



BOOK OF MATCHES





# **Book of Matches**

A Literary Journal

Issue 4 Winter 2022

**EDITOR**  
Kelli Allen

**EDITOR**  
Nicholas Christian

**COVER ARTWORK**  
Danielle Spradley  
<http://daniellespradley.com/web/>

*Book of Matches* is published three times annually.

[www.bookofmatcheslitmag.com](http://www.bookofmatcheslitmag.com)

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Clayton, North Carolina

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Dear Readers-

The end of one year and the cusp of another means slowing the wagons down and letting the horses drink long and to satiation. We plan for new triumphs and grieve for those we failed. We tie back our wild hair one last time and say prayers over the fruits saved all winter. Soon, after traveling so many nights, we each bend at the waist and collect baskets full of damp buds. All our complaints are woven once again into wishes for gods to be kind and lovers to be true. Bitterness is locked tight away from Spring rains. How can we not be happy that it is, indeed, never too late?

The stories and poems collected in these pages are shoes tossed into the sand, feet outstretched into icy wave after icy wave. There is salt crusting the edges of lines and phrase and we, the gathers of these truths and stomachs, offer what order we can to how much brine we take to the skin and how much we leave to tide. Another year is just a drop in a cuttlefish's cat-cut eye. Poems and stories are the lids that close over the eyes of all creatures in such a sea.

Standing at the bow, we hope you readers, you riders of small boats in eight seas, can be at home on land and otherwise in this coming cycle of months. We hope the works gathered in this issue serve as succor and salve for whatever adventures leave you bruised, thrilled, and hungry. We wish you the best magic—the kind bred from sweet jam and elegant dreams. We wish you fed and curious.

Drop your eyes down into what waits here, and then raise them to horizons not yet promised, but there all the same. Zero-in, brush the biscuit crumbs from your fingers, and hold-fast to the poles leading toward new catches, new words, new remedies, new proclamations of *yes*.

-Kelli and Nicholas  
*Editors*





## King Tide

Despite the warnings—or because  
of them—we've come to witness  
the wilding surf. Spumed crowns  
exaggerate their gaudy froth  
on what's left of the beach. Stranded  
bull kelp bejewels the shore.

We know the cautions, alert  
to sneaker waves that want to suck  
us into a hypothermic void, mudslides,  
slick rocks. Logs, already fallen,  
already dead, would roll and crush  
our bones easily as a bird's ribcage.

We sidle up to danger's edge, its  
metallic-salt taste on our tongues.  
Voyeurs unfold chairs on the dune  
to face the great arena, as if watching  
a coronation parade float by.  
Sky lowers its clouded bunting as

waves buck out of their chutes,  
bellicose and frenzied. We don't know  
whether to fear or hallelujah praise them,  
and we just can't stop watching.

Saint Michael  
*(for Stray)*

in that little stucco apartment  
built around 1947 with all its age-old  
charms and Spanish tile awnings,  
you'd cook dinner and set out  
the chess board, talk to me  
in the cool shade beneath purple  
phosphorescent skies

you monk, you brother,  
you taoist, you friend,  
offering confession and communion,  
black bean tacos and beer;  
what will I do without these memories?  
I'd crawl all the way back through time  
on my hands and knees to make them again,  
to move the pawns and rooks in  
and out of danger as you smiled and  
waited for your turn to show me  
the way

Eat Not the Cherries, Little Monkey, Little Doubt

Where do you keep your dictionary, your storehouse  
of thunder? I describe a spike, and you worry a hollow

in moon's most surrendered side. The ghosts I conjure  
from days I could spell a word at finger-snap, syn-

apse firing from the sanctuary, cranium covered and holy,  
held up by beams of light. Now, no blankets in the nave,

no history in all of the cloakroom that hasn't been swept  
under the rug covering the time capsule planted when

this church was new. Now I take the bread with sway, weep  
with the used-to, the wine. Now some cream becomes

a scream, the river the path saw treed like a coyote  
after sweet pears. I thought I was forever, but found out

I was enough in the eye of dirt. Pigs may fly, but I've leavened  
the lily, paid dearly for silence with the devil.

## Moon

My son collects moon rocks. So far he's found three and keeps them inside a stained tupperware container.

It's important, Jax says, to keep moon rocks covered because moon rocks need to stay fresh, and did you know (which is the start to *all* of his facts) that moon rocks are a lot like snowflakes; no two are made the same!

\*\*\*

Moon, our yellow Labrador, wasn't actually yellow. She was blonde. The coloring of her fur reminded me of the sand in one of those tv commercials, the ones that make you want to take a trip to some far away tropical destination. Unfortunately, Moon's soft and dreamy fur didn't last long, and neither did he.

Prior to Moon's death, chunks of his fur would fall and land in piles on the floor. Sometimes I'd stare at it for a bit and watch it drift around the room. Falling and rising. This creamy chunk of hair would flutter around in the air.

\*\*\*

Jax enjoys watching Jurassic Park. He says all dinosaurs had feathers and all dinosaurs are actually birds. So whenever he finds a feather, he brings it home and studies the colors, it's shape as well as the thickness of the fibers. Based on his observations and experience he's able to calculate the size of the dinosaur and identify what it ate. Herbivores, he tells me, have skinnier feathers and are usually shorter compared to those that come from the meat-eating dinosaurs.

\*\*\*

Moon accidentally bit my hand one time. I was sixteen and by that age, Dad already had warned me millions of times to never bite the hand that feeds you.

However, technically, Moon had only bitten one finger.

It happened after I was done eating yogurt. I lowered my Yoplait cup so Moon could lick the inside, but I must've moved too fast which caused him to overreact.

He clamped down, or maybe I just thought he did. Maybe it was more alarming to me because I noticed all the blackness instead of his teeth.

I'm confident, though, that Moon's bite was just an accident. He didn't realize it was *my* hand that startled him, and it was *my* hand that he was biting.

People don't know there is a scar on the left side of my middle finger. It's close to the knuckle and the scar is hidden between the flap of skin that connects one finger to the next.

\*\*\*

When I look at Jax's moon rocks they don't remind me of snowflakes. They

remind me of Dad's lava rocks. Sadly, lava rocks don't come from lava spewed from an active volcano. They're not bits of magma that has hardened over time. Lava rocks are stored in plastic bags at Stein's Garden and Home and ours were the reddish burgundy kind because the other colors wouldn't match the brick as nicely.

Lava rocks are typically used as an outside decoration; a pretty yet affordable and low maintenance way to spruce up a yard, fill in the space under and between bushes or cover areas where it's difficult to grow grass or keep plants alive.

Dad took pride in our grass. He loved it and spent many springtime hours making sure it could be brought back to life.

I don't think Dad thought about his grass when he brought home Moon. It must have been the end of winter, or perhaps we had been having a very cold spring.

I thought for sure that Moon was a goner, once the snow melted and Dad had seen all the blotches of deadened grass, but he wasn't. Mom wanted Dad to make some sort of pathway along the fence line so she could water her flowers and not be so damn stressed about if too much water had dripped onto the damn grass. The easiest solution for unwanted water and dead grass was to fill the space with a sturdy kind of rock.

If you've never seen or walked on lava rocks, they look, feel and sound very strange. Like all rocks, they are lopsided and have jagged edges but these kind also have holes all over them. They sort of resemble a sponge. But of course, they're not. Although holey, they are surprisingly strong and when stepped on they make a loud crunching sound. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. It's terrible. Imagine walking on top of mounds and mounds of crushed chalk, or the sound of crunching bones.

But I don't tell Jax about that. Or that his rocks aren't real.

But *my* Moon was.

I don't tell him the moon rock he's holding is really a piece of asphalt. And I didn't find it necessary to point out that even if he *did* have moon rocks, they wouldn't be fresh because all of our tupperware is covered with a permanent orange haze. Or, that all dogs can bite. Even the ones that love you. And some people can, too.

Even the ones that are supposed to love you.

I don't mention that much like snowflakes, no two things ever break the same.

Like walls.

Doors.

Telephones.

And the wooden parts of a broom.

Because Jax will never have secret scars or frightening tales that form invisible scars.

Because Jax should never be told that

*there once was a small girl who grew up believing she could be strong and brave, but the girl was indeed, neither strong, nor brave.*

*The girl knew there was a wolf lurking around the neighborhood. She saw it, many times, in fact. However, nobody would listen. Nobody believed that a wolf, a wolf of all things could be walking around unnoticed in broad daylight. There was no wolf in the backyards.*

*Stop being so dramatic, the girl's mother often scolded her.*

*You're acting paranoid. It's unhealthy for a child to be so worried.*

*And then one evening the wolf no longer cared about being seen or unseen. He was no longer going to apologize for living as a wolf. So he snarled and sneered, barked, and growled, but nobody cared. Nobody looked his way. Everyone just went along their business. Ignoring the wolf made life much easier. Except for the girl.*

*She was determined. She dreamed about taking out that wolf and the wolf knew this.*

*He knew she was all talk. She wasn't capable of actually challenging the alpha..*

*And that irritated the wolf. He became bored with all of her hollering and screaming wolf! A wolf! Look, the wolf is standing beside you!*

*He thought about what to do with the boredom. Surely nobody would notice one little slip up...*

*Without hesitation, he leapt in front of the girl and pounced on her useless and pathetic dog. The wolf growled and howled as he chomped and chomped on that poor dog's body, but because the girl was neither strong nor brave, all she knew to do was fall to her knees and pray that the wolf would stop and move onto her. Because if she had his bite marks, maybe someone would finally believe her.*

## Frankenstein's Gargoyle

Denizens of dark places,  
like stars who have unzipped  
their overcoats and dreams,  
sit around, wait for something.  
What's it like, being a gargoyle?  
Hang out, scrutinizing remnants.  
The crushed beer bottle  
sitting in the curb, for instance,  
it's been that way for days.  
I don't go over and throw it away,  
just let it sit there, as if souls  
require images of waste.  
Ants abandon their houses, pondering  
the damage eked out on the world.  
A constant reminder  
of doom and the day after,  
rubble yawns at the sky.  
The music of the organ flares.  
Each note says something  
in each shade of the phrase,  
the organist's in his inner void.  
Is it lust for a body  
or despair shooting through?  
He hammers it flat, the body  
plus despair. A shoe  
sits in an empty field  
and one gleam spirals down.  
The organist looks up and grins.  
Something unzips daily, flutters off  
like a stray dandelion after all  
the tulips have become weeds.  
A man in the cellar  
lifts a goblet to his lips,  
like a sculptor sectioning  
his own moist framework:  
here is a tooth, and this here's an eye.

Hello Suffering,

Unlike brewing a cup of tea [cinnamon], mothering a child is a task that is exceptionally difficult to navigate. You can do everything right — be loving, wise, nurse, bake, give up your career, exercise, take supplements — and still suffer from hell like fatigue, pain, depression, and more. But what if, instead of spending so much time, money, and energy trying to solve the complex parenting riddle, you could actually cut straight to the root of the problem? Discover the child within, that latchkey girl who cried during Lassie, climbed an olive tree in her yard to peer into a nest only to send [blue speckled] eggs tumbling to earth. *How she cried for forgiveness as she held broken in her palm.* Remember the girl that believed unconditional love/babies would save her from herself only to be shunned decades later like a virus we are all afraid of catching. **BREAK FREE** from the sad of her. She will never be anything but a carrier of faulty DNA, three generations of trauma handed down. I know about the wagon, how she liked to run, change up her space. She didn't make it far at five, across the street with David, her two-year-old brother, his bat, her blanket — trying to shield him from blows she knew were coming. And now, you owe it to yourself to shed the barbed wire wall, those invisible arches, men who love to pull your hair, palm your face bone to bone before entering. Leave suffering behind. In this summit you will learn how to do a moral examination of your past in order to create a new future. Life is all about cutting. Day after day, a water use warning. Somewhere there is a bridge. You owe it to yourself to cross.

>> [Click here now to reserve your spot](#)

Expulsion from the Spirit World

A baby stands on Mother Terrible's head,  
baby balanced, Mother Terrible walking  
stiffly, eggs tattooed on her face and hands.

They have a dog that wears a human mask.  
Or is it a human head borne on a furred body,  
too knowing to whine, too reticent to speak?

They walk through a ruined city. A ferry  
pushes methodically over salt water.  
A girl looks at waves. A boy folds and

unfolds white paper boats. Mother Terrible  
takes the shape of a toad. Or is a toad,  
four floppy legs, baby unwavering,

egg waiting within her hopping body?  
She loves appearances: sky, snake,  
bloodthirsty bird. Snuffling beasts stalk

beside her. Are they wild hogs? I'm stilled  
on the porch, run aground, afraid to look,  
afraid not to. The dog barks, the baby cries.

Tennyson Seen Fishing For Barracuda Off Ambergis Caye

He is under a huge, flowing tent,  
throwing spears into the sea and yelling.

“The gigantic sea snake eats eels!”

“The octopus snares a random mate  
and plunges a tentacle in, holding her pinned there for days!”

He reads little, just does things:  
fishing, sailing, racing around on motor bikes.

A maker of boxes  
snarls at the solicitous one: “I will push you into darkness.”

Centuries pass and still they ring: an eagle

*clasps the crag/ with crooked hands.*

Some Kind of Response

This must be love.  
Or maybe  
anaphylaxis  
This urge to engage  
in the mundane and hope  
for normalcy when everything obvious  
and to-be-expected seems  
like an impossibility.

This quickening of the heart  
half butterfly, half arrhythmia  
tells tales of love perhaps afoot  
or else it is a violent histamine response  
to irritants but probably  
it is just a pang of affection.

I'm crying again  
for no reason  
It's love.  
Love and ragweed pollen.  
Good Lord how uncomfortable  
can one person be in their own skin

There's isn't a square inch of epidermis  
not screaming for a good scratch  
And this is how I know I need you  
so badly  
You, and maybe Benadryl  
but certainly you, regardless.

The flush of cheeks  
can easily be misinterpreted.  
The red-eyed sleeplessness  
brought on by a flurry of blinks  
and mildewed eye rubs  
None of us is beautiful  
in our morning face.

We are gasping for air now  
Both of us  
For two distinct reasons  
on which

we will never quite put our fingers.

Pygmalion's Wife Confronts a Vase

women starve themselves to  
look like me, poor things. can't see  
the way my skin betrays me, patterned with the  
notches of scorned fingernails. all soft  
like unfired clay.  
porous and raw.  
he wanted his ivory girl,  
paralyzed in a stoic grip.  
cool to the touch. but the gods  
wanted children. for what good is a  
thousand years if it ends  
in a gravestone clutching a pillar of  
dust?

i think he gets off to me weeping  
each night. i can sense it,  
lying frozen in the  
undercurrents. dreaming only of  
how the forest bends and sways with  
a single breath. you wouldn't understand,  
having such kinship  
with the silverware.

must have taken a lot to make  
me, huh? special girl. fifty dead elephants dancing in the corners  
of my eyes. when he kills me they'll be all lined up  
for their second slaughter. bursting through my chest to  
stampede around the house. i doubt you'll survive.  
perhaps it's all for  
the best.

## Know One's Self

Thinking of the otherside, she watched the sunset like she watched her step, the inside of a peach's sweet guts stretching to skin and radiating purple that warmed her eyes first and lead her to a colder night's full moon. She had decided already, when the last trimester began, authorizing the thought to build another thought as a landscaper authorizes a home. Until the pain became too much to bear, as natural as the seasons' changing. It had nothing to do with freedom. She had too much faith, learned through cycles of healing forgiveness, those wild nights followed by those quiet early mornings when she'd hear the peregrines' song and the wolves' last snores coming from somewhere outside as that forgiveness realizing her faith must grow. When she turned her fate over, allowed Victor to embody her change. Magnetic and jaded, it began.

An air-freshener's cedar held dominion over her with its masking and she couldn't smell the weed and the cigarettes and the booze that no longer merely endured but had become a part of Victor's Mustang and all she could desire to smell is all she wanted and did, Victor's love. When he said that he loved her, it began.

"I don't believe you—but I love you too—or does love just mean different things to different folks? Maybe your love is green and my love is brown."

She laughed at her joke, wanting Victor to laugh along. However, he responded by looking away and caring less about what love was.

\*

This consciousness templated to the curves of her body, her holiness's compliant container. She headed home—the boy kicking against the inside of her lower abdominal while the girl grazed a freshly formed hand against the upper half—the heat entrenching as namelessly as those babies she carried. Under the impression she only had one baby in her stomach, she calculated her path.

She walked uphill, her legs tiring more with each step. Time turned into a broken clock's amending story about suffering. Unable to see the hill's peak, visualizing as the prayer does versions of promised lands, she let her sweat fall free as salvation and she decided on a boy's name, Horace, and a girl's name too, Diana. She took a moment, resting in the darkness, squinting as though to see the future, and her eyes began to water because she did not blink and her thoughts caught tried catching her tears, the stretching weight of the agony, the troubled belief that she could proceed. Once her legs regained a little, something found a miracle it was in need of and she went further up the hill. The temperature dropped into a night where only a few stars were visible. She saw the hilltop finally and the soreness, deep in her leg tissue, unknotted and she felt a release in her back. Halfway down, she saw her old home. She felt like she was moving briskly. She was sludging. Losing control to her thirsts and hungers and hallucinating memories about her father and mother—who were singing the same song at equal distances from her, dressed in all white at a family reunion—their image took hold of her and she murmured her hopes of forgiveness to herself and she pictured herself young and her younger self made her think she could go faster.

She reached the bottom of the hill and her knee gave like that was all it could do. Her next step—automatic, a progression towards home—overextended and landed wrongly and she heard a snap, grating and debilitating, and it shot up the side of her leg, and she held everything back with breaths of rumination. She limped to the house, which seemed to shrink. Her ankle swollen with quickening pulsations as she knocked on her childhood’s crimson painted door, staring at her mother’s garden. The cosmos and lilacs, surrounded by light yellow bells and spiraling petals, blended her reminiscing of the crimson and the three golden threes warping her reflection. She knocked and knocked some more and kept knocking. Her knocks got quieter, an aching crossing down her bicep to her heart with each bang, and then there was her mother’s face. The old woman’s sunken reflection, given more, peeked through two of the window’s bent blinds. They’d seen each other, seen the other seeing them. Her mother gasped and the door opened and her mother stood there looking like the retiree she was confronted with having to work her former job for just one more day.

“Leda?”

“Yes, Mother. It’s me.”

“I see that now. What in the hell you doing here? You and me the only two out here and I know my voice is still as loud and as brash as it ever has been, Leda. I hope for your sake you ain’t come from wherever in the hell you came from to make me ask you the same damn question over and over.

“No, Mother. I would never.”

“That’s more like it. Now, out with it. Whatever in the hell it is.”

“Mother. I’m pregnant. I’m gonna be a mother too.”

“You sure as hell look like you is. Ain’t no doubt on that. Who’s the father? And you better not say who the hell I think it is.”

“I don’t know for sure.”

“You don’t know for sure. Well, I certainly don’t know either, Leda. How far along is you. You gotta at least know that.”

“A couple of months I suppose.”

“You suppose? And what’s a couple of months. Actually, you know what, don’t answer that. It don’t matter to me none really. I ain’t no doctor. Just tell me this, Leda. Just tell me what in God’s glorious name you doing here? You wanna just bring more shame to this family. Is that it, Leda? I bet you can’t even answer that and you ain’t gotta neither. It’s okay. Cause I don’t care no more, Leda. At all. I can’t. I damn sure ain’t no fool. You betta get on though. You betta get on just the way you came, specially before your daddy gets home. The last thing he’d wanna see is you—and with some baby inside you on top of that. Oh, for heaven’s sake.”

As a slight gust—they heard all the *thens* that they’d shared and neither of them spoke, holding emotions that were prescribed to them, those *thens* had turned to now, as singular and together and as divinity and as their shared vexation wisping her mother turning around, unable to look upon Leda any longer, closing the crimson door, which Leda

could only stare at, its untouched coldness attached to the wind's chill, and an unwavering defiance, which revolutionaries have, entered Leda's mind as though from above and she wiped tears before they could fully form this time as she'd seen her mother do and she thought of a new way back, envisioning it as though she were a bird flying over Alms. As if gripping for the wind in growing darkness, wanting to get lost, leaves crunching underneath each of her steps, she did not know where the path went, understanding she had no home, as though it went to the core while also traversing forward. Like the devoted, she looked forward, moving over those dead leaves, Horace and Diana awakening below her heart.

\*

In between heartbeats, she reached a body of water, a small river, small waves spreading through it. She stopped and she saw how big she was and felt her body's foreign contours with both of her palms, looking at the water to see what she was touching.

Examining her unfamiliar self, she caught her own eyes. They were overcome by a snout, dollar green and scaled and breathing heavy. Revealing its yard-long body with a predatory crawl, the rest of the gator emerged. Leda tried to run. As if the ground beneath her and time were working against her, she lost her balance. The gator had no such issues to contend with, its legs fresh, an appetite and a force that it lived to empower, and its eyes set on the flesh that it smelled. It moved towards her as though it were moving through a door that was left open and sprang out of the river, beads of water splashing from its body as crystals of light and its teeth clamped Leda's leg. Her body numbed with shock and everything went black and as her eyes rolled into her head, her eyelids covered them and she slipped into unconsciousness.

\*

When she awoke, a light was shining onto her face. Like a dream she could not remember, sourceless and indecipherable. She heard a woman with a soft voice say, "She's waking up. Thank You, Jesus. She's waking up."

Leda stared into the light until she got used to it. Her head giving into the pillow.

"Miss," the woman with the soft voice said.

"Yes."

Leda and the woman with the soft voice both felt a jolt of liberated surprise, hearing Leda's voice. A man joined the woman, stood next to her, and he too looked at Leda like a squirrel would look at a tree that they just climbed down.

"I am Nurse Toni. This is Doctor Benson," the woman with the soft voice said and the nurse and the doctor shook Leda's hand like she was famous and the nurse continued with a tinge of clairvoyance, "You are at Saint Maria's Hospital. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Leda."

"Leda, do you remember any of what happened?"

"Not really, ma'am," Leda said, looking away from the light for the first time. "I

was going to see my folks to tell them that I am going to be a momma. I mean a mother. I am going to be a mother. Except when I finally got there my mother said that they still ain't wanna have nothing to do with me. So, I started to head on to a—well, to any motel I could find nearby—and then—”

She stopped and remembered. The sun's light pressing against a nearby window reminded her that she could feel without touching. She felt warmth as though it were a fist unclenching its fingers within her and then she remembered that last night's decreasing temperature and she felt fear. The fear felt as though it was grabbing the warmth's hand and trying to pull it away from her/. She remembered why she felt the fear. It was her last memory. An incomplete, unfinished thought that she wanted to forget but could never, this though made her want to stand and run away from her past, from herself, from what that past had made her. Then she completed the memory. She looked at all the white walls around the window, returning to the warmth being pulled, confused by what surrounded it. Like the monks who discovered The Golden Buddha beneath the clay, she removed the cotton blanked and discovered her foot, shining bruises of black and blue and magenta. She attempted to wiggle her toes. Realizing immediately that she could not, she knew that control was never hers and that her foot would no longer be hers. *Nevertheless*, she thought, *I live*. This thought cleared a pathway in her mind and made a tingle go down her back and the tingle divided down both of her legs just the same. She touched her stomach with a dedicated consummation. Laying as that tingle grew with her awesomeness, she smelled the antiseptics and the urine that mangled underneath the antiseptics' surface. She looked again at her foot, content to move, as the spirits move, down that new path that her mind had found.

“How'd I get here?” she asked.

To that question, Nurse Toni and Doctor Benson smiled, coyly and as though in love with what they did and to each other, and the doctor answered, “You were brought here, Leda.”

“Brought? Here?”

“That's right,” the doctor said. “Three days ago.”

Nurse Toni nodded to confirm and Leda's shoulders loosened.

“Who brought me here?”

“A man,” Nurse Toni said, averting her focus to Leda's belly. “He carried you in here. Robert's his name. And he's been checking up on you, too, every day you been asleep here. It's about 3:30 now. I think he gets off work at 3, so he should be here at any moment. I am certain that seeing you all bright-eyed is just gonna make his day.”

\*

Robert arrived as Nurse Toni said he would. He watched Leda, his heart beating fast, as though he'd had twice his normal amount of caffeine and like she was the most beautiful natural phenomenon. Still getting used to what'd happened, as Eve would've looked at Adam had she been created first, Leda looked at him.

“So, you're this Robert?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“I’m Leda.”

“I know,” he said and chuckled to himself as he would’ve had he tripped over a bump in the sidewalk. “Doctor Benson and Nurse Toni told me.”

“They say that you the one who saved my life.”

“I just done what anybody would do. It’s a blessing I was there actually. I was just out smoking really. Turns out cigarettes can save a life too. Anyway. I was just walking and thinking and smoking and listening to a little nature and then I seen you. Thought you was asleep at first. Then I saw your foot and your leg. Lord have mercy.”

“I imagine it was even worse then.”

“Yes, Miss Leda, it sure was a sight, a bloody and scary sight, and so I checked to see if you were alive and obviously you was. But you wasn’t coming to for nothing. So I decided I had to get you here as fast as I could.”

“So, you did save my life?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He paused and looked at her bewildered face. “According to Doctor Benson and Nurse Toni it wasn’t just your life I saved,” he said, proud and vindicated and grateful.

Medusa

Who waits for something secret to be masked  
at the upswing of night before she will emerge,  
even midsummer, even this glaciated moorland, when

night is barely there at all, who waits  
then calls you, then appears, as white and nearly weightless as  
hydrangea blooms, as white and fugitive

as if you cupped your hands around a thousand  
moths, impermanent, translucent in  
July's perfervid prairie dusk, almost blue-white

with hotel TV glow projected on her skin,

a Garbo in Ninotchka, leaning on the jamb  
before you pause then wrist the knob, a glimmering  
photopsia slowfloating from her grisette smirk

to something else, a poise or microgravity  
that belies the gaping slobber girl contrived  
by staggered Berber and Sumerian boys before you,

who, above the urinals of Numidia and Ur,  
drew tongue and gape and gag and grunt, dithered  
(as you are here) by the redolence now indwelling

a bidding and beguiling Bemidji whisper,

the gorgeous movement of whose dark perfume  
in swirls around, untellable, ubiquitous,  
is now the only rhythm-mark of time,

whose sheaves of hair overfilling in your fist  
are now the counting-sticks for everything  
the world has ever had, whose kisses fertile,

countless, like the wood at Gargara,  
obstruct and supersede the throated, raving howl  
that tells why she is here, or would, that otherwise

would ring oblivion though gorges measureless to man.

The Wild Lament of Saint Teresa

with Tania

Two days' storm, the beach  
wrack line: woven grass, worms,  
sponges, and dark feathers from,

we guess, a tern, skimmer, some  
sort of gull. We talk about love  
and death, suspect choices, derelict

results. We walk beyond my usual end,  
and finally find the loon, wrapped  
in grass and shells. Its long neck curved,

not as in flight, not as in swimming,  
but as in dead. I nudge its white  
collar with a bare toe and think of Eberhart's

groundhog in the golden fields, his wasp  
and the breath of life. We turn into the wind  
slinging its rain shroud like a slow, dark parade.

## I'm Worth A Million In Prizes

My brother's youthful adrenaline rush came years before mine did, when he took me to watch a movie starring Ewan Macgregor that opened with him running from the cops under the influence of what took my father away from me, but my rush overshadows both of theirs because no one saw me come running with my decadent coping mechanisms, which have gone public beyond an angry youth, with an existential striptease performance due to my refusal to wear any kind of uniform here in my ongoing personal revolution.

## Highlands

Streams tumble, pool across the *puna*. On  
golden tufted grass sheep graze. Shaggy thatch  
houses rise out of the earth like  
hay stacks. Rough circles of stone corral  
llamas, *burros*. Rough squares of stone mark  
fields of alfalfa. The *sierras* embrace this  
valley. Snowy summits rasp the blue heavens.

## My Prison Hair

I'm clinging desperately to the sweaty arm of a naked seven-foot man. He's screaming rape and fire to anyone that'll listen. I'm a pretty big guy, a weightlifter, but the Lieutenant and I struggle, due to the humidity slickened concrete floor of the Segregation Unit. Our destination is a dingy white shower stall that the inmates are locked inside for their weekly five-minute showers. The stall is a mere couple of feet away, but it may as well be the entirety of the B-Wing hallway with its fourteen cells. Just before getting inmate Smithy to the shower, the slickened giant slips from the Lou's grasp. Smithy plants a hand and pushes his giant body up from the floor, sending the Lou and I scrambling madly to knock him back down. The three of us tumble like hard struck bowling pins. I seethe out "mother fucker" when my knee hits the floor.

"I'm going to grab you by your fucking pecker if you don't stop fighting me and pretty boy here." The Lou chomps this out through his gritty brown teeth.

Now this only serves to piss the inmate off further as evidenced by him balling-up his fists, arching his back, and kicking wildly. Dry spit flies.

The Lou and I, we both know that this guy has "full blown AIDS."

Full blown AIDS. I never thought about it then, but that's how the nursing staff would report it to us as a heads up, "inmate so and so has full blown AIDS."

Is there a half-blown AIDS?

Of course, I didn't think about a lot of things in those days. Unhappy, yet content enough to go along with the program just enough to be compliant. Wrestle with naked, diseased men. Get piss thrown on me. Get verbally abused, not just by the inmates. My family threatened. My entire perspective on life warped. But collect a decent paycheck.

I hear the lightning-fast unsnapping of the Lou's pepper foam pouch and turn just in time to get a smattering of the stuff all along my left side. Smacked into the face by the Capsaicin, Smithy bellows, instantly slapping his hands over his eyes which gives us the opportunity to finish wrangling him into the shower. I slam the bars shut and the Lou immediately clamps the golden padlock down.

Smithy pulls the shower handle on, turning his shrieks into cries of relief.

Per procedure, when an inmate displays a threat to his self in the Segregation unit, he is to be removed from the cell and locked in the shower while awaiting the prison psychologist to interview him. This avoids lawsuits, should said inmate harm themselves or others.

Smithy had tried committing suicide.

Again.

At least, that's what I'd thought when I'd looked through the little square window of the steel door while making my rounds and saw nothing but darkness. When I realized that I couldn't see any daylight filtering in through his outside facing cell window because his body was pressed against his door window, I'd radioed for help. A little pissed off because this was toward the end of my shift on one of my last days here, I waited, per procedure, until the Lou arrived. I rapid-fire keyed open all three door padlocks and dropped them to the floor, booting them away. I nodded one, two, three and then ripped the door open only to have a long arm lunging out of the darkness for the Lou. There was no rope made out

of bedsheets, or a Segregation unit jumpsuit, or collected tube socks strung together—this dude had *wanted* us to open the cell door.

As the shower hisses, the Smithy cackles, bringing the other residents of Segregation B Wing to a howl. Howling seems apropos at a moment such as this. Here and there, an arm shoots through the feed slots in their doors and launches hard turds like grenades in my general direction. *Hard* turds because they'd set them aside for a special occasion such as this.

The Lou, he shakes his head and walks backwards down the length of the chaos engulfing B Wing, somehow missing the turds without even looking, the lights flickering, because of course they'd start flickering now. The Lou, he spreads his arms like a ringmaster and yells over the raucousness of Wednesday and says, "I bet you're going to miss this in three weeks, aren't you, Greg?"

He never once called me by the correct name.

Thirteen years in, and not once.

I was working at a joint in Southern Illinois. I'd never wanted the job, but I was getting out. No one grows up wanting to be a prison guard.

I'm sorry, I'm supposed to refer to the guards as Correctional Officers.

No one grows up playing cops and robbers and correctional officers. And the inmates never aspired to play cops and robbers and correctional officers and caught robbers. It just doesn't happen. I'd taken the job because, well, I needed a job. I was in my mid-twenties and all my friends were becoming cops, which I'd also aspired to becoming until I did my internship at a jail and spent a lot of time with cops. My buddies were getting married and some of them even had toddlers bouncing around their modest two-bedroom homes. I was a community college drop-out doing hospital security, pulling security gigs at grocery stores, and working in a book store. I didn't have a lot of direction or hope for the future. So, I'd went and tested. And because of some poor sap's failed drug test, and my being fortunate enough to be next in line with a pulse and no opiates in my system, I was hired.

The prison where I worked was a medium-maximum security joint which means that there were medium-security areas and maximum-security areas, namely the X-house which was a classification area where inmates are housed before being grouped according to gang affiliation, crime, amount of time, locale they hail from, and all kinds of other shit that made it seem like a careful science.

I hated my job. Hated it from day one when that heavy metal sliding door thudded me inside and the fear on my face was laughed at by inmates and scoffed at by grizzled veterans who, without the uniform, would actually look like they were from Central Casting for the roles of "angry convict."

I didn't fit in that day, and I never would.

Prison smells like bad feet and gum disease and shit. It's loud and caustic. There's a perpetual gallows humor that addles everything inside you again and again until you emerge/retire 25 years later something gray and different than what you were when you went in.

And when you get out, that little ember of violence in thought and words glows on.

I spent my time on the inside, on the “right side” of the bars, with very little friends due to my crimes against the common mold of what a prison guard should be. I saw very few “officers” on the inside. There was no servitude or honorable duty taking place in there.

I wore the guise of an actual professional Officer when I’d been placed on the Crisis Intervention Team by the Major who, I liked to think, had seen something different in me than the other guards. Or maybe he saw a softness in me. A softness that the other guards seemed to notice when a clever new nickname was devised for me: Officer Hug-a-thug. Being a Crisis Intervention Specialist didn’t pay more, but was a pretty sweet gig as it got me out of a lot of distasteful work like anal cavity strip searches. Every time an inmate was kind enough to declare himself as suicidal, and the prison psychologist wasn’t available to visit with him, I became the listening guy that sometimes-talked inmates down from their proverbial ledges, assessed their actual willingness to commit suicide, and reported my findings and uneducated beliefs as to the veracity of an inmate’s claimed suicidal ideation to the prison psychologist.

I received two nice days outside of the prison being trained.

And, to my knowledge, I never guessed incorrectly.

One of the differences between me and the other guards was a physical one. I had hair. Not a buzz cut, a “high and tight,” or a shaved head. If you lined me up with the other guards, like in one of those cop show line-ups, it’d be easy to see that the one kid that was doing his own thing was me. I liked to look good, crisp. I combed my hair and used styling gel on it, citrus smelling Crew product. This, to the other guards, was a major offense. I was “Pretty Boy.” I spiked my blonde hair up, and I secretly hoped that the tips of my hair would glow golden if the sun caught them just so. When I was asked, facetiously, what style of product I used, and I’d said Crew, and not Axe hair gel, I also earned the moniker of “Faggot.”

But there were other differences, deeper ones than my looks.

I drove an economical sedan. And I didn’t have an NRA, Dixie Flag, or buck silhouette sticker on my car.

I also liked to read.

But in truth, many other guards liked a good book. We’d all stuff books in our underwear and do our best not to waddle all too much as we passed the shakedown room with the escape of a new life amidst the pages rubbing our nuts. No other guard was going to grab at your junk, lest he labeled a cock monster or cock gazer.

The other guards, they read books like: The Bible, any western, detective novels, and Maxim Magazine. But I was reading faggy stuff like the classics. I also read Cormac McCarthy, Larry Brown, and Harry Crews—all three of these authors very man’s man type writers, but definitely faggy by guard standards.

And, oh the time I got caught reading *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens...

I didn’t read the Bible and I didn’t wear a crucifix on my lapel, and I never prayed before a meal with my hands upturned to the ceiling, the prayer style where I worked.

And there was also my perceived inaction towards the inmates which, I guess, understandably, made me seem lazy to the other guards. Officer “Hug-a Thug” never screamed at inmates, or pounded the cell doors or the glass of the observation bubble. I didn’t grumble out racial epithets.

In fact, I only remember raising my voice once on a particularly bad day and yelling, “Lockdown, mother fuckers. Get the fuck out of here!” The inmates were so confused that they readily complied, finally scooping up their chess or card games and shuffling off to bed.

The differences between me and the other officers, between me and the inmates were legion. *Them.*

Me.

And for my differences, I used to think I was a better guard than the others for my humane treatment of the inmates—but I wasn’t.

It wasn’t humanity I was displaying. But it wasn’t laziness either. And until that day, one of my last at the prison, wrestling with a naked full-blown AIDS inmate, ducking turds and pepper foam, that it actually occurred to me that I was only slightly better than the other guards.

I had the ember of something vile glowing inside me, malignant, but threatening to catch flame and burn me from the inside out.

My kindness was just a show. I played a role as best I could to an audience of one—me. It was bullshit deference to these inmates. Contrariness for the sake of being contrary to the other guards. And when I was asked, and often I was, if I thought I was too good for the prison, I lied and said that of course I wasn’t. But I hated the prison, the guards, the inmates, myself for settling into this odorous shit of a place.

In truth, I didn’t want any inmate to kill themselves on my watch because I didn’t want the blame for it, maybe get sued for negligence.

I didn’t yell at inmates because I didn’t want to create any more problems than were already there. When assigned to a new cell house, I had one policy that I’d relay to any inmate who seemed like a heavy presence, or a gang chief: “I don’t give a damn what you do, just don’t make me work. Don’t do whatever you do in front of me.” This was one-hundred percent of the time met with quiet agreement. Inmate wasn’t going to ask what that meant, and I sure as Hell wasn’t going to try to elaborate on it. But how much harm did my indifference cause?

I’ll never know.

My indifference to everything corrections grew worse with each passing year until I ended up spending my days barely speaking a word outside of what was necessary to seem human enough for my coworkers to save me in the event of a riot. I walked the clattering prison yard, the long stretches between the cellhouses, the raucous chow hall with my head forward, eyes fixed straight and focused on an uncertain future. I hated myself for spending years in this ugly assed mint green uniform shirt.

Eventually, the uniform changed to something that looked a lot more “officer like,” dark blue, almost black shirts and matching pants. And it was on or about my eighth year, after the 1,346<sup>th</sup> Ace and Gary joke (my fellow guard and good friend of mine, he also wore hair gel which made us an obvious comparison to the dynamic gay duo of the SNL cartoon skit: *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*), when I decided I was going back to college.

No, this isn’t some college saved my life story.

I changed out my crotch reading material from fiction to textbooks—a much harder sneak-in as those expensive books tend to be as huge in size as they are in price. I

started trading my assignments for tower gigs and spent my time doing my English Degree homework after the yards were cleared and I wasn't expected to possibly shoot inmates with a Mini-14 rifle should they get squirrely. Sometimes, I'd pace the tower with my faggy hair and read aloud short stories that I wrote, complete with character voices.

On one occasion in the tower, I'd had the phone off the ringer because I didn't want to be bothered. The guard in the command center that manned all the phones in the joint was able to tap into the line and listen to me. He got some enjoyment from a horror story I'd written that took place in, where else? A prison. When he later asked me what the actual fuck I was doing up there, I explained just what the actual fuck I was doing. And that it was for a class. My nickname changed to, "Fagatha Christie." I got called into the Major's office and was told that, "Smothers, you do know that now you're a known reader, and a writer. So, we'll be watching you."

No shit. A known reader. A known writer. Being watched.

I even got called down to Internal Affairs shortly after this. Being watched.

In the gloomy light of the Internal Affairs office, the IA guard held up *All We Need of Hell* by Harry Crews and said, "This, this here book, see." He slid it across his desk to me. "We found this in an unattended lunch bag. What'd you have for lunch today? This looks like something you'd read. Is it good? Hell, huh? All we need of it."

I purchased the book again on eBay some years later, a first edition. Son of a bitch.

It took me a long time to graduate—five years to finish my Junior and Senior years towards my Bachelor's in English, but graduate I did. In roll call one morning, the Major announced that he'd seen in the newspaper that Smothers had graduated with honors from college.

There was no applause, no celebration.

No, this isn't some college saves my life story.

In fact, no one said anything. Except one guy, a guy I'd always admired, had worked out with, and even hung out with once after work and had a few beers with.

"Smothers," he'd said as we entered the double gates and the first gate clattered the slow crawl behind us, "You know what you are now? You're an educated Correctional Officer. Pretty one, but it's all you are and ever will be."

As the gate to the prison rumbled open in front of us, I flinched and wished I was big enough to hit him when he touched my hair. But instead, I nodded, stepped through the threshold and into the depths of prison.

Still fucking nodding like someone with Parkinson's and smiling.

Something shifted inside me. The pages of a book brought to fire for sitting too close to that ember inside of me. I wanted to hit everyone. To tell everyone: officers, administration, inmates with their sad and desperate eyes who studied me with accusations of being a failure, that I will not retire behind a badge. I liked the sound of that: behind a badge.

I was coming as close as possible to saying that yes, I was too good for them.

Me and my reading and writing and hair and pressed uniform and lack of a southern drawl and liberal politics and lack of hunting skill and no dip in my lip and no knowledge of football and...

Strangely enough, when I eventually got a new job, the other guards got pissed.

This, you see, confirmed that I thought I was too good for them. They said that me and my pretty boy hair would fit in well in the office and I'd probably get a boyfriend soon enough.

Every time they ran my escape down, I'd imagine, the words sizzling on my tongue before I swallowed them, telling them that I could fuck their homely looking wives and have them begging for more.

But instead, I settled for a discount to my safety on phrases like: I don't want to look back after 25 years and realize that this was all I accomplished. Or: I don't know what I'll do without man-on-man rape jokes, but I'll manage. Or: I'll see you when I return as Warden and become your boss.

And then, with three weeks left, I find myself wrestling with a naked inmate.

I leave Smithy, his face upturned to the cool rain of the shower, and complete my report. After rinsing my own face, neck and chest, and changing uniform shirts, I return to B Wing to check on him.

Smithy's sitting on the floor of the now dripping shower, his legs drawn up to his chest. It's strange, seeing a man so large sitting in such a way—looking reduced to something. His face is reddened from the pepper foam, eyes puffy. The wing has gone silent. The turds lay about the wing like the fossilized dinosaur eggs I'd seen once as a child in *National Geographic*. I'd wanted to become an archaeologist.

"Smithy, just what the fucking fucking Hell was all that hullabaloo about?"

Smithy he shrugs weakly. After a beat he says, "I was hot, Smothers. In the end, I got a shower. Mission accomplished."

"And pepper sprayed."

"Sacrifices, G. We're baking in them mother fucking cells. My eyeballs, they practically bubbling. And I was, like hearing voices and shit. Had to do something to get out. And I did. But you ain't going to say shit, right? Nah. Nah. You're short. Unless the Lou says you write me, you cool. I know you, G."

"I see." I nodded and looked down the hall so I didn't have to look at this reduced man. An inmate three cells down held his raised arm and middle finger up at me. I was thankful he wasn't yelling and stirring up all kinds of shit. "Yep. I am short."

"You know, you ain't never done nothing. You as laid back a mother fucker as I ever seen. You a ghost up in this bitch. And soon that's what you be. A ghost. A mother fucking ghost."

"Boo." Me saying the all-time scare word of cartoon ghosts actually scared myself. I'd never joked with an inmate. In thirteen years, I never once had a conversation of any merit, or shared a smile, or said as much as good morning to an inmate. I just, I just interacted.

"G, you be so kind as to grab me a book from the library cart? I'm bored in there."

I wasn't going to be a ghost, I was one. And always had been. Only present enough to be here. Many times, in my previous couple of years down here in the seg unit, I'd walked these four wings and done nothing, ignored pleas for conversation, just so I could hurry back to my desk and read. I never even passed a guy a classic or a mystery. Or even a goddamned western. They'd sit in their cells and stare at the gray cinder brick wall. Bake in the summer, freeze in the winter.

I listened when I was assigned to listen, talk a good script when it was required to

assess a suicide. And I faked it, man. I faked caring so good. I was never an officer. Just a guard, and barely a guard at that.

I left him and grabbed a Louis L'Amour title from the cart, stopped halfway back to Smithy, and returned to the cart—found *Of Mice and Men*. I tossed it into his cell atop his jumpsuit.

“Got you,” I said as I stepped over a turd and returned to the shower. “Why’d you put up all that fight, yell rape and fire?”

“Look, one of us is getting out of this fucking place. I put myself here and here, I’ll stay. Maybe I become a ghost too.”

I didn’t know what he meant, and it felt higher brow than I had any right to understand.

I jumped at the sound of a throat clearing behind me. Another officer, the biggest asshole of the entire camp—he’d been on my ass, joking about getting in my ass, since day one.

“Smothers, when you’re done hugging Smithy’s nuts, the Lou wants to see you. Mother fucker there’s got AIDS, you know?” He laughed and walked away, his handcuffs slapping their metallic, dull music with each step.

I puzzled about getting out of this place and ghosts and being cool and putting Louis L'Amour down as I passed through the double set of sliding doors, was popped out of the Segregation Unit house, walked past a line of inmates awaiting outside the Health Care Unit, and passed on by the Lou’s office. My neck and face burned in the cool breeze and the smell of pepper foam stung my eyes. My eyes watered and the words on the barber shop door were warped.

As I get buttoned into the barber cape, in walks the Warden. I watch in the mirror as he sits two chairs away from me. I’m in a place I’m not assigned to and my being here puts me at risk of a major violation called post abandonment. A vein in my neck throbs and I feel like a giant in the chair. The Warden is a regular visitor to the segregation unit and could easily recognize me. He’s going to spot me in the mirror and lose his shit. Although I shouldn’t care, the good boy in me indeed gives a shit. Then I realize, that with the barber cape wrapped around me, I look just like any other inmate. Carefully, I move my hand to my radio and turn it off.

The inmate at my ear snips the scissors three times quickly and asks in a laugh, “What can I do you for?”

“Take it all off. I want to walk out of here bald and beautiful.”

Although it isn’t funny, he laughs throatily. Then so does the warden, and then all the other barbers and inmates. So, I laugh too.

I walked out of the prison, head shaved, in three weeks, all these fantasies of telling everyone off with legendary slams spoken in a fake southern drawl, not happening. I walked out quietly, like a ghost. Like I was never there.

My head is still bald, I liked the look. And that ember, it’s still there and glowing, though dimmer. But it is always going to be there.

This isn’t some college saved my life story.

Bottom

What's the thing he says after the parts  
are dealt, in night-before-the-battle mode,  
blurting as the dopey troupe departs?  
A kind of grave *hoo-rah* or *lock-and-load*—

as if their oafy show were Agincourt  
or Bosworth and his overwrought goodbye  
a *see-you-on-the-other-side-old-sport*—  
maybe with forearm-clutching, thigh to thigh.

And later, in full-on assbattery  
under the moon, the way the sprite queen dotes  
pub-drunk on nonsense love, the flattery,  
his appetite for headscratching and oats,

the berries and bouquets each nymph extracts—  
the gag is she's the only one enchanted.  
He's just himself. He likes the snacks.  
He is a sop for adulation, granted,

but, to her roiling hungry panting, cold—  
a masterpiece of lunacy, cemented  
glazed and cast on cladding tile, the mold  
an inverse to disunion unrepresented.

Applaud the nameless potter for the arms  
devised a telltale way—his in distrust,  
crosscut, hers tendering him a plea of charms  
as if, aware their dreams are drawn in dust,

to ask, "What will become of us, sweet love?  
What part of promise may survive unspelling?  
What docile breeze won't scatter us above  
the distant sundering sky and past retelling?"

To which, if you and I had been supplied  
with parts, would we recall how underneath  
this same moon, at his slo-mo suicide,  
we nearly peed our pants and couldn't breathe?

Remorse

Remorse would not make this day any better,  
filling a space that is empty  
whether you want it to be or not.

Remorse for the way the world is  
does not make the world better.  
But it seems appropriate.

My heart has its own memories  
and they are dreams  
of what should have been.

Someone killed the cat I loved  
or rather, caused the cat to be in the road  
in that place at that time.

It might have been the kid next door  
or another kid.  
One we don't even know.

Obsession

Leering at time,  
And themselves,  
Two ragged drunks,  
In cassocks,  
Change bed every night.

Terrified of knowing each other,  
Or any other,  
On rope bridges, woven from ideas,  
They skirt round the edges  
Of fast passing days.

And squatting, dishevelled, sheltered in caves,  
With a dying old man, and his dying old donkey,  
They spit watermelon seeds,  
And argue tempestuously,  
In the language of stick and sand.

The Disconnect of Truth

Our blood has dried                      the cobbles red,                      and ecstatic stylites  
Line our streets.

Theirs                      a vast vision of piety,                      staring  
From 40-foot billboards,                      the impossible,                      a holy conviction.

And their thrill is ours,                      the transmuted thrill                      of becoming God,  
Divine and total,                      an axiom of awe.

And our faith is                      just that,                      proof,  
That the incalculable,                      remains,                      a zero sum.

And it is beyond our capacity                      to reach,                      and so it is  
We worship,                      through approximation.

And the day breaks,                      among the shambles                      of ruined flowerbeds  
That I call home.

And I laugh                      sweetly,                      and think  
Again                      of you.

## His Penis

Four arms and four legs used to make one body, heated and sweaty in two shades of one scent, in two shades of one taste. But he&she broke down in a muted dance, eyes averted, back-to-back, forearms touching shins.

We will never be one body again, he says silently, but she hears him well.

They will still inhabit the house by the square with many empty rooms that two bodies now share. From its windows they will see two solitary naked trees, at a distance from each other, cemented apart.

And he builds a wall made of their bedlinen, reaching up to his waist. There, beyond the wall, away from her touch, from her smell or taste, his penis is safe.

#16: *A Little* (Morning, Noon, and) *Night Music*

It was his mischief-maker's grin,  
his impeccable pecs, abs, glutes—

one taut compact body to wrap  
my legs around; but it was mostly

our post-coital tête-à- têtes—  
about semiotics, sign and signifiers,

Foucault's ascendant post-structuralist sway,  
and, oo-la-la, Todorov's treatise, *la fantastique*.

It was aphrodisia of exegesis.  
It was even convenience—that handy

cot in his faculty office a few slinky  
steps from my petite TA's cube.

It was *en fin* Sondheim, the sole cassette reeling  
through those three seasons of athletic bouts.

*Don't you love farce?*  
Same thing, this fucking.

When I Think of Your Mistress

The state insect of New Mexico  
has a torso as big as my thumb,  
as your thumb even, callused and cracked,  
gripping ropes caked in salt.

She is searching,  
crawling over sun-warmed rocks,  
invading burrows.  
She finds her tarantula.

Goads the other into a fight.  
Paralyzes it.  
Drags the living carcass back to her nest,  
lays eggs inside it.  
For weeks it hosts her children. Alive.  
    They eat her flesh. Avoid her organs  
    so she will live longer.  
They hatch. Eat their way out of her body.  
Emerge into air  
as she takes her final breath.

Thirst

A light glimmers – at the edge – of sight,  
Distending it – a whorling, a gathering –  
Into convocations of distemper –  
And here, crow wings furnish the bond  
Where rootstock and tissue meet –  
And new growing lullabies rock, with heavy lip-  
Whetting sweetness in dry air – I,  
I have made myself a garland  
Of their blackness: an inky paean  
To the high priest of fragments –  
And my lips, bright with thirst,  
Ripen to taste,  
Through this mesh of feathers,  
In a glutting call for veins,  
Calamus, and downy barb.

And beats the brook in lament:  
Its river call, for fresh eyes to look,  
As we wade in the muck,  
And the cormorant lifts its head to see,  
Raising its wings to – beat – and usher in the light  
To take flight, under a minatory of compressed  
Reflections: the imagery of night long low laid  
Beneath the clouds: our ladder to the stars –  
And, with the blood of crows, my sacrament,  
Dowsed, I anoint myself the harbinger  
Of footsteps, and wet leaves: an augur  
Of the mulch, here, where we sate thirst  
Before the sun breaks through the rain.

## My Hunger is Light

I loved a woman once who raised cockroaches. She trained them to lie on their backs and wiggle their legs in a kind of insect Morse code. They were always signaling the inevitable volcanic eruption in Italy that would bring on a dust-choked skies and more rain in Singapore. How could you not fall in love with a woman who was so gentle with the roaches, petting them in morning's quiet hours, naming them after favorite aunts and uncles, feeding them crystals of pure cane sugar stolen from a farm in Clewiston? Near Lake Okeechobee, the pond apple trees were cut down to build the Herbert Hoover Dike. Ripples on the water often mimic the path to eternal salvation if the east wind is just right and all the largemouth bass are sleeping. What do the fish dream, you ask? If I could answer that, we would have to add a whole new discipline at the college and hire fish experts from across the country to measure the brain waves of sleeping mullet and trying to intuit the meaning of the highs and lows measured on green monitors humming quiet tunes that sound vaguely like country and western ballads. I want to run off with the woman who trains cockroaches. I want to follow her herd wherever their hunger takes them. My hunger is light, in any form: starlight, moonlight, water light, cigarette light burning orange last night just down the street from the fizzy lamplight that needs to be replaced because it buzzes on and off across the parking lot. I am hungry for a more constant light. Without it, I'm told you might find yourself tumbling into a tar pit, transformed into a skeleton that a future paleontologist might mistake for a yearning insect because the bony hands are open in supplication. How would she know that this pain was from a terrible death, not a signal to the angels? The Wise Men knew that Jesus was allergic to straw. Resurrection is a city park where children play, their laughter like bells pealing in crystalline autumn air.

End-of-The-World B'Dazzled Blue

Just once I follow you like a dog over the sunlit bridge  
where the air is thinnest, dandelions more yellow, and spilt  
split pea soup generously laced with bacon.

My muddle is a tortoiseshell, the slipper washed up  
on the sand with its foot still intact  
after the last minor apocalypse. I'm sorry, I've lost

what you gave me, but I assure you, all my answers  
are correct. If you're not unobjectionable, I can be  
quite unreasonable, irascible, an irrational adjective,

a root-down day of boughs and anti-freeze. Through  
and through the window, the moon. The Pleiades ask  
where I was last night, the cat keeps me

in her line of sight, sighs and sleeps at me. I burn  
best at 451 degrees, and test this yearly, like smoke  
alarm batteries. With your death firmly imprinted

like a whalebone corset, a car seat, a case  
of lockjaw, I approach dusk and dust the same way.  
My hands smell like garlic. My hands smell like

regret. I rub them with salt, wipe them on the blade  
of my best stainless knife. Just once I wish to burn sooner,  
just once let me name all the colors of the atmosphere,

pull from the ozone every word in your soup bowl,  
number the tiny hairs shed on the head of a pin,  
in every part of this scarce-apple world.

Love Languages of a Literal Creature

It isn't that I don't understand  
metaphor, mind you. I have

the brain of a poet, after all.  
There were so many seed

-ing the cemeteries, they -  
we, are so very talented

at dying, just to be dug up.  
So I *could* wrap words

like bandages, bolt them  
to structures free or formal,

present them like a performance  
of humanity, we – I - am so good

at almost passing. I tend to grow  
on folks, mycologically person

-able. I'm sorry. This really isn't  
about me, I just wanted to explain.

I do know what all the sonnets  
mean, and maybe you would find

one easier to accept, but still  
the mélange of me - breath, blood

stitch, and sinew, couldn't help it.  
And it is so easily detachable,

I just didn't see the point of offering  
my heart, without going all the way.

## The Subtlety of Mass Movement

The coastline wanders  
out to sea one  
grain at a time  
and the locals swear it doesn't.

They remember yesterday  
as vividly as the day before  
and they will tell you  
there are things that have changed  
and things that never will.

One day they may question  
where the sand bar came from  
or where it went  
or why the boats in the channel  
seemed so much larger then  
but maybe they were just children  
with eyes bigger than  
they ought to have been.

Лицо - дыра.  
Внутри есть рука, держащая пенис.  
Мы ничего не слышим.  
Ветер сдирает кожу и тело исчезает,  
как ночь исчезает из  
белая доска.

The face is a hole.  
Inside there is a hand holding a penis.  
We don't hear anything.  
The wind rips off the skin and the body disappears,  
As the night fades from a  
White board.

Кровь выходит изо рта.  
Я боюсь умереть.  
Растение выходит из моего рта.  
Я стираю  
рисунок представляет меня внезапно.  
Я никто.

Blood comes out of the mouth.  
I'm afraid to die.  
The plant comes out of my mouth.  
I delete  
The drawing which represents me suddenly.  
I am nobody.

*Sam Cherubin*

## Nantucket

I wish I could remember these things,  
important things, you'd want to remember,  
in case anyone ever asked.

A real Nantucket basket is different than an imitation.

Tanned natives sitting on lobster traps,  
fibrous sea-grasses twined in their leathery palms,  
migratory birds fluttering above the seal pups.

It had that definitive salty smell of realness.

Breakfast

I know if I am patient  
the minnows will dine  
on my dead skin,  
my sunburn flaking off.

Standing in the sand of the lake,  
the schools slide  
around my legs,  
nibbling.  
Just to check,  
then two, then more.

I could walk deeper,  
let the sand give way to weeds,  
give them a feast.

Then I would emerge from the water  
and no one would recognize me,  
but they would know who I was —  
like in my dream  
where you have three heads  
and I sit at breakfast,  
scraping butter onto toast  
as if nothing is wrong.

## Wearing Glasses

I must now admit, fess up, tell it like it is,  
move beyond denial that I need to see squat—  
whatever squat is. Bottom line: I need to wear  
glasses, especially when my fingertips follow  
the enjambed lines of a perfectly flowing poem  
or decipher the expiration date on a tub of yogurt  
or remove strands of my wife's hair wadded up in an earring  
or keep my pen motoring down the narrow drag strip  
of white between the blue barrier lines on a pad of paper.  
I will confess when I see the optometrist,  
and I will stress how words such as *pickarel* and *pachyderm*  
now leap like circus critters through fiery hoops into my face.  
And at this moment, as I slide the glasses up  
over the bridge of my nose, I clearly see that burning  
hangnail on my left ring finger—the hangnail that got  
caught inside my wife's sweater while we giggled  
and paddled each other up the stairs. The hangnail  
that is now so magnified, so intensified, I cannot  
help but think about the sometimes ambivalent—  
sometimes caliginous—ache of love.

## Twisties

As I turn onto Carmel Valley Road, it starts raining ash. Eleven miles to home where the fire rages two miles further east. I left two days ago, the air quality index having reached 350. Today it's over 550, but I'm returning before the imminent evacuation order to grab boxes of family photos.

The wipers smudge ash on the windshield. Something like blizzard driving. I look for taillights, but in this ghost town, no one's on the road. Still, I'm doing twenty-five in the fifty mile per hour zone. No idea if I've gone three miles yet, if I've passed the red barn or the Mid Valley shopping center. I might as well be on the moon.

Midair, in the snow globe of the dress rehearsal's spotlight, I have no sense of where I am, only that a chair in the stands that is bolted to the floor is tipping. If I manage to land on my back outside edge, I'll probably start off again in the wrong direction, ending up at the wrong end of the rink. That night I tell Mother I'll do anything besides one and half revolutions in that blinding white light. She says if I don't do my Axel, there'll be consequences. Consequences can't be good. Somehow, I manage the Axel.

The N95 mask is suffocating. Rebreathing carbon dioxide, I feel light-headed searching for familiar landmarks in the grey. My hands, white-knuckled at ten and two, I continue straight.

Descending in Fiji's clear waters, I'm unexpectedly buffeted by strong current, pushed into a whirling eddy. Instantly a pilot with no horizon, unable to tell up from down, I summersault, grab for my gauge, continuing down— or so I think— in the snow globe. A 360 degree turn and then another 180 – a slow motion Axel— in search of my bubbles. At twenty meters, a menacing brew of swirling particles, eternity somewhere below. My mouth clamps down on the regulator. Slow exhale. The only possibility is up. Without a shot line. Will I remember ten meters a minute max? Three-minute stop at six meters? Immeasurable time before I hit the surface.

The Twisties gymnasts call being lost in space. 'Sundowning,' a version of twisting on land, is the name given to the late-afternoon disorientation associated with Alzheimer's or senile dementia. I know it can't be afternoon now, because I left the Bay Area at six AM and it takes less than two hours to get to Carmel.

Here in the Twilight Zone finger-like things protrude over the endless road. Tree branches or Tau tangles? What If I can't find my house? Or my boxes? Yesterday I went into a room and forgot why I'd come.

The building just ahead looks like the Village garage. If so, the next right should take me home. Tell the fingers of my hands to uncurl; left index hits the blinker, right thumb, the garage door opener. Inside, the boxes are just as I left them.

## Cuts

You must make several cuts  
in the back, where they will not show,  
if you want the thin front  
of the wood to bend  
so the staircase will curve  
its way upward, away from  
the flat floor on its foundation,  
toward the second story where  
you perform your ablutions,  
ready for bed, pray for sleep, and wake  
as one day winds into another,  
leaving solitary screams  
behind silent doors of bedrooms  
and bathrooms in your nakedness,  
shifting into your own uniform  
that cuts into your arms as you  
pose before the full-length mirror,  
seeing how close the cloth  
covers your body but you  
do not change because this  
is what you have chosen to wear  
to cover your cuts when you  
descend that curved staircase  
out of your door where no one's  
cuts show though you know  
they are there.

Hypoxia, My Hypoxia

We thought suffering telling us  
to use our names to fill in the blanks  
meant the blanks were crippled and sad  
which made us care even more.

It took purpose and props to conspire with pain  
to make each day a finish line.

Remember the angels our rural faith  
proudly carved from the ruins of a church  
we always talked about building and burning  
to experience the fullness of god,

or were we just out of breath?

It was so important to be confused and believe the race  
was worth the run, even when it wasn't.

I loved the way our faces looked,  
one side being a footstool for god,  
the other an umbrella for the dead.  
They called you Stillness. I called you Blue.

*Hypoxia, my Hypoxia.*

## A Walk To Where

A storm was brewing as I left  
for your house  
and it rumbled and cracked  
and spilled its guts  
when I was half way  
to my destination.

With the water rolling in like tides  
from every direction  
and harsh wind  
punching at me  
like a middleweight,  
steady footing was no guarantee.

And yet, here I am on your doorstep,  
soaked through, hair like  
a badly fitted wig,  
chin dripping,  
shoes squelching,  
ready for colloquy  
and wine and nibbles,  
much face to face,  
maybe some interconnection.

But please, don't laugh  
when I dedicate my unhappy  
journey to you,  
your immaculate looks,  
your overall dryness.

I dressed for the plucking of expectation  
from touch, feeling from expression,  
exaltation from charm.  
But I caught the sky at a bad time.

## No Reasonable Offer Refused

The centerpiece of the cherry ranch on the edge of Lodi was its packing shed, which packed and sold only the prime fruit—dark red, almost purple Bings too big to pass through any but the largest hole in the sorting card. Those that didn't make the cut—the “culls” marred by spurs or doubles—were set aside for relegation to the maraschino brining bin. We were able to rescue a few lugs to a higher fate at the end of each day, selling them for rum money from a makeshift stand on the shoulder of West Lane.

There was very little beautiful about the location, aside from a certain geometrical refinement to the rows of trees behind us. The temperature had finally started to drop as we set up our lawn chairs one weekday evening in a ragged row beside the lugs of culled cherries, with Brian Brown's handwritten sign advertising the going price rattling in the breeze:

—Cherries—  
30 cents per pound  
3 pounds for a dollar

The sign was, to my mind, a work of genius. Five customers shelled out a dollar each before a sharper shill—probably from out of town—noticed it was ten cents cheaper to buy by the pound. Brian pointed out that neither tallying method was advocated above the other; in fact one could argue that, given its top placement on the placard, the per-pound method was given implicit priority. I think the way he put it was: “I never said it wasn't.” It might have been some comfort to the rapidly departing man that he wasn't the first or the last person bewildered into silence by Brian's reasoning.

After the season had wound down, I took a job at another packing company a little farther down the road. Brian and his wife Carolyn let me stay at their house on the ranch while I looked for an apartment. The roadside stand had been abandoned, and in its place a stronger tradition had taken hold. A little after sundown Brian would turn off the music—*Funky Kingston*, maybe, or *Exile on Main Street*—and he and Carolyn would sit opposite each other at their folding table. This was before they had kids and could have plopped down anywhere. They pulled up a chair for me and we had dinner. It was a home already, the two of them were a family, and it was an unaccustomed comfort to sit with them for a while in peace. It's been a few years since then, never mind how many. As Brian taught me, there's no point in counting unless you think you're being cheated.

#

Here he comes now, ponytail and trucker cap bouncing, his gait both aimless and purposeful. More than likely there's an oddly shaped object in one hand, and a beer in the other. Brian rarely met you empty-handed. A radical atheist farm boy for whom very little was without value or use, he collected what others tossed aside, including contradictions. He hit every garage sale and flea market he could locate, zeroing in on the very things that would be both most sellable and least missed. He nearly always turned a profit, though that

wasn't the point. He'd just as soon trade one peculiar thing for another, or failing that, give it away. The point was the transaction, the one-on-one passing along of a tangible thing. His collecting wasn't strategic, or even intentional, no matter what he might have claimed.

We were a part of that collection, a group of friends accumulated over the years, expanding with the arrival of children and occasionally shrinking when someone moved on. We were held together by him as much as anything else, our connections affirmed every winter at the annual holiday party. The party's venue rotated year-to-year between three or four houses spread roughly along highway 99, with Brian and Carolyn's Yuba City house the unspoken preference, its garage the gravitational center. Brian could invariably be found in there—along with his two oldest friends—dealing blackjack and doling out patter. The field emanating from the bill of his cap exerted a magnetic pull few people fought against as he flipped cards and narrated eBay finds like archaeological digs. Or told a story you figured into that made you feel for a time a little more consequential.

The last time I saw him, a hard wind was pouring off the Sutter Buttes and sluicing over his back fence into the yard Carolyn had transformed into a calm wilderness. Native plants hugged gentle contours and trails cut through in unhurried lines, their margins pocked by Brian's quad cane. A wind chime on the shed clanged in the gusts, along with a bell ringing somewhere to the north. Brian had been slowed by cancer and chemo, but was otherwise the same Brian I'd met forty years earlier at a semi-communal house in Davis. He took a buck off me before I'd even sat down—the first of many he'd more than pay back over the years. He was an anomaly, a gambler who didn't really care if he won, and as a consequence usually did.

I don't know if he was comfortable with the language of gambling in the context of his disease, but he understood it. His doctors quoted rates of survival, recovery percentages. The odds were against him. His cancer was at an advanced stage, and the one promising treatment—a bone marrow transplant—involved a brutal chemo regimen and an uncertain outcome. Success was a longshot if you looked at it straight on, but no one who knew Brian would have bet against him.

A friend of mine sent me a picture the day he told me Brian had died. It was taken at the last holiday party before the pandemic, in the back yard of the friend who was hosting it that year. Brian's telling a story and I'm laughing. I wish I could remember what the story was. He's holding his hands down and apart, as if he's pushing a wheelbarrow, or about to touch two wires together that shouldn't ever meet. The background is a scruffy patchwork of stumps and outbuildings exposed by a recent wildfire. The ground's bare, it's late December. There's no one else in the picture, which is how it always seemed with him.

#

I can feel a kind of general delusion nibbling the line as the tail end of the pandemic wrenches and stuffs the old world into its new shape. A stubborn wish for what happened back in that other world to stay back there. For us to pass blithely from one room into another and close the door behind us. But of course it's a fantasy. The walls are as thin as the walls of a cell, and the quiet is unbearable. Nothing—certainly not the dead—will remain willingly behind. So we'll have to bring them grudgingly along and try to do them

justice.

I open the door as much as I can stand. The world's smaller, yes, and a little poorer, but everything will have to be made to fit. I'll have to move a few things around, stack some of the heartbreak in with the cautious optimism. I don't know if there will be a holiday party this year; I'm not sure who we'll be by then. A big old, lovable, one-time-only part of what made us *us* is gone. In the end we'll probably give in, hoping it's what he would have wanted. After the last of the fires have gone out and the rain's started up again. Standing in someone's back yard in a broken circle, waiting for Brian to come fill it out.

Monica

The field the pheasants inhabit  
holds her stash.  
This remnant of fowl,  
paralyzed by the startle  
of her silent approach,  
watches when she hides  
the beer that helps deliver her  
from the midden she calls home.  
In time, a rafter of wild turkeys  
replaces the frightened pheasants  
with their bolder view.  
These replacements mind  
Monica's muttering in puzzled Polish  
as they patrol their glade.  
When she can't find her cache,  
she forgets her intention to escape  
among her husband's cars—  
left to rust, for nature to hide—  
nothing there she could power  
with her spill-over anger.  
She will never yield  
her treasure to the turkeys.  
She and they molt  
their lives in unison.

## Little Death Language

You used expressions from a dead  
language, as though you might revive it  
and see it spread beyond the land where  
people had stopped receiving visions though  
they still packed their bread and olives, expecting  
to see their ancestors in sunspots,  
for advice on the rising of oceans,  
retreat of sweet-tined grasses, the waves  
ushering tribe away from succor and sources  
taken for granted, though no one listens to a prophet  
in his own time and station.  
Though you claimed to have,  
in the original dialect, one learned  
in wartime, where the guttural attaches  
to more of the urgent vocabulary: obscenities,  
commerce, though this was a tongue short  
on promises; long on risks; brittle for contracts.  
When you said what you said about empty hands,  
you expected me to agree, or take it as a compliment;  
perhaps picture your benefactors and their livestock  
with nowhere to graze but between  
rock and wind, the mud on lucky  
occasions, but I've always known the weight  
of emptiness, from the drag of the fabric  
beginning at the wrists, and down to the ankles.

Son of a Bitch

Me licked clean, warm tongue  
on the sticky membranes that burst  
separating us. We do not waste,  
a family trait after centuries  
of hunger, but I am not  
a dropped ice-cream cone  
on a sidewalk, though one would,  
for moments at a time, get the same  
intense attention. Gallons of milk  
right out of the carton, loaves  
of bread toasted and slathered  
with butter. Oh, we crawled  
all over her, eager to nurse,  
born in the crawlspace next  
to the heat of the furnace.

Anthropogenic

“Queequeg no care what god made him shark.” —Moby Dick

It’s not unnatural for a shark pup, secure inside the womb, to cannibalize its siblings—impelled by an instinctive need to dominate, and becoming, via murder, the most complete expression of itself.

Solitary by nature, cold-blooded experts of efficiency, they’ll track vulnerable prey for miles, joining cousins in a collective and remorseless act of annihilation—an implacable machine until their edacity is sated.

But on occasion one of their own number is wounded in the frenzied wave of teeth, and the others will turn on it, perfecting a cycle that commenced not within the sea but with Cain, Abel, and He who made them.

*Richard Peabody*

A Murder of Crows

in the parking lot outside  
the Van Gogh Immersion.

As if somebody released them from  
a cage on the flat warehouse roof.

Primordial tricksters  
cawing atop streetlights,

remembering the wheat, the sky,  
the peculiar face of the painter man

on the banners stretched  
across gray brick walls.

Reminding us  
that generations of crows

waited for him  
to bring more treats.

*Richard Peabody*

Mercy Seat

Elegant widow  
clutching  
a machete

## Someone Kills Someone But I Don't Know When

Twenty years ago, I could have gotten the help I so desperately need just walking through this kind of jangling truck stop door. No words necessary. Barrel curls. Cherry chapstick. Nipples like diamonds on my t shirt sundae. I was a walking dog whistle.

Now, I'm standing here at fifty next to the chrome counter of Rupy's Roadhouse outside De Kalb, Mississippi, with my fifty-year-old pancake tits awash in my fifty-year-old armpit discharge, actively ignored. By scores of hapless drivers: broken nosed, gap-toothed, pig-bellied, bald-tonsured drivers. Men seated in a hunched line dismember chicken and waffles. It's clear at first glance I'm neither hooker nor bounty hunter, and the waitresses all wear tags, so I'm not that, either, so that's the limit of my potential importance exhausted.

I dropped my phone between the driver's seat and the console. The car is a rental. Free to me.

He said it was the least he could do.

The ergonomic seat makes a cove in the molded cutout of the center divider so the seat can't be slid adequately forward to free my stuck phone. It took me an hour to even find it.

"I need help! I can't reach my phone."

Raised eyebrows but no comments. No tears in my eyes. All the liquid is in my pits.

A guy in a pink corduroy cap looks at me. He's eating an entire turkey dinner for breakfast. I can't remember the last meal I ate. I'm glad it wasn't his.

"Please! I have to get the seat out. I have to get my phone! Doesn't anyone have a set of wrenches? I'll pay you!"

Collective disdain ripples through the diner.

Pink Cap swirls a glob of cranberry into his mashed potatoes with his fork in a noisy way I can't help watching. "You fixing to chainsaw your car for a phone?" At least he's interested.

"It's a rental."

"You fixing to chainsaw a rental? You got money to burn."

I shake my head. "It's not mine to burn."

Thin pink lines on the bill of his cap catch dust motes in the mismatched bulb's wayward shaft. Gravy, biscuit, dark meat globules snow airily down his shirt front. "Where's him whose it is?"

There's an empty stool beside his place at the counter, stop sign red. I slide onto it. Make a frame of my forearms on the chrome, hang my face in the window between my shoulders. "He's not important."

Shoving the plate gently away with crossed wrists, Pink Cap folds his arms on the counter too and cocks his head on a pitch.

"If you say so."

"I do."

"You stole it?"

"No. "

"You running out on him?"

"It's not a surprise to him, no."

“You in touch, though? You negotiating?”

“Oh, no. No, no.”

“Why you need the phone, then?”

Our noses nearly meet on the crest of waving interest.

“Maps.”

He waits.

“I like to see where I’m going.”

“That’s just a lie.” He uses the inside of one unfolding arm to crook the plate towards me.

“What makes you think I’m hungry?”

“I can see your skinny tit through your shirt sleeve, honey. Tide you over till we get your maps unstuck.”

Once he’s gotten up and gone, I duck my chin to check. This t shirt is big as a sandwich board on me. I don’t know how I got so thin so fast. There’s an untouched slice of canned pumpkin pie still waiting. The spoon breaks the crust like a fingernail in the dirt.

Chopstick dexterity ought to be a Jewish signal of potency. He was phenomenal with sticks. He was always helpful to women. If a coworker was moving. If a friend of his mother’s had a daughter with a raccoon problem. If a neighbor asked to have her dog walked. His help was good, competent and unassumingly offered. It always felt very transactional from where I sat. I was pleased and proud he could offer the help and vend the assistance I couldn’t or was loath to. And I enjoyed the vicarious credit.

He made it sound so matter of fact. First, he heard from her. She got in touch with him. For help. Then he met her. For lunch. For Chinese food. To discuss the help. Then, he helped her. Then, they had sex. Then, he left.

“Was that...instead of getting paid?”

“Oh, I would never ask your friends for money.”

I got really high, and I thought about death. I took note of how alone, all alone, in the world I was. How flimsy are walls. How empty statistics. I shuddered so hard my ribs stitched. This is how hard a woman shakes when she’s being killed, I thought. Footsteps pounded in the room next door. I put out the lights and put a nature movie on my laptop and lay fetal on the bed with my shoes on and the door locked. I could not stop shaking. My breast grew a knot.

Pink Cap shows a strange tool, like a coat hanger wire lobster claw cracker, but big as garden shears. He shows his essential disdain for my tiny, fifteen-year-old car by refusing to sit all the way inside: he cops a weird one-kneed gate pose with his twice as big upper body flung across the driver’s seat and the big pincers tool held almost in prayer. His wrists are remarkably flexible. I picture them taped, with that full range of motion, and I feel hopeful.

Usually that’s the best thing to do with violent intrusions. Skip the shame. Take the hit. Move on.

Then he heaves his back up again so the car’s doorway is blocked from my view.

I can see into my back seat. It feels like I'm looking into a Salvation Army sorting bin. A huge pile of blue net does a number on me. I know it's a shower curtain but it looks like a prom dress.

It's working. I can already hear the springs resonate. There's a way things sound when they take purchase, and that's what I hear.

When our cat died, we had to choose: fight over dust jammed crinkly balls and perforated blankets, or burn the lot. I guess there were other ways to handle that, looking back, but we played to our strengths. I was proud of us for being fair, if not terribly kind.

There was a dilapidated plank shed on our corner with a horseshoe over the threshold and a fire pit in the yard. Others in the neighborhood had cycled through with their occasional immolations. An artist in her sixties once used it to destroy all her journals. She had a grim diagnosis, I forget what. I don't know how much longer I can.

Crinkly balls are shooting stars scattered across the sky of your cat's floor. You throw planets, and they chase. They come trotting back carrying stars like mice in their mouths.

Since this new friendship all started ten minutes ago, I've felt less invisible. My reluctant savior brims with human foibles. Just a man eating a turkey dinner for breakfast at a truck stop counter in Iowa recruited to esoteric aid by lowly damsel. The strip of his belly in back where his 2XL shirt is giving up the ghost of coverage as a bad job. His pink cap like a giant's diva cup lain on my passenger seat. All this as he tries to backalley my overheated phone out of my overheated car seat so I can get back to social media and retroactive triangulation.

I wonder if Pink Cap is going to have sex with me. I wonder if I am going to consent or resist. I wonder if he's noticed yet the charging cord. It's six feet long and stashed somewhat out of sight under the wheel and the seat. It disappears under the front. Because it's plugged in to the phone.

This frantic flystrip waving inside my heart. All catch, no quarry.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked.

"What an unfair question. Either way I answer, you win."

He thought that over.

Pink Cap midwives my phone free.

Stab stab stab on the messages icon.

Refresh.

Nothing.

"How long's it been?" he asks.

Omitting the minutes and seconds, I say, "Forty one hours."

He reaches past me for his cap. We almost touch but we don't and I cringe and his

heart breaks. No one has ever felt as sorry for me as this man does.

He holds out one hand. I give him back the phone. He puts it in his pocket. He tosses his cap back on. "Come get another bite to eat before you go." He holds out his other hand. I take it. I get up. I let him lead.

Lit fires and fired arrows make the same sound.

I'm only a few days from getting where I'm going.

*R. Thursday*

If, on a visit, a lover...

*With thanks to Italo Calvino*

The first time I tried to lend you  
a winter title, you told me you knew  
it, favored by a chaining phantom, and so  
shelved with other such unmentionable  
mementos. The first time you tried to  
lend me the same winter, I introduced  
our copies: book-ended symmetries,  
stacked mirrors till I saw you again,  
transmuted returned codex to a tin can  
line connecting, an inside joke where the heart-  
punch line is only 'I was thinking of you when...'

The second time you brought the same  
winter title, eagerness soft and curiosity  
earnest, I reminded you how like a season  
it was, this swap, and isn't that something  
like love? Safely acknowledged hurt, until  
a return to the soul of something, of ourselves--  
then a recursive connection, and unbrittle desire  
to know: so what do you think now, how has it,  
I mean you - I mean us - shifted? Do you still like it;  
what new shadows dance between the lines  
when lit through my eyes? How so our style  
of love, to repeat reassurance without fatigue: why,  
yes, I have read that, but let's talk about it again,  
let's talk about anything, again, each time something  
like a new revolution, a turn towards welcomed warmth.

*Nazar boncugu*

A man saw me staring at the eyes. I reached for one, picked it up. “They are the evil eye,” he said. I dropped the eye back on the pile. And stepped away. Quickly. I knew about the evil eye. I had forgotten about it, but in that moment, I remembered. I had heard my grandmother talk about it. My reaction surprised me. I am a well-educated woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I don’t believe in superstition. Not like my grandmother, who learned her superstitions from her Italian peasant immigrant mother a century earlier, and had many of them reinforced when she married into a Greek family. Breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck. Spilling salt signals sadness to come. Throwing some of the salt over one’s shoulder provides some protection. Eat lentils on New Year’s. Doing so will bring health and fortune in the New Year. A found button foretells a new friendship. Don’t open an umbrella in the house; it will cause trouble to rain on the family. Knives and scissors given as gifts are an act of ill will and malice. My mother’s blood is Mediterranean blood. My mother would tell you that she doesn’t believe these superstitions. She is a woman of logic.

The man laughed at my reaction. “No, *they* are not the evil eye. They are *for* the evil eye. To protect you *from* the evil eye.” Ah, now I understood. I nodded. “Charms,” I said, “to ward off the evil eye.” “Yes,” the man said. “*Nazar boncugu*,” he said, giving me the Turkish name. “You should buy to protect your family and friends.” I smiled and picked up one of the glass eyes again. The smoothness of the glass was pleasing in my hand. The pupil was black as the fur on a Halloween cat. The blue of the iris brilliant as the sea, touched by sunlight. I stared at the pile of glass eyes. Hundreds of them. They stared back at me. I set down the eye, smiled at the man, and walked away. “Miss! You need the *nazar boncugu*! You must buy!” I hesitated, for just a moment. Did he know something? No, of course not. He was a souvenir vendor. And I am a woman of logic.

The glass eyes followed me during my travels. Sometimes I saw them for sale. Sometimes they peered at me through my mind’s eye. *Matiasma*. That was the Greek word. Evil eye, must ward off the evil eye. Not that I believed in the evil eye. I was intrigued by the smoothness of the glass, the stark blue, white, and black of the charm. I also appreciated the glimpse into another culture, a culture tangential to that of my ancestors. That was all. That’s why I brought some home as gifts for friends. Interesting mementoes. Which now hang in our homes and offices. Not that we need them. We are people of logic. *Nazar boncugu*.

## Snake Plant

That potted snake plant looks nothing like a snake:  
it's a wide flat ribbon that ends in a point  
—maybe a snake flattened by traffic  
on some desert road—but no snake I know  
stands head-first in the dirt like a signpost,  
though I've seen them slip quickly down a hole  
between two rocks in my garden.  
& no snake I know of is so cardboard stiff,  
or pale green, or white rimmed,  
though I've seen ribbon snakes, dark green  
with yellow racing stripes, & wouldn't it be cool  
to see a snake in helmet & goggles  
buckled into a Formula One, tongue flick  
for a thumbs up, tear around the track,  
because snakes are fast, “a wrinkle in the grass,”  
though they freeze when cautious. The snake  
that bit my daughter's foot stuck around,  
stood its ground long enough for a cell phone selfie,  
annoyed to be almost stepped on,  
which is how they eventually determined  
it *wasn't* a rattler, though I didn't know that at the time,  
racing across half of Pennsylvania in the pre-dawn night  
with the only best-case scenario I could think of:  
*she'll only lose her foot*  
which had inflated to almost twice its size,  
each hour's swelling marked  
with a paramedic's sharpie, a topo-map of toxins,  
but it was a copperhead's bite,  
so that was the worst of it, & by the time  
I arrived at the hospital the antivenom,  
freshly flown in from the zoo, had begun cull the swell.  
So, hurray for modern medicine  
& for hospitals that write off exotic expenses  
& for the taxpayers that absorb the cost  
& for the snake that gave my daughter  
a reputation for toughness  
she carried the rest of the school year  
& a story that's good for a lifetime,  
that snake that lay like a dark ribbon in the rocky shadows,  
though nothing like a snake plant,  
which looks much more like green lasagna  
when you think about it.

One is alarmed by the reciprocal gaze. The devil, preoccupied, has no use for one's idle hands. What else might one see on holiday? A waterfall spill and expand, tangle and fray before the mist and splash? A snake hoarding pearls in its nest? A stain dispersed? A window bricked in? A shadow pinned to a wall? A beloved pined after? A series of vignettes? A blue tarp over a linden branch as a rude screen? A fiddlehead uncoil? A nascent fascism? A view up from under ice? A beautiful in-law? One stands out in the crowd. With each step forward, the feedback enlarges.

A Nearly Level Place

shelter-in, the siren shrieks:        where sky reaches down father-  
fisted     to belt the loosening earth into a frenzy:     a doorway    an eye  
a womb    so much destruction in re-    birth        what it must have been  
like when god still touched     us    stirring dust up into men to kill off  
other men    before we mastered this mastery        a golem forged of winds  
warring against each other:    everyone we've fought        so hard to love  
huddled together    finally embraced     in a concrete bunker beneath all this  
useless house:     our channels gone static     the neighbor's dog still tethered  
to bur oak & yowl     a jagged treeline leveling:     grandpa reminds us exodus  
is the stuff of myth     how children in unpronounceable places should remain  
there regardless        self-sufficiency & stay &     when the water runs low &  
the roof disassembles     before whatever god is listening untangles the storm  
there is only     us & them     & broken buildings & rebar & bodies holding  
other bodies:     to keep it all holy     how we must hold ourselves up     as sacrifice  
until the next    sacrifice:    fences re-barbed     oak replanted     another throat  
to fit the rope     still trembling    nooseless    in the yard:    this silent fucking yard

## Desert People

Whatever it is,  
we let it grow,  
honor it for its staunchness, its persistence.  
This is the desert after all,  
home of the unsated, the unsoothed.  
And underground roots have it hard enough  
but the surface is sun-dried brick.

This was once ancient sea  
and now there's not a trace of dampness.  
And faces age two years to winter's one,  
while, but for stray cats,  
the coyotes would starve.

The heat is fire without flame,  
too withering to speak sometimes,  
and distance is constant mirage  
and everyone's a stranger  
until they emerge from the shimmer.

At least, the night frees us a little.  
We get stars like some people  
accumulate mosquito bites.  
And a moon that changes like moods.  
We're human pupfish.  
We can survive just about anywhere.

But water comes from someplace,  
even if begrudgingly.  
Turn on a faucet  
and something trickles out.  
And, on rare occasions of rain,  
we reacquaint ourselves with the color green.

Outside, we watch our step, in case of snakes.  
And have candles ready  
in case the overhead wires lose heart  
by the time they get here.

No one grows fat.  
The weather's like a diet pill.  
And we dress loose

so as not to keep the occasional breeze out.

It's primordial here but we adapt.  
And, ask anyone, and they'll pronounce  
the word "saguaro" for you.  
We're not primitive.  
We're too hardy to be endangered.  
And, knowing what hell is like on a daily basis,  
we're spiritual by default.

We can still laugh.  
Sometimes with company  
but mostly within ourselves.  
And there's none of us is rich,  
for it's a twenty-mile drive  
to the nearest scratch ticket.

They say that desert people  
are as dry, as harsh, as uncompromising,  
as the desert itself.  
If they didn't say it,  
we would.

Ode to the Mission's Acronyms

Praise to the NOAA's forecast of hospitable weather  
on planets awaiting us in the Goldilocks zone. Praise to LASIK  
performed on the Hubble telescope's lens

so we see a hydrogen oasis where our descendants  
will awake from deep sleep, take a swallow,  
then continue our endeavor. Praise to mission patches

embroidered with gods & dragons we haven't outgrown.  
Praise to the space programs. Praise to the ESA,  
to JAXA. To CNSA & to ROSCOSMOS. Praise to NASA's

Mission Control, & praise to Jet Propulsion Laboratories  
for coding the rover's damaged wheels to moonwalk Gale Crater.  
Praise to the acronyms of nations

who no longer discern *limb* from *body*. Praise the decision  
to love others as we love ourselves. Praise, also,  
to *Research & Development* for new materials

so our skyscrapers glance planes & bolides away,  
harmless as frisbees. Each day we journey further from home  
is one to praise our system redundancies,

each put in place by at least one astronaut's death.  
Praise to the seed vaults in Antarctica. Casting our crises  
into space, I give Praise for *acceptable human loss*

as human loss is no longer an exception.  
I pray you, too, let rise within you the blue-hot living word,  
kindling your voice as we praise the golden ratio.  
Let us give whatever praise remains to its own act of giving,  
all I've found equal to the mission's pursuit.

All Your Hot Work

1.

My annealer annulled all your hot  
work  
at the glory hole. Once liquid sun. We

dipped our hands & had no hands.  
That golden glow is gone. Clear glass.  
Come,

lay with me on the marver, a cold  
smooth marvel. Marred & marbled by  
our breath.

Soffietta droops, starved of its cone.  
Taglia scores nothing. Punty bent.

Unusable. Long tubes that miss your  
diaphragm.

2.

Who trusts a bomb lance? Breaking  
to bits in front of your face. Oily  
blubber-

spades flexed & flensed. Years of self-  
recrimination traced in scrimshaw.  
Why

didn't I take care of them? Whales  
agree, deep in the molten sea.

3.

Half-moon *kenzan* going two separate  
ways. I twisted, but couldn't hold on.

*Ohuchi* dulled; black leather dry &  
cracked. Bonsai escaping indignities,  
climbing from tight containers. How

long can I stay confined to a pot?

4.

Tiny birds hit the window & bounce  
down the steps. Stunned, shake, fly  
away.

### Three Marbles In A Jar

The precedent is Cantilever versus Earthquake. There's no innocence like that of standers by. In lieu of tulips I would tiptoe through the tulips' ruins. I would use internal tourniquets to stop believing. If in senses one through six I'm apprehending then I'm acting fast. I learn of lesions in my sleep. You're welcome to my thoughts.

As virtue needs no sense of humor electromagnetic energy may even propagate in outer space. Descartes said, May the word that's not in spell check be *extrapolate* or *heretofore*.

As watches, wallets, keys and coins on distant dressers, so improbable my cause, but just. I'm in a different prison now. Who gives the twist permission? It's a new dance and it goes like this. Here, hold my breath while I.

## Love Over Oceans

A proposal for extracurricular research

### **Abstract**

Never underestimate the heartbreak of the big bang. Imagine a force capable of compelling an ecstasy of infinite singularity to scatter into a vast, cold and dark universe.

### **Tangible**

I want to live in a world with the environmental allowance for lovers to fly across the world to be with one another. I want learners to be able to voyage to the edge of their known universe so that they may be confronted with the bewildering landscape of human possibilities: within and without. I wish everyone the freedom to move until they know they always belonged.

Yet I know this is not the case. I am an anomaly in time and space. So I try to plant trees and compost my melon rinds and smile at strangers and look down at the world from little airplane windows to be moved by smallness: without and within.

### **Introduction**

You say my journey lacks academic excuse. And this is probably true. Still, it is movement towards truth and fuller expression of what my life can be, so I see no conflict in our goals. I would not miss your class if there was another way.

### **Conduction**

Touching earth roots me to what is real and I can feel the joy of what will be without leaving the ground, my head in clouds. It would be too harsh a separation to send my soul across an ocean before my body could reach those shores. We are learning what miraculous closeness is possible in distance,

yet the universe is not only expanding. It pulls us closer too.

### **Methods**

I will prepare nuts and dry fruit for fortitude. I once made the mistake of bringing salad through security and I had to convince the officer that it was not a liquid by eating it. I will spread peanut butter onto bread, because it only counts as liquid in a jar. Rubber snakes. Sporks. I have learned many lessons from loss. Where I am going is far. And

cold. And dark. It is the universe, so I am bringing every sweater I own: exactly one.

I will rest best I can, although I have dreams overflowing even in day. I will hurtle across lines in the sand, to lands where clocks disagree with me. I will bring paper and tea for collecting thoughts. I will drink water and seek vegetables and emerge through winged cocoons newly enamored with sunlight.

## **Discussion**

So why did the universe decide to burst forth? Why shatter perfection into uncountable shards? Why carve trees into boats to chase the horizon? Why challenge the gravity calling us to Earth? Why leave paradise to burn candles and bundle in coats?

Because this is the only  
journey.

## The Weight of Fire

Laconia, NH 1975

Smokers, my parents left matchbooks in almost every room of the house. I'd take a book I found lying around, hide it in my pocket, and go outside for the day. I'd then search out a quiet area on my street, huddle down between a paltry stand of trees, and pile up some dried leaves, bits of scrap paper, little black twigs, whatever, and tear off a match.

The sound of striking the head against the back of the book, that almost metallic/wet clicking, made me feel powerful. And when the flame sprouted from the top of the match, that feeling deepened. I'd place the tip against a brown elm leaf or a crumpled milk carton, and as the fire slowly grew, eating at the bits of trash, I felt far away, detached, as if watching a T.V. show through someone else's eyes.

My parents started getting calls from everyone in the neighborhood that their 'stuttering son' had started another fire. Adults would discover a loose pile smoldering behind the small brick school building, or maybe in the trashcan of Mrs. Chevalier, white smoke climbing its invisible rope toward the empty, hot sky.

So one bright August morning, my dad showed up in front of our house straddling a ten speed. He didn't own a bike. On the back was a seat for a little kid. He found me outback playing with my older brother Brian, hitting rocks with a metal bat.

"Hey, Chris, wanna go for a ride?"

He showed me the bike and how I could fit into the seat. Brian wanted to know when he could get a ride on the bike, and my father told him soon, soon.

I was excited by the prospect of riding not only on a grownup bike, but also on one driven by my dad; I rarely had one-on-one time with him. My mom was certainly more attentive, but she was young and just starting to discover her own sexuality—this, unfortunately, began to involve other men besides my father.

The helmet I wore was too big for my head but I wore it anyway, the chin strap bulky against my neck. I loved the feeling of the warm air running past my face, the slight pump of tires churning against asphalt as my dad peddled.

Downtown was busy that day, cars slowly moving through lights and then stopping behind mirrored bumpers. A couple of young boys were fishing off a bridge next to the town's only hotel; they laughed in dirty t-shirts and teased each other. I turned and looked at the river escaping our city, going somewhere I could only dream of.

When we pulled up in front of the fire station, I was excited. We're visiting the fire trucks, I thought. Wow, what a surprise. I'd already spent a day visiting garbage trucks, a friend of my father's taking me to a dispatch center. He was the County Commissioner and had connections, and since he knew I loved garbage trucks, he was able to get me my own personal tour. My mom still has a glossy 8x10 photo of me being lifted up into the cab and looking quite shy. Afterward, I went to *Dairy Queen* and was allowed to have whatever I wanted. I started thinking which ice cream I'd get after this visit.

My dad stopped the bike near the side of the station and swung his right leg over the frame. He helped me out of the seat and helmet, leaned the bike against the gray wooden clapboards, and led me through the front door.

Several firemen were sitting around a folding table playing cards, dressed in regular

clothes. Two men were quietly reading books and didn't even look up when we came in. I felt slightly deflated.

"Hey, I'm Rusty. I'm here with my boy to see The Chief."

Two guys got up from the table and said hello, that The Chief was upstairs expecting us. One of the younger men said he listened to my father on the radio. My dad always loved the recognition and chatted a bit before walking me up the steep flight of stairs.

The Chief was a plain man with average build, clean shaven face. He met us with a great smile and motioned for us to come in. The room was relatively empty save for some tightly made bunk beds and a large table in the middle of the room topped with a dollhouse. He squatted down to meet me face-to-face and introduced himself.

"So, you're our little fire starter, huh?" Chief Brown smiled.

I was confused, still wondering when I'd be able to climb into the cab of the hook and ladder, when I'd be able to place my helplessly small feet into the rubber boots and have my picture taken.

My father spoke with The Chief for a moment, hushed words that I could not make out, then said he was going downstairs. My dad smiled at me.

"Hey, after Chief Brown finishes up with you, I'll take you home, OK?" My dad then waved to me, which I thought was a little weird, and then made his way down the staircase, his arms bracing himself as he descended.

"Come over here, will you Chris?" Chief Brown asked. He was still smiling and now standing next to the dollhouse.

I walked over and slowly climbed up on a small stool next to him. He removed the roof of the house and I was able to look down inside and see each individual room and small plastic figures of people.

"Does this look like your house, Chris?"

Thinking he wanted me to say yes I said yes.

"Where's your father here?"

I pointed to the figure which was clearly the dad. It wore blue overalls and held a lunch pail and was sitting in the living room, its plastic blue legs jutting straight out and toward a TV.

"And your mom?"

Again I pointed, this time at a female figure wearing an apron and standing over a stove and a little plastic roast chicken.

"Good, good." The Chief spoke in a soothing tone as he guided me.

"How about you brother, where is he?"

I pointed to a smaller figure smiling stiff atop a bed.

"And where are you, Chris?"

I looked and looked again but could not find a figure of me. My eyes darted back and forth as I searched for myself.

"I'm n-n-n-not there," I admitted.

"That's right you're not there. And do you know why you're not there, Chris?"

"N-n-n-no," I said, growing a little frightened.

The Chief put his nose real close to mine. I could see my face reflecting in his blue eyes.

“Because you’re outside setting the house on fire, that’s why. And your family is trapped inside and they’re all going to die. Do you want them to die, Chris?”

I was horrified. “N-n-n-no!” I mewled. “I don’t w-w-w-want them to all to g-g-g-get killed!”

“Well, that’s what you’re going to do, young man. You’re going to kill your family.” He picked up the figures and tried to make them walk out of the rooms they were in. Each time, he tipped them over and said the smoke got them, that they were now dead. I started to cry as I watched my family be subtracted one by one until all that remained was the unseen me, the ghostly me who orchestrated this massacre and was probably still lurking outside the home.

Afterward, my father biked me back home the way he brought me—in silence. There was no visiting the trucks, no pictures of me wearing oversized helmets. We did not go to *Dairy Queen* and I did not order the Parfait, which was the ice cream I had decided on.

In two weeks I’d start first grade and stop lighting fires all together until my tenth birthday, made more memorable by the fact that I’d improperly extinguish a campfire and burn down the woods behind my house. “A hell of a set of candles,” my father would say.

But after my visit with the Chief, I stayed outside until dinner and thought about all different types of fires: small, sputtering ones which don’t do much of anything except sting your eyes with their cotton-colored smoke, and the giant ones which roar like strange creatures we’ll never be able to fully understand or embrace. I had a matchbook in my dirty shorts pocket. On the inside cover was a phone number a man had written for my mother. Throughout the day I absently reached into my pocket and squeezed the matches, squeezed and released, the rhythm plain and steady; heart-like.

Go Then, There are Worlds Other Than These

Glimpse your other lives in places you say *fare thee well*  
to the flesh. How easy, forgetting this life

at the carnival's entrance. A clown's face, leaden mascara  
peeling from Edison bulbs. Do you remember

entering the sour-fanged mouth, how you came  
to The Hall of Mirrors? Melon shrinking in minute angles

through lenses of endless Jonathans. In one mirror,  
your forehead, a convex, bald slate. Limbs, swollen.

Blue-veined from squats. You, on steroids, a living  
that once tempted you. In another mirror a dwarf stares

at his brother who's surfaced from drowning long ago.  
These, your possibilities. The maze's glassy corner

summons a little light. Sobs. Clanging. In there  
a windowless basement on the other side of silver glass.

Someone's hard at it, hammering chains. These,  
your possibilities had you or the world chose different.

Until now you never knew these delicate skins  
between you. What bone engines you could devise,

what things you could do. This pane of glass,  
what separates you from the one who knows rape

is as much the fear smell of vinegar as it is a legacy  
of taking. Leave. Go now. This is not your beautiful house.

These are all your beautiful homes.

carved in stone

you slid into the world  
redfaced and squalling  
with a furious innocence

coated with the gluey wax  
of the sea that fed you  
angry at being forced from its warmth

and as happy as i was  
to know you as yourself  
instead of as part of me

as you twisted your tiny face into  
contorted masks of outrage  
i could see you were my twin

my heart grew heavy  
knowing you'd walk  
a road of stone to become yourself

now thirteen revolutions  
since you returned to stardust  
i still wonder if i could have saved you

but no matter which way  
i tumble that stone  
the answer is always no

## Springtime Blues

The puffer fish in tonight's documentary  
builds his intricate starburst nest:  
radial valleys and ridges ornamented with shells,  
pebbles, and bits of sea glass  
like roses round a cottage door.  
He uses just his fins. Such industry!  
Such architectural endeavor!  
But the lady fish plays coy,  
nibbles kelp, doesn't even glance his way.  
We feel for him, as for the poor schmuck  
whose proposal flashes on the Jumbotron,  
before 32,000 fans,  
and she doesn't have grace to smile,  
return the ring tomorrow.

Which of us has not been rejected?  
by a mate? an employer? an editor?

The cat is on the prowl; her raucous yowls  
pierce night. One of us got lucky.  
She'll be home come morning,  
dead mice on the sill. Pity offering.  
Heat off,  
I've added a thick comforter to the bed,  
yet still shiver,  
wrap arms about myself.  
Spring nights can seem the year's coldest.  
I leave the porch light on,  
attract only moths.

Catalog of Acceptances

—Hart's Cove, Center Moriches Bay, L.I., NY.

November 15-21, 2016

Accept that curious bunker fish, thick & glittery, swarmed in the shallows.

Accept that the whale's hanker & the sandbar lay too close together.

Accept that the tide six cycles of lows/highs, too weak to thrust the whale  
30 feet into the ocean's channel.

Accept that the whale heart, its bending, ever-rhythmic pulse,  
flexible heart crushed by its weight. Sand-bar pinned.

Accept that sun's caldron boils over isinglass skin. The gulls. The gulls.

Accept that the whale's song box folded/unfolded into a long low wail  
shuddering through double-paned windows to the listening village.

Accept that the locals' beach patrols named the whale, *Morey*.  
called out: *Lord, for an ear and a dig-away.*

Accept that the locals wrote the state house, rallied, sent checks for rescue cranes.

Accept that experts are hooked on mysteries. The whale's body had a story to tell.

Accept that a beach turns into a room with rubber boots, latex gloves  
prongs needles clamps vials swabs hammers the rongeur  
to gouge out bones Liston blades for amputation for sectioning.

Accept that the tow strap fastened the rags of carcass to the truck slab.

Accept that locals played bagpipes at the end of Inlet Road  
to the hammering into the yellow Dead-End sign  
a driftwood carved—black whale.

Photograph of an Oyster Dredge in Greenport Harbor (circa 1940)

So many crooked, large, rock-hard barnacle crowns.  
Piled as high as the wheelhouse windows. So many oysters.  
We look at the photo, feel awe as if seeing the resurrection  
of a sunken galleon brimmed with emeralds.

We shake our heads.  
The way the oyster mound distracts from the crane's teeth,  
the long-handled shovels like Giacometti statues,  
the watermen's hulk. Some watermen

side-glance the camera eye. Some look down.  
No longer feeling their hands? *The photograph*  
is *a secret about a secret*. It's 1940.  
The last year for oysters. Who knew?

Watermen. On the deck, rich  
with industriousness, like ants carrying seeds  
to domed mounds, whose scurrying  
boats run out to sea, further, further

down the line, museum patrons whisper  
with the soft mouths of dreaming.  
The oysters' mouths are shut,  
like an oracle, speechless until spoken to.



## Contributors

Irish poet, academic, and financial journalist, **Oisín Breen**'s debut, 'Flowers, all sorts in blossom ...' was released Mar., 2020. Breen has been published widely, including in About Place, the Blue Nib, Books Ireland, the Seattle Star, La Piccioletta Barca, the Bosphorus Review of Books, In Parentheses, the Madrigal, and Dreich.

**Ronda Pizsk Broatch** is the author of *Lake of Fallen Constellations*, (MoonPath Press). Ronda's current manuscript was a finalist with the Charles B. Wheeler Prize and Four Way Books Levis Prize, and she is the recipient of an Artist Trust GAP Grant. Ronda's journal publications include *Fugue*, *Blackbird*, *2River*, *Sycamore Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Palette Poetry*, and Public Radio KUOW's *All Things Considered*.

**Rick Campbell** is a poet, essayist, and editor living on Alligator Point, Florida. A collection of essays, *Sometimes the Light* is forthcoming from Main Street Rag Press in the spring of 2022. Most recent collection of poems is *Provenance* (Blue Horse Press.) Campbell's published six other poetry books as well as poems and essays in various journals. He or she teaches in the Sierra Nevada University MFA Program.

Poet-translator **Lorraine Caputo**'s works appear in over 300 journals on six continents; and 19 collections of poetry – including *On Galápagos Shores* (dancing girl press, 2019). Her writing has been nominated for the Best of the Net. She journeys through Latin America, listening to the voices of the pueblos and Earth.

**Michael J. Carter** has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Boulevard*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *MomEgg Review*, *The Rail*, and *Provincetown Arts Magazine* among many others. He is a two-time Writers by Writing Tomales Bay Fellow, a Nadya Aisenberg Fellow at the Writer's Room of Boston and was recently a Summer 2018 Wolf House Resident. He was recently a guest editor for *Poets Resist at Glass: A Poetry Journal*.

**Sam Cherubin** earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is a Futurist working in healthcare, exploring the intersection of virtual reality and climate change.

**Christopher Clauss** (he/him) is an introvert, Ravenclaw, father, poet, photographer, and middle school science teacher in rural New Hampshire. His mother believes his poetry is "*just wonderful*." Both of his daughters declare that he is the "*best daddy they have*," and his pre-teen science students rave that he is "*Fine, I guess. Whatever*."

**Lorraine Hanlon Comanor** is a former U.S. figure skating champion and graduate of

Harvard University, Stanford University School of Medicine, and the Bennington Writing Seminars. Her essays have appeared in the NER ( Pushcart Nominee), Boulevard (Notable in Best American Essays of 2020) the RavensPerch, Ruminare, the Gold Man Review.

**Barbara Daniels'** *Talk to the Lioness* was published by Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press. Her poetry has recently been accepted by *Permafrost*, *Westchester Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *Coachella Review*. She received four fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, the most recent in 2020.

**RC deWinter's** poetry is anthologized, notably in *New York City Haiku* (2017), *Coffin Bell Two* (2020) in print: *2River*, *Event*, *Gargoyle*, *the minnesota review*. *Plainsongs*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Southword*, among others and appears in numerous online publications. She's also a winner of the 2021 Connecticut Shakespeare Festival Sonnet Contest, publication forthcoming.

**James H Duncan** is the editor of *Hobo Camp Review* and the author of *We Are All Terminal But This Exit Is Mine*, *Feral Kingdom*, and *Vacancy*, among other books of poetry and fiction. He currently resides in upstate New York and reviews indie bookshops at his blog, The Bookshop Hunter. For more, visit [www.jameshduncan.com](http://www.jameshduncan.com).

**Jeff Ewing's** writing has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *Southwest Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Utne Reader*, *Willow Springs*, *Subtropics*, *Cherry Tree*, and *Phoebe*, among others. His debut short story collection, "The Middle Ground," was published in 2019 by Into the Void Press, and his first poetry collection, "Wind Apples," was released in May by Terrapin Books.

**Vivian Eyre** is a New York-based poet, and the author of the poetry chapbook, *To the Sound* (Finishing Line Press). Her poems have been published in *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Fourth River*, *Moon City Review*, *Quiddity*, *Pangyrus*, *J Journal*, *Spire*, *Bellingham Review*, *Asheville Poetry Review*. She serves as the guest curator for the Southold Historical Museum's Whale House, and a rescue volunteer for cold-stunned sea turtles.

**Caroline Geoghegan** is currently an undergraduate student at The College of New Jersey. Her work has previously appeared in *The Lion's Eye* and the 2022 *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*. When not writing, she performs in her college's improv troupe.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Penumbra*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Hollins Critic*. Latest books, "Leaves On Pages" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Lana Turner* and *International Poetry Review*.

**James Grinwis** the author of two poetry collections, have recent work out in *Bennington Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *Free State Review*, and live in Greenfield MA.

**Roger W. Hecht's** books include *Talking Pictures* and a chapbook, *Witness Report*. His poems have appears in *Diagram*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Gone Lawn*, *A-Minor*, and *Sheila-na-*

gig, and he has work forthcoming in Gargoyle and Redactions. He teaches literature and creative writing at SUNY Oneonta.

**Ann Howells** edited *Illya's Honey* for eighteen years, both in print and online. She has been named a Distinguished Poet of Dallas by the Dallas Public Library. Recent books are: *So Long As We Speak Their Names* (Kelsay Books, 2019) and *Painting the Pinwheel Sky* (Assure Press, 2020). Chapbooks *Black Crow in Flight* and *Softly Beating Wings* were published through contests. Her poems appear in small press and university journals.

In a past century **Heikki Huotari** attended a one-room school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. He's a retired math professor and has published poems in numerous literary journals, including *Spillway*, the *American Journal of Poetry* and *Willow Springs*. His fifth collection, *When Correlation Is Causation*, is in press.

**Jane Rosenberg LaForge** writes poetry, fiction, and occasional essays from her home in New York. She is the author of four chapbooks of poetry and three full-length collections; the most recent is *Medusa's Daughter* from Animal Heart Press. She also has published a memoir and two novels. She reads poetry for *COUNTERCLOCK* literary magazine and reviews books for *American Book Review*.

**Frederick Livingston** has mostly worked in sustainable agriculture and experiential education, he has been published widely in literary and scientific journals. Currently he practices and teaches biointensive farming in coastal Northern California.

**Christopher Locke's** essays have appeared in such magazines as *The North American Review*, *Parents*, *The Sun*, *Poets & Writers*, *JMWW*, *The Rumpus*, *Slice*, *Atticus Review*, *Jet Fuel Review*, and *New Hampshire Magazine*, among others. He won the 2018 Black River Chapbook Award (Black Lawrence Press) for his collection of short stories **25 Trumbulls Road**. His latest poetry collection, **Music For Ghosts**, (NYQ Books) and a memoir, **Without Saints**, (Black Lawrence Press) are both due in 2022.

**Karla Linn Merrifield** has 15 books to her credit, including her new full-length poetry collection published in December 2021; it's titled *My Body the Guitar*, from Before Your Quiet Eyes Holograph Series, which includes a long tribute section of poems about the "mighty guitar gods." <https://www.karlalinnmerrifield.org/>; <https://karlalinnmerrifield.wordpress.com/>

**Jesse Millner's** latest book of poems, *Memory's Blue Sedan*, was released by Hysterical Books in April 2020. His poetry has appeared in *Best American Poetry 2013* and his prose is forthcoming in *Best Small Fictions 2020*. Jesse teaches writing courses at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers, Florida.

**Ivan de Monbrison** is a poet and artist living in Paris, born in 1969.

**Daniel Edward Moore** lives in Washington. His poems are forthcoming in *The Chiron Review*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Lily Poetry Review* and *The Adirondack Review*. He is the author of “Waxing the Dents” (Brick Road Press). His book, “Psalmania,” was a finalist for the Four Way Books Levis Prize in Poetry.

**Sean Murphy** has appeared on NPR's "All Things Considered" and been quoted in *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, and *AdAge*. His chapbook, *The Blackened Blues*, was published by Finishing Line Press in July, 2021. *This Kind of Man*, his first collection of short fiction, is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press. He served as writer-in-residence of the Noepe Center at Martha's Vineyard. He's Founding Director of 1455 ([www.1455litarts.org](http://www.1455litarts.org)); [seanmurphy.net/](http://seanmurphy.net/) and [@bullmurph](https://twitter.com/bullmurph).

**Nana Nafornita** writes poetry, short prose, short plays and has recently completed her first novel. Her first poetry and short prose collections, written in Romanian, were published by Tempus and reprinted. She lives in Finland with her husband and two children.

**Jay Nunnery** is a writer, teacher, and musician, who calls many places home: Wisconsin, New York, Louisiana, and California. Recently, he completed his first short story collection *Alms, Louisiana*, a collection of twenty-one, interrelated stories. Currently, he is working on a screenplay called *The Circuses* when he is not teaching high schoolers or making music.

**Eric Pankey** is the author of many collections of poetry and a book of essays. A new book of poems, *NOT YET TRANSFIGURED*, is due out this fall.

**Richard Peabody's** *Gargoyle Magazine* (founded 1976) will release issue 74 by the end of 2021. He has edited (or co-edited) 26 anthologies including *Mondo Barbie* and *A Different Beat*. *Guinness on the Quay*, was published by Salmon Poetry in 2019.

**Sheree La Puma's** personal essays, fiction, and poetry have appeared in or are forthcoming in *The Penn Review*, *American Journal of Poetry*, and *WSQ*, among others. Her micro-chapbook, 'The Politics of Love,' was published Ghost City Press. Her new chapbook, 'Broken: Do Not Use,' was recently released with Main Street Rag Publishing. She received an MFA in Writing from the California Institute of the Arts and taught poetry to former gang members. [www.shereelapuma.com](http://www.shereelapuma.com)

**Kevin Ridgeway** lives and writes in Long Beach, CA. He is the author of the poetry collection *Too Young to Know* (Stubborn Mule Press). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Slipstream*, *Chiron Review*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *San Pedro River Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry* and *So it Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library*, among others.

**Stan Sanvel Rubin** lives on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington. His poems have appeared in *Agni*, *Georgia Review*, *One, Hole in the Head*, *Poetry Northwest* and others.

His four full-length collections include *There. Here.* (Lost Horse Press) and *Hidden Sequel* (Barrow Street Book Prize).

**Greg Sendi** is a Chicago writer and former fiction editor at *Chicago Review*. His career has included broadcast and business journalism as well as poetry and fiction. In the past year, his work has appeared or been accepted for publication in a number of literary magazines and online outlets, including *Apricity*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Clarion*, and *CONSEQUENCE*, among others.

**Chryssa Sharp** is a recovering academic who spent 20 years as a professor of Management and International Business. One term, she enrolled in a graduate creative writing course out of curiosity and her brain has never been the same. She also plays with glass as a fused glass artist.

**Steven M. Smith** is the author of the poetry collection *Strongman Contest* (Kelsay Books, 2021). His poems have appeared in publications such as *The American Journal of Poetry*, *The Worcester Review*, and *Rattle*. He is the Writing Center director at the State University of New York at Oswego. He lives in North Syracuse, New York.

**Gary Smothers** has been published in *The Binnacle*, *Dogwood Journal of Poetry and Prose*, *See Spot Run*, and *Hippocampus Magazine*. He is also a former correspondent with the *UIS Journal* and former submissions reader for the literary journal *Quiddity*.

**Connie Soper** has come back to poetry after a long hiatus. Her poems have appeared in *North Coast Squid*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Windfall*, *Rain Magazine*, *Catamaran*, and *Verseweavers*. She divides her time between Portland and Manzanita, Oregon. Publication of her first full-length book of poetry is forthcoming from Airlie Press in 2022.

**Claudia M Stanek**'s work has been turned into a libretto, been part of an art exhibition, and been translated into Polish. Her poems exist online, in print, and in her chapbook, *Language You Refuse to Learn*. She holds an MFA from Bennington College. Her rescued dogs manage her life.

**R. Thursday** (they/them) is a writer, historian, educator and all-around nerd. Their work has been featured by the Poet's Haven, Eye to the Telescope, Vulture Bones, Drunk Monkeys, the Sheepshead Review, Claw and Blossom, among other lovely publications, and they placed second in the Rhysling Short Poem Awards earlier this year. They live in South King County, Washington, with the world's most copacetic cat.

**Jonathan Travelstead** served in the Air Force for six years as a firefighter and currently works as a full-time firefighter. Since finishing his MFA in Poetry at Southern Illinois University of Carbondale, he turns a lathe and apprentices for a jewelry-smith. His first collection "How We Bury Our Dead" by Cobalt Press was released in March, 2015, and "Conflict Tours" (Cobalt Press) was released in 2017.

**Katie Vinson** is an emerging writer from Milwaukee, WI. She lives with her husband and three small children.

**J.R. Welles** has published in The Portland Press Herald and The Ocotillo Review, and lives in Bermuda Dunes, California.

**John Sibley Williams** is the author of four award-winning poetry collections: *The Drowning House*, *Scale Model of a Country at Dawn*, *As One Fire Consumes Another*, and *Skin Memory*. A twenty-six-time Pushcart nominee and winner of various awards, John serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and founder of Caesura Poetry Workshop.

**Liz Ann Young** lives in Montana with dogs, cats, houseplants, and some humans. She received her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has been published by Black Heart, Tinderbox Poetry, and San Pedro River Review, among others. She is the poetry editor of Atlas + Alice.







