great place to start.

Who Would You be Without the Pressure?

Someone I know from university posed this question on Instagram and answered it for herself, and it made me start to think about who I, personally, would be without the pressure.

I've felt pressure for as long as I can remember; looming over me, ever-present, attached to my being like my shadow. Sometimes it's not visible, but shine a light on yourself, and sure enough it will be there, lurking in the darkness. Pressure to do well; pressure to look nice; pressure to conform to societal norms; pressure to be liked, even by people that treat me like shit. During exam season, I used to study so hard that when it was all over, I wouldn't know what to do with myself and I'd cry for days. I still do this today when a really stressful situation has passed.

I don't even know where this 'pressure' came from – of course my parents wanted me to do well and succeed, but they never punished me for failing or pushed me until I was close to breaking point. They were ecstatic with my achievements, but never disappointed if I felt I couldn't do something. But perhaps that's the prime point; I rarely failed at anything. I got consistently good grades, I could play the keyboard and did well in the official examinations, I could draw – 'a woman of many talents' as my auntie calls me. I had a hard time in maths during my Highers, and needed a tutor, but I came out of that with an astonishing B. The only time I could probably say I've failed is when I got a D in my Advanced Higher English. I was so disappointed in myself that I doubted whether I was good enough to study English at university level. After all, I had never been able to achieve an A in any English exam, so how on earth would I be able to succeed? But I went to University to study English, and told myself that if I were to graduate with anything less than a First Class Honours, I was a disappointment. I did the same with my postgraduate degree, and did not fail to get what I wanted. Why would I have been unhappy with anything less? Was it because I liked the feeling of achievement and how people complimented me? Or was it because I hated it when people said 'well done' while having a pitiful or smug look in their eye because they knew I had to be nothing short of amazing?

When I thought about it enough, I began to believe that there were no external forces placing this concrete slab on my back and asking me not to mind it. It must all be internal – it had to be coming solely from me. My mum has asked me on numerous occasions why I can't take a moment to be happy with my achievements; why do I always have to be looking for the next thing to do?

I've recently realised that I have high functioning depression, which effectively means that though I experience common symptoms of depression like omnipresent sadness and overwhelming self-doubt, all the while over-analysing every situation, I rarely struggle to go about my everyday life: I still exercise regularly, I still get good grades, I still socialise, I still work – I still get out of bed every morning. I experience moments of real happiness, don't get me wrong, but I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop and for the sadness to come creeping in again like a thief in the night and consume me. Because

of my depression, I feel that people merely tolerate me and that my existence is futile in the grand scheme of things, and so I do everything in my power to prove that wrong by being the best at everything: the best student, best worker, best daughter, best friend. I push myself to the very limit most of the time (and punish myself when I'm not) because I feel I need to show everyone in my life that I'm worth their time, and I'm not pointless. I hardly ever allow myself some down time or relaxation time because it only makes me feel guilty that I'm not doing something productive. One of the only reasons I'm even writing this is because I was feeling guilt for sitting about watching an episode of *Grey's Anatomy* despite the fact I had just been on a three-hour long walk beforehand. I never stop. I can't let myself stop.

But has the pressure only come from me, really? You grow up, and from your very first achievement, you can see how proud your family are, and it makes you feel warm inside, and you begin to crave more praise, equating that pride with love. Your parents begin to tell their friends how well you've done, and their friends say they must be so proud to have such a smart daughter. They all beam down at you as they tell you what a brilliant young lady you are, and what a brilliant woman you're going to grow up to be, and that you'll make a man very happy someday. Your parents agree. You begin to believe that your value is based entirely on your own intelligence, so you bust your ass and continue excelling in that department because it's become a personality trait. You've got brains. You're the smart one. You're the one that's going to go to university and give your family a good name.

My sister became pregnant at age eighteen. I was only eight at the time, and didn't really understand much, but I understood that my parents weren't happy. Although I know that my sister would do it all again, and my mum wouldn't trade in her grandchildren for anything in the world, my young brain still picked up on things that shaped who I have become. I know my sister wishes that she got to live a bit more of her youth, and that part of her can't wait until both of her children are grown so that she can live that out. When my parents used to joke, 'don't be like your sister and get pregnant at eighteen,' I knew that it wasn't really a joke. I began to tell myself that I didn't ever want children, because if I did, I wouldn't be successful, as if success has a singular definition. Why shouldn't I be like my sister? She raised two children on her own. She's beautiful, she's strong, she's smart, resourceful, and so much more. For individual talks at school on 'who inspires you the most' I always talked about my sister. I always wanted to be exactly like her, so why did I feel pressure to be more? Because, in reality, there are always external forces placing pressure on you. My parents, whether they realise it or not, had placed a certain amount of pressure on me – or, at least, expectation – to be someone, to be more. It's not like they told me that I had to be a doctor, and I had no choice in my own future, but the sad truth of the matter is, once you show potential, expectation always follows.

I don't know how to stop placing this pressure on myself, and allowing it to be placed on me. If I hadn't started this cycle, I think I'd be someone who was confident, and never doubted how someone felt about me. I'd wake up every morning with a sense of who I was with zero self-loathing. I'd wear the clothes I want to wear, and I'd simply be able to walk away from the people that treated me like I was nothing because, guess what, I wouldn't feel pressure to remain in a situation that hurts me because I wouldn't feel the need to prove that they can change.

But, ultimately, I don't think I'd be me. I might overload myself at times and do this to myself out of a sense of worthlessness (however imagined), but it's helped me to build the life that I want to have, and it's given me hard experiences to push through to truly discover what I'm capable of. Whether I like it or not, pressure has moulded me into the person that I am, and I'm finally beginning to like that person. As they say, you can't form a diamond without pressure.

Friday. I had tested positive! We were going to have a baby. I was scared and excited at the same time.

Monday. It was my turn to appear before the inspector. I'd already sent my pupils' books to the office. He was scrutinizing them when I passed the office en route to the ladies room during the interval. My heart jumped into my throat. I was never good with inspections – inspectors made me jelly-like and shaky inside; moreover their presence did something to my tongue. Not inarticulate, and usually very self-assured, the presence of an inspector reduced me to a snivelling coward. I hated them for that.

I was to appear before him directly after the interval. I entered the loo, prepared to sit on the seat, and then the most horrific lower abdominal pain struck. I thought I would fall down dead. Could anyone possibly survive such horrific pain?

“O God,” I prayed fervently, “don't let me die with my brooks around my knees.”

Slowly and carefully I took a deep breath and slowly finished making my wee. Thankfully the pain subsided so as quickly as I dared, I stood and pulled my pants up. Relief!

Then the pain struck again. Was I going to die? My daughter, in grade four, was waiting to get her sandwiches which were in my classroom.

Slowly, hunched over, and holding onto the wall for support, I made my way to the kitchen where my colleagues were gathered since the staffroom was being used by His Nibs. I was not going to be found dead in the lavatory!

“Hey!” gasped one of my colleagues. “What's the matter with you? You look like death warmed up!”

I tried a weak grin and decided to make my way upstairs to my classroom instead. My bewildered daughter followed me. The pain became unbearable.

“Go Sweetheart, and call ... (a friend on staff). Tell her to come quickly.” My precious baby flew out. Soon my friend appeared at the door. She exclaimed with shock when she saw me. “Let me take you home,” she said with great concern. “No,” I gasped. “I'll die there – I have to go to the hospital.”

One of the older male staff members took me to the hospital, driving at a snail's pace. “Please,” I begged, “a little faster; I'm going to die right here in your van.”

“I’m trying to avoid bumps which may cause you more pain.” He was very worried. I’m sure he did not want me dying alongside him. He was an old man, maybe in his late fifties. Eventually he got me there. I was taken to Casualty where they brought a wheelchair to wheel me into the place.

The nightmare resulting from a misdiagnosed condition was just beginning...

I managed to gasp out answers to their questions. My file was fetched. They confirmed that I was due to have come in later that day to attend prenatal clinic, so they took me to the gynaecology department. The examinations made me scream or perhaps shriek is a better word. The pain was horrific.

I held onto the hand of a nurse who I hope did not end up with dislocated fingers. It was a teaching hospital, and they had students who took turns to examine me. Then they poked a long, curved needle into my abdomen to check if there was any bleeding inside there. They began to argue among each other about my condition. Some believed I had an acute bladder, others argued that it was an ectopic pregnancy. The pregnancy tests they did all came up negative. They could not explain the positive testing of a few days ago. I’d gone to the hospital because my period was late. All I wanted now was for this nightmare to end.

They decided to send me to another hospital to be tested on their ultrasound machine. This was 1979 and technology was still battling through. An ambulance took me there, screeching its way between traffic on the road. For a brief while I was pain free, until they put me on a drip to fill my bladder. This, they said would facilitate matters – make the ultrasound test accurate. That was a good idea for the test but a bad one for me. The pain was incredible. Eventually they pronounced me negative, opened up the valve on the catheter and released the overload in my tortured bladder. I was not pregnant. The ambulance took me back to hospital number one, where I was admitted.

Later that afternoon the doctors did their rounds. There was this sea of faces around me discussing me as though I was asleep or absent. Again the argument was acute bladder versus ectopic pregnancy. One large, red haired doctor emphatically stated that “this patient, in my opinion, should not be in this ward but in Women’s General.” The head of the department was the only one in the team who believed that it was an ectopic pregnancy and that the ultrasound machine was faulty. By the grace of Almighty God he went along with his hunch. Only once had I tested positive and that was earlier in the week. On this particular day all tests were negative, yet the professor went with his hunch.

I was feeling pretty blurry at that point and soon fell off to sleep. When I awoke, my dearly beloved and two of our friends were seated alongside my bed. It was good to see them.

Visiting hour ended and reluctantly my dearly beloved took his leave. It would be a lonely weekend. I don’t think he had reached the main corridor when pain struck again. This time it was worse than ever. I screamed the place down! The doctor on duty up in Casualty was mending a man who’d been stabbed all over the head and shoulders. She had to leave him and respond to the urgent calls from the agitated nurses on duty. I’m sure I was frightening the other patients with my screaming and shouting.

They drugged me again and I passed out while a nurse was fiddling with my very full catheter bag. I awoke the following morning feeling refreshed and at the same time aware that I should lie very still in order to keep the pain at bay. The head of department did his round with a diminutive lady doctor that Saturday morning, with a nurse in attendance.

“How are you, mother?” he asked.

“Fine, as long as you don’t touch me or the bed,” I answered as cheerfully as I could.

He turned to the nurse and said curtly, “Prepare this patient for surgery at once.” The two doctors walked out and soon I was wheeled to theatre.

I opened my eyes and looked straight into *the man’s* eyes. He was looking at me while talking to a nurse in the middle of the smallish ward. He looked very worried. He came to my bedside and I cannot for the life of me remember what we spoke about.

When the doctors did their rounds, I asked why I was in a different ward. “You’re in intensive care. You’ve been a very sick lady.” I was told. It had been a long, hard operation because my fallopian tube had begun to tear and was bleeding into my abdomen.

The doctors actually did look shamefaced when they explained to me that they were wrong, and their Chief was right and that I was “lucky” to have seen the night through. My right fallopian tube had begun to tear with a six-week foetus growing in it. From all I heard from them in the days that followed, I gathered that I was the department’s 9-day wonder.

1990. I was born again on 27 February and had a complete change of life. My religious knowledge of God became a living relationship. Unbelievable! This was really me... me... a borderline atheist! And it was all real. I thought of that ectopic pregnancy that nearly killed me and spoke to the Lord about it. I repented for referring to ‘it’ as a ‘thing.’ I also asked what baby ‘it’ would have been. A short while later, I cannot remember exactly how long, I was kneeling at my bedside, praying. Suddenly I went into a trance – it was like a time warp - I was standing and a young boy, his face shadowed, stood alongside me. The Voice said, “That would have been your son had he lived.” The vision lasted just seconds, but the memory remains.

Although it’s been quite a while since my last ‘sighting,’ I have seen Peter-John (yes, I named him) twice more. He’d have been 41 this year. The dreams, which they were, showed me aspects of what his personality would have been like. Someday, we will meet. Meanwhile he is in good company with my parents and other family members.









Ellena Ruiz-Lindsey
Infatuation with a stranger



Ellena Ruiz-Lindsey
longing to be a stranger

