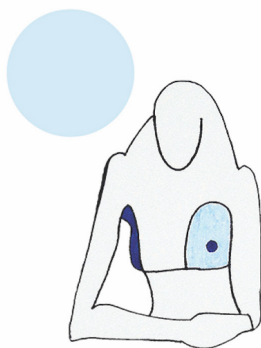
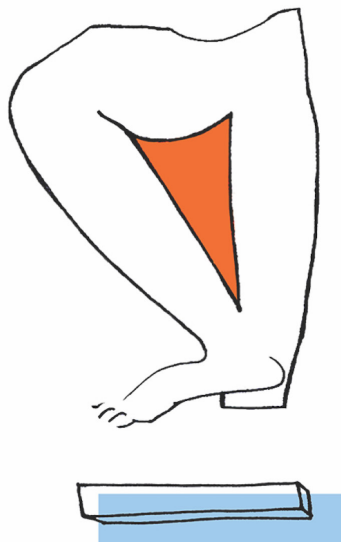


# ellipsis



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LITERATURE & ART

VOLUME 56

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**ellipsis... Award**

Judged by Don Bogen

*“To Time” by Emma Bolden*

**Academy of American Poets Student Poetry Contest**

Judged by Don Bogen

*“Bitch” by Marilyn Melissa Salguero*

**Anne Newman Sutton Weeks Student Prose Contest**

Judged by Don Bogen

*“Borboleta” by Weston Smith*

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cover art: “Steps and Splits” by Ana Jovanovska

## To Time

Emma Bolden

What a little worm you are,  
what a trick to turn &  
squirm off with the shine  
on you. How can we forgive you

for gushing up our roses into mulch,  
for lying, a weight in the bottom  
of sthe liquor we drink to forget  
what your tick tells.

O enormous insect.  
O tiny trick. How carefully we keep you  
on our wrists & still all our beauties  
you turn into mud.



## **Solipsism**

Richard Foerster

Face it, the shattered world  
flashing its random shards,  
those countless mirrorings:  
gaze deep though no face  
peers back. The pure boil  
of your breath evaporates  
into its empty afternoons,  
and a hand held in yours  
offers but fathomless warmth.  
You float in a vat, complete,  
even as the light that sieves  
through the trees rustles its silks  
into sparks of confusion.



## Liquid Courage

Diana Valenzuela

I met Selena—who was my first girlfriend, my first goth love, my second mother and technically my real one—in a regional fiction class in the fall of sophomore year.

I fell in love with her. Everyone fell in love with her. How could you not? She wore slick, black, fast fashion from Forever 21 but she ripped and reinterpreted everything so that it looked like she'd made it all herself. She had flat ironed hair that hung to her waist in thin sheets. It was 2011 and she wore her eyeliner in a way where you could tell she was deep into witch house.

One day in late September, I sat behind Selena during a lecture. I was in this row full of girls like me, girls who were not even close to being glamorous or calm. We'd come to college as dorks and were working overtime to shape ourselves into women who would be as naturally memorable as Selena. We stared at the back of her head. We inhaled and exhaled. We rippled in a jittery tide that Selena tugged left and right like the moon.

The lecturer was some wacko who everyone called Professor Cheekbones. He had taut yet leathery skin with a dusky, rose petal hue to it. In technical terms, he was not qualified to teach shit to shit. He was on a kick about ape-ishness and kept veering back to that when he was supposed to be dissecting *Ethan Fromme*.

"Did you know," he digressed, "that human women are the only primates who don't know when they're ovulating?"

Selena responded (in a wide, clear voice, without raising her hand), "I know when I'm ovulating. Because I get really horny."

Professor Cheekbones flushed blister-red. All the girls in my row dithered and twittered.

She continued, "Also are you trying to imply that women are like, somehow lesser than other female apes? Because of these false-ass ovulation facts? Or are you just being a fucking asshole?"

He sputtered, "Point taken."

She swung her hair back and I knew I'd love her forever, just like that.

At the end of class—even though we had never spoken, or met—Selena turned to me and asked, "Wanna study for that stupid test together?"

She was Mexican and had a slight, lilting accent. She grew up celebrating good report

cards with fried bananas dipped in sour cream. She was a first generation college student. She'd never gone to prom. She was from a shitty little part of Oakland and she was angry about that but also so proud she could just about die.

I'd forgotten we were even having a test, but I went, "Yes, okay, sure, when?"

"Thursday night?" She scribbled something on a scrap of paper, then flung it at me. She was already walking away. "Details."

I skittered back to my dorm room, clutching the paper scrap so hard that the pencil marks smeared. I looked at myself in my flimsy mirror and decided that shaving one side of my head and dribbling lavender essential oil onto my neck each morning had made me into a woman worth Selena's time. I laid on my anonymous dorm bed and basked in a shimmering sense of prettiness.

I still hate her for yanking away the feeling that I was totally destined to seduce and influence amazing people. But I understand. That was not my journey.

\*

I grew up in Redondo Beach. The ocean lived around the corner like an old family friend. Everyone I knew kept whale bones scattered about their houses. Everyone I knew still remembers me, even though I must not have been there.

I remember going to public schools my whole life. I was great in 3-D art and biology. My dad and I ate soft serve ice cream from Fosters Freeze when I got good report cards. I went to prom with my high school best friend, Joseph, who confessed that night that he loved me. He was one of those people who actually believed prom was a special time, like Christmas and the apocalypse combined. I wore a blue halter dress and turned him down. I remember a life as rich and full as the sea itself.

When I got into Cal it happened in part because I was a legacy. Which means my parents went there. I don't know what to make of this, but I still call it true.

\*

Selena took me back to her place on the Oakland side of Telegraph. She lived in a dirty white Victorian with holes all in it and rusted bikes chained to the porch.

"Don't mind this shithole," she said, and I didn't. I was from moderate money so of course, I loved it. It felt exotic to me.

Six red doors lined the grimy front hall, three on each side. She had a tiny pack of roommates, she explained. They were always out. They left passive aggressive notes asking who was overusing the soap?

They were the best roommates I'd ever lived with, because I would live there, too, of course. They really knew how to give a person space.

"Is it hard to commute to campus from here?" I squeaked.

Selena ignored this and pulled me into the kitchen by my wrist.

"This is where I work." She rolled her eyes. "I make this stuff and sell it at the farmer's market, Etsy, whatever."

Her yellow kitchen overflowed with piles of crystals. Blue and green crystals hung from the ceiling in red nets. Decorative fish tanks on the floor held hundreds of pink and orange crystals. Clear crystals bobbed in bubbling pots on the stove. All the crystals dripped with glittery fluid.

I went, "Neat!" and placed a hand on my heart.

"It pays the bills. I have to feed these."

Selena opened the fridge and grabbed a slab of baked salmon, a chunk of Adderall, and some peach gummies. She dropped these ingredients into a black pot on the stove. The liquid inside the pot hissed and spat. Crystals frothed up to the surface and swirled around in furious circles.

"Needs more sugar," she said.

I sat in a fluffy gray chair and watched her work. She gave me an Ambien and a mug of white tea. She tied her hair back and shot me a thin smile. I saw that she was the type of woman who would certainly be preserved in paintings. You wanted to look at her for all eternity and enable everyone else to look, too.

She stuck a spoon into her pot of pink slop and pulled out a string of soaking wet crystals that looked like rock candy. Fat droplets of the crystal fluid fell to the ground. When the drops landed they disappeared and left no puddles.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's liquid courage." She laughed through her nose. "I mean, that's what I call it. It makes my crystals grow."

"What's it made of?"

She shook her head. "The ingredients vary, but it's mostly made of intention. It's made of my power. I dunno. It's made of a whole lotta bullshit."

"Can I have some?"

"Okay. Just this once."

She dipped a tiny spoon into the pot, leaned down over me, and dabbed a drop of liquid courage onto my lips. It tasted like Strawberry Lipsmackers, gusto, and love.

I said, “I adore you.”

She made me move in the next day.

\*

At first, we’d lie in bed and she’d say my name over and over again.

“Caroleeeena. Caroleeeena.”

“Selena,” I responded. “Seleeeena.”

She kept a black bed on the floor, beneath a big poof of black tulle strung from the ceiling. She had posters of Marilyn Manson up on her wall. She wore black satin nightdresses to bed. She looked like an actress playing a goddess in a movie. I laid there beside her, all stringy and white and waiting to be told what to do.

“You know,” she said. “Before I knew you, I had your name stuck in my head. I’m dead serious. I’d say it to myself all of the time. Sometimes when photographers at raves asked me my name I’d say, ‘Carolina.’ I’d doodle it. I wrote it on a t-shirt with puff paint. I bought one candle with La Santa Muerte on it and another with La Virgen on it and I burned doodles of your name in the candle flames.

“Anyway, after I graduated high school, I took a plane to Carolina by myself. I was alone on a vacation for the first time ever. I lived off Rite Aid peanut butter. But I had my fake I.D. so the trip was not like, the worst. Though it almost was. It came together in the end.”

She placed her face close to mine. Our eyelashes touched. I wondered if she could get me a fake I.D., too.

Selena’s eyelashes were as long and black as spider legs, even though she didn’t wear mascara. I asked how.

She said, “Magic.”

I believed her. I was twenty fucking five before I even heard of a lash tint.

\*

Selena wanted to be a Medievalist, because something about reading *The Once and Future King* as a child. Something something about *A Song of Ice and Fire*, metal music, whatever her parents wanted, Tolkien, treasure, dragons, and the roles of women. Something about her truest, deepest desires. I have to admit: she actually told me what she really lived for, she rambled on about it in the kitchen over French press coffee and clove cigarettes.

But even though I nodded and said, “Uh huh, uh huh,” I wasn’t listening. At this point, I was only ever looking at her mouth. The way the sunlight lit her hair blue from some angles, red from others. The ways her dry, shredded bottom lip flaked with skin. The plain between the mountains of her brows.

More than anything, she loved her class on King Arthur. I thought King Arthur was a bore. I liked the most useless English courses, the ones about video games and inanimate objects. My only goal at the time was to marry a beautiful, brown, Medievalist who left me at home each day so I could give myself haircuts and make sourdough bread. I was a homebody and a fool, yes, but since I was only a few months old you should cut me some slack. I didn't want a life outside of my mother and when you were that age you didn't either.

\*

The Gawain thing started when Selena read this book from her Arthur class. She read it while she worked on her crystals. She listened to an audiobook version as she wrapped Etsy orders. She rubbed the cover as she set up her market stand.

"What's it about?" We were walking home from selling at a street fair. I dragged a blue plastic wagon full of crystals behind me.

"It's about one of the Knights of the Round Table. He fights the Green Knight."

"Who's the Green Knight?"

"He's just some asshole. But they get along eventually. Gawain is very amenable. That's what I love about him. He's a real knight. He loves to actualize others' intentions."

\*

Her obsession lasted after the professor assigned other readings. It lasted after she got an A in the class, and As in four other classes that she'd barely half assed. That semester, I got straight Cs.

I was supposed to go home to Redondo Beach for the summer. My mom had pressured one of her thin, intellectual friends to wrangle me an internship with a small press. It was all set.

But then, Selena got a new t-shirt and some puff paint. She scrawled the name "Gawain" on the t-shirt. She also had a brown paper bag full of new candles with long white wicks.

I called my mom and said I didn't want the internship. She cried and said she was done doing me favors. I said that was just fine.

\*

It was late August. The air smelled musty and animalistic. I began sleeping fiercely, and late into the day.

Selena shook me awake one morning and hauled me out of the house.

"We've got buses to catch," she said.

A great underbelly of fog crept over us as we rode east. After about fifteen minutes on the bus we were far away from every part of the Bay Area that I was legitimately familiar with.



As we clambered through a series of crazy, dirty neighborhoods, Selena described the different places where she'd done that mysterious business of her adolescence. She pointed out an old boyfriend's beige duplex, the squat bar where her dad drank, and the church where she'd done First Communion.

As ever, I ignored the parts of herself that she gave to me. I only cared about why she kept mouthing a word to herself. Oh, the way Selena looked when she had a name stuck in her head. She wrapped her lips around it like she was sucking marrow from a bone.

We got off the bus at the top of a skinny hill. Selena led me to the entrance of a park, then onto a trail. We came upon a crowd of redwood trees. They gave off a pungent, toasted, floral scent. Selena approached a tree and peeled a single sheath of bark from it. We left immediately.

\*

Here are the other things we gathered that day: a slab of Ghirardelli chocolate she made me shoplift from a Walgreens on a road called High Street; a photograph of a brown stallion picked out of a big old box at the Depot for Creative Reuse; a bottle of beer brewed by distant monks from that giant Whole Foods in Oakland; a pair of suede boots bought for \$30 from Mars Vintage in Berkeley.

We got home sore and hungry. She went to the kitchen, smashed open a blue crystal, plucked an Ambien from its core, and fed it to me. I curled up in the grey chair.

She brought out a copper pot so big it took up two stove burners. She lit them both. She opened the beer and poured it in the pot. Once it started boiling she plopped the shoes in. They gave off a stench of barn and fire. She tore the horse photo into bits and added them along with the chocolate. She turned to a set of neglected red shelves. Our forever absent roommates stored dusty snacks there. She stole a pot of their local honey and tossed it into the vat of liquid courage.

\*

It took thirty days. In the meantime we started junior year. I rented textbooks. I followed Selena around her circuit of coffee shops. I sipped English Breakfast and dreaded her getting up to go to the bathroom. It always meant that her goth coffee friends would run out of things to say to me while we were left alone.

"Working anywhere this semester?" This came from a death rock art boy who drank beer at nine in the morning.

"Just for Selena."

"No work study? Didn't you work with Jade in the library last year?"

“I deferred.”

“What about summer? What’d you do?”

“Worked for Selena. I took some me time. I’m taking some me time.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Jesus Christ. I mean, no shit.”

\*

Gawain arrived during the last swells of summer. He changed the world before he emerged from the pot.

What I mean is that one day I walked into our living room and instead of our tacky beige rug we had a lawn. And not a suburban lawn, but a lawn brimming with different grasses, herbs, and a bit of hemp.

I ran into Selena’s room.

“What did you do?” I asked.

She got up and glanced over the stairs, at the new living room.

“Oh, it’s fine,” she said. “When someone is born this way they end up changing the world.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ugh, it doesn’t matter. When the world changes, no one human knows the difference.”

Later that day, we went to a housewarming party at the death rock art boy’s house. Palm trees sprouted right out of the living room floor. He picked weed from the lawn and ground it up for us to smoke.

The next evening, I flipped through old photos. I found a picture of me on prom night, before we left in the limo. Me and my old friend Joseph stood in the living room with our arms around each other. Vines of ivy and jasmine spread across the couch, the TV, and the coffee table.

For a school assignment, I went to look at a Francesca Woodman exhibit at the SFMO-MA. By chance, I passed an oil painting of a woman relaxing in a parlor. She sat before a bowl of apples and looked right at you as you walked by. Her parlor overflowed with stalks of grass as fine as dental floss.

When I got home, I found Selena at the stove.

“Why did I notice the change?” I asked. “You said no one human would know the difference.”

I thought maybe I was special, like her. Like I could be a crystal making witch, too.

She said, “When I made you, you turned North and South Carolina back into one state

again. Just one Carolina. I was very proud.”

I said, “What?” She repeated herself.

I said, “You didn’t make me. That’s just not true.”

Except that I looked over the short stretch of my life and saw that it was. It felt like putting on glasses for the first time and seeing a smudgy scene snap into focus. But at the same time, it did not feel like that at all. It felt like nothing that I can describe. It felt like nothing else ever.

I had a gruesome panic attack. I vomited. I cried. I said I’d like to die. I did all sorts of mock human things that seem a little silly to me now, but of course it was very serious then.

\*

I saw Gawain arrive. I had an early class and was eating breakfast in the kitchen. First, the lid of the pot toppled off and clattered to the floor. Then, Gawain made a burst of popping noises as he stood up. He looked like a cluster of pipes. He had curly hair except when you wanted it to be straight. He had red hair except when you wanted it to be brown. He had skin the color of pecans and ears like perfect shells and eyes as green as a living room lawn and these things never changed because they were perfect.

“Hello!” he shouted at me as he jumped out of the pot. “Are you hungry?”

He picked up the piece of toast I’d been eating.

“No!” he yelled. He grabbed the copper pot, tossed it onto the floor, and placed some pans on the burners. He found some eggs and butter in the fridge.

The commotion woke up Selena. She ran into the room with a broad smile on her face. She shook his hand and talked about his journey. He seemed to think he’d ridden a horse. He chattered on about friends halfway across the world who Selena supposedly knew. He screamed a lot. Selena told me later that volume levels take a few hours to develop.

While Gawain cooked, Selena held my hand. Hers was sweaty.

I whispered. “How many people have you made?”

“You’re not people.” She scowled. “You’re something much better.”

We stopped talking.

\*

Gawain cooked us these foods: Peking duck with plum sauce, ramekins of creme brûlée, chilaquiles, perfectly circular balls of falafel, mango lassis, spiraling towers of maqluba, groundnut stew, braised goat, blackberry pie, and mead.

And if it wasn’t what you wanted he would make you something else. Except it was always what you wanted, even if you hadn’t realized it yet.



My mom flew up from Redondo Beach to visit.

Normally we would walk around campus and bicker, visit museums and bicker, and go to my house so she could pester me about my missing roommates. Normally, I would respond with clipped, one word answers.

This time, when I met her for coffee in the morning, I hugged her softly, as though we were slow dancing. Her shrewd black eyes had crinkles at the edges. I'd never realized how delicate and crisp those wrinkles were. I touched them like they were folds of cashmere.

I asked, "How can you exist? How can you be here right now?"

She responded by frowning, sweeping my hair out of my eyes, and asking, "Did you smoke dope before you got here?"

I pulled her onto a leather loveseat and asked her to tell me stories. I wanted to know what she was like at my exact age, if she had ever wanted more than one kid, what she would have poured her excess energy into if she'd never been a mom, where she wanted to travel most, and if she'd ever loved a goth.

She stayed a week. She slept on our couch, ate Gawain's enchanted food, and visited the farmer's market with us. Selena made my mom a crystal necklace and they got drunk together on brass mugs of mead. I spied on them talking about me.

"She looks mooney with love," my mom laughed. "I miss that state. I was just like her. I could never just handle love. It always sucked me away from myself."

Selena touched her arm and said, "She's doing great."

She nodded. "Doing a favor for you is never just a favor. But I draw the line at conjuring the husband. I haven't had a dick in me since 1972 and I'm not going to start again now."

Selena howled her head off. I didn't know what to do, what to say. I crept off to Selena's floor bed.

Before she left for the airport, my mom told me she respected the person I was in the process of becoming. I squeezed her to me for too long, and too tightly. She was real flesh and blood and bone. I could feel her heartbeat through her skin. She was so sorry, she said, for being mad at me for not wanting the internship.

"You don't have to lie." I spoke into her shoulder. "She's an idiot to think I want you to lie."

"I'm not sure that's true," she breathed. "Who doesn't need a mother?"

"Just tell me. Is she a good witch? A bad witch? Please."

"There are no good or bad witches," she murmured into my ear. "She's your witch."

As she left, I caught side of the brand new, Selena-crafted, pink crystal bracelet on her skinny neck. I didn't know how much of a gift a whole mother was until I saw mine swathed in liquid courage.

\*

"You have to get a new job," Selena told me. "Gawain sells much better than you. There's not room enough at the table for three."

It wasn't just that: every morning over hot crepe breakfasts, I watched him watch the valley between her brows. I noticed him noticing the blotches of brown scars on her ankles. I saw him seeing her in soft Bay Area sunlight, his lips parting as he imagined kissing her. And yes, I saw him *actually* kiss her on our porch steps, as they got drunk on Walgreens beer. A cat pee-smelling rain started pitter patter on the roof exactly as their lips met.

I heard the keening sounds of sex. First it happened when I skipped my Wednesday class. Then, Selena canceled our nightly study session so she could drink Natty Lite and fuck Gawain in her room. They played 80's goth music to try and drown the sounds.

But I still slept in Selena's bed. I figured that if Gawain and her were involved, then he would be mad about that. I didn't know him well enough then. Really, he's cool with anything.

One afternoon, I asked her about it, sort of. She was waking up from a nap. I stretched out next to her and said, "What, are you a straight girl now?"

She wouldn't like it if I told you, but I'm not going to lie for her: she slapped me across the face so hard I rolled off the floor bed.

She sneered, "My family is Catholic. I got in trouble for being this way years before you were even the shape of an idea. Rich bitch. With your bougie ass parents."

"You made me like this."

"Well, I wish I hadn't."

"You're a bad witch."

"And you're a moping idiot."

I put my hand to my face. I didn't understand how she could resent me. She'd set up my whole life for me. But I've met lots of parents since. I've done a lot of processing. I think I get it now.

\*

One Saturday, I decided to ruin his life. I picked through the tangled patches of chamomile on the living room lawn all morning, waiting for him to wake up. When he wandered in through the kitchen, I told him where he came from.

Gawain offered a bland smile. "Well that's all right. It's kind of funny. I mean our

girlfriend is our mom. How many people can say that? Or, I mean my girlfriend is my mom. I guess your ex is your mom.”

“What do you mean she’s my ex?” I dug my hands into the herbs. Thick slivers of dirt wedged beneath my nails.

Gawain’s smile tensed into the idea of a smile. He held his palms out in front of himself, like he expected me to lunge. “You didn’t know? It’s not a big deal. She needs someone to help her achieve her quests. She’s a sorceress.”

“She’s an asshole.”

“She’s my lady love. And it’s not her fault you don’t know how to support other people. That you just mope. It’s like, you won’t listen to her enough to support her but you won’t step back enough to let her breathe.”

I flipped him off. He shrugged at me.

“You’ll see,” he said. “You’re both like plants. Plants can’t water each other.”

Then, Gawain dashed into the kitchen and cooked me a crepe. It was delicious. It oozed white ribbons of pepper jack cheese.

\*

Gawain stood over the stove the next morning, stirring a pot of liquid courage. Selena allowed him to do so much more than me.

I said, “Can I borrow a jar of that?”

I don’t know why I asked. I didn’t have a plan. The idea just filled me with a rotten feeling. That seemed promising.

“Definitely!” He winked.

“Don’t tell Selena though, it’s a surprise. For her.”

“I love surprises!” He sloshed some into a jar. The liquid courage sparkled and shone. I tried to leave, except then Gawain insisted on making me cinnamon rolls for breakfast. It was impossible to hate him and I never truly managed it.

\*

I carried the jar around in my bag for a few days. I couldn’t decide what to do with it. One night, I sat on Selena’s bed while she brushed my hair. I’d been letting dreadlocks form out of negligence and despair.

“You look like appropriative Berkeley swine,” she grumbled. “I won’t have that.”

“What did you make me from?” I asked. “Was it honey and shoes, like Gawain?”

She smiled. “Nothing with you was like it was with him. I used a dead, white chicken. I stole it from my mom’s house. I didn’t know where else to get one. I had to take it home on

the bus. It was quite a caper.”

“What else?”

“A wedding dress I got from this vintage shop that’s not around anymore.” She braided my hair into two pigtails. “A bar of ivory soap I carved so it looked like a naked man. Marshmallows, and just a teaspoon of marshmallow fluff. But of course I should have left that out.”

“Why?”

“Never mind.” She tied off the pigtails. “I also used cocaine.”

“Oh. Well. What do the ingredients mean?”

“It’s up to you.” She stood, walked to her desk, and opened her laptop. She turned on some industrial music, which was typically a sign that she wanted to be left alone. “You’re the one who decides who Carolina is.”

“Thanks.”

She frowned. “Except appropriative Berkeley swine. Carolina is not that.”

\*

A couple of nights later, Selena and Gawain left for a rave. They invited me and even tried to give me a deranged, leather outfit.

“I’m feeling gross, guys,” I lied. “Maybe it’s the flu.”

I had to put up with half an hour of them chanting over me and placing crystals on my extremities before they left. As they walked out the door, they held hands, their forearms wrung together at the wrist.

I climbed out of bed and turned off all the lights except for Selena’s collection of pink Himalayan salt lamps. The whole house glowed like Professor Cheekbones’ flushed skin on that day I fell in love. I wondered if that was the day I’d been born.

I sat in the hallway and looked upon the series of locked, red doors. Each one might be full of crystal people or magic secrets. I didn’t really want to enter any of them. But I wanted to know that I had some potential. Any potential.

When I unscrewed the jar, the liquid courage puffed out blobs of steam. The jar was warm as a cup of hot chocolate. I started off with small sips except that with each little sip I could feel new bits of my brain pop open. It felt like taking off a belt that was too tight but it also felt like blowing up a balloon. I drank faster.

The liquid courage tasted like red Chinese New Year envelopes, Dolly Parton themed slot machines, and brand new pennies. But it also tasted like coconut cream pie, vanilla soft serve, and the summer air of Redondo Beach. I drank until it was gone, then licked the inside

of the jar.

I thought I would sprout horns or unmake myself. I thought I would pass out for thirty years. Instead, my jaw softly detached. It didn't hurt but wasn't normal. I sat very still and listened to the house creak around me. I felt an odd pressure on my throat. The pressure came in thumps, like footsteps.

To the right of me, a red door burst open. Wind gushed out. I could see a jagged slope of stone through the doorway.

Then, something scaly and hot came out of my mouth. It didn't feel like puking but it didn't not feel like puking. I only saw it for half a second. It was as raw and red as scraped flesh. The thing slipped through the open door.

I saw, suddenly, that for all of time human beings who lived in houses would keep one red door in the hall that led to the top of a jagged mountain.

Another red door burst open. A hot blurt of flesh flopped out of me. I felt another change: all of a sudden, wishing wells were extremely real and thus foes of mankind. The wells and the humans had engaged in long wars for many centuries and though lulls of peace existed, a real truce was impossible.

Three more doors blew open and out came the obliteration of many rainforests, the idea that there were civilizations of demons living under the earth's crust, and the change that turned all cottage cheese to poison.

I tried to push my jaw back into a normal position. I grasped at the changes by their tails when they spurted out. But they only grew more muscled, and angrier. Dozens of changes happened: changes to the atmosphere, changes to the way we canonized Western literature, and changes to the timeline of the Salem Witch Trials.

It took either five hours or twenty minutes. I don't know. Either way, coughing up change makes you feel like your whole body has been deboned. I would have laid crumpled on the rug until Selena rushed home, except that one of the changes was that all rugs were able to fly distances under one mile. The rug in the hall hovered up the stairs and dumped me onto Selena's floor bed.

\*

"I'm not mad at you. I'm just a little disappointed. Are sure you're all right?"

Selena and I sat at the kitchen table the next morning. Gawain hunched under the table, rubbing my feet at Selena's request.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. The world didn't end. And if it had, no one would have cared."

"I feel hungover." I pressed my fingers to my temples.

"Me too. But that's because there's free alcohol on the BART now."

"I don't know if that's a good change."

"Nobody human knows the difference. It's a market day. We're going. We'll bring you back a milkshake." She stood up and started gathering bundles of crystals.

"A milkshake?"

"Another change. All milkshakes are free now."

Gawain rolled out from under the table and said, "Milkshakes are nifty."

I looked at his placid little oval of a face. I thought, *I wish I could hurt you.*

Then, because I had changed a little, I said, "I wish I could hurt you."

He smiled and said, "But you can't. Because you don't have anything I want, do you?"

Selena ignored him. She leaned down to hug me and breathed, "I'm glad you're deciding to be something. I might have to slay you eventually. But I'm very glad."

\*

I spent the day packing a red suitcase. I could no longer remember what I'd brought to the house. I took what I felt entitled to. I packed a thick knot of black clothes, the electric kettle, and a net full of crystals. I put my suitcase in the living room and called the death rock art boy to ask if he had space in his house. He said he'd let me sublet a literal cupboard for fifty a month. Neither of us remembered each other's names, but I couldn't think of anyone else to call.

After that, I had nothing left to do for the rest of the day. I should have relaxed and reflected on all that I'd done in that dirty Victorian shithole. Instead, I took an Adderall, then cleaned the downstairs bathroom. I would have done it all differently now, I assure you.

\*

That night, as we laid in bed, Selena said, "You're leaving."

"How did you know?"

"It's so obvious." She placed her face close to mine. "Why don't you stay? I'll miss you."

"Why?"

"Because you're you."

"I don't even know who that is."

"You know what your mom told me when we got drunk together? She said your life used to be like, not that interesting."

“What?”

“Harsh, but moms are terrible. Anyway, your mom said she’s happy now because you’re challenging yourself. Think of that. Think of how much you’re growing.”

“But she’s not my real mom. She’s just some witch. I don’t know if I need her.”

“Well don’t you like having the option, just in case? And if you don’t want her, stay with me. I’ll get you a better mom, the very best. I’ll make you one.”

I pulled my face away from hers and said, “I’ll stay if he goes.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s not your decision. But you get to decide who Carolina is. That should be enough.”

\*

Selena kept me close, maybe with magic. I visited their house for dinner every Thursday. Selena and I went to raves together, we graduated together. She kept up her Etsy stuff, even through grad school. She quit the farmer’s market, though. Everyone quit the farmer’s market. Because of the smoke.

\*

For a while, I moved to Carolina. I thought that would help me answer questions about myself and who I should be. I fell in love, tried too hard, and learned to say what I felt. But I could have done that anywhere. After a year, I left for Redondo Beach, to live amongst the people who say they remember a figment of me.

I learned to lean on my mother, that dark haired, middle aged looking witch who Selena had wrangled into visiting us in college. She refused to make me a father, but she gave me pep talks and oolong tea. She rubbed my shoulders and sent Gawain some hexed shoelaces that would make him trip. She taught me to infuse some of my simpler intentions into objects, then to melt these objects into liquid courage.

And with these skills we silently walk to market each morning, two women propping one another up, just enough.

\*

When I click through Selena and Gawain’s Facebook photos, they look pretty normal. But at their home in Oakland, when it’s just the three of us, they’re different: they both have this glow. It’s like chunks of crystal lie under their skin. Gawain breathes a glimmering fog that makes me hot and drowsy. At night, Selena’s eyes widen into pure, black pits that look like portals. They feed me enchanted foods that influence my mood and they give me nifty presents and call me sacred.



They always say, “You never stay long enough.”

But I visit them in the Bay Area twice a year, which is a lot. Like, a lot a lot. Most people avoid going there at all. For as long as anyone can remember, the black, singed hills above Oakland erupt into flames at least once a week, because of the dragons. They’re furious at beasts both crystal and human, and just as furious at their own tangled masses of treasure, which lay clumped beneath them like eggs.



## **Dream Seed**

Kelly Talbot

One single cell of skin  
forms, exists, grows,  
pushes upward while  
an old cell drifts  
beyond the horizon of this  
self-contained self.  
'This is a natural process.

Last night I had a dream.  
It sprouted, flourished,  
and pushed other thoughts  
beyond consciousness,  
beyond subconsciousness,  
becoming awareless awareness.  
A skin cell, a dream,  
spontaneously becoming.

I must intuit my path  
without physics,  
without metaphysics,  
as the first tribes did.  
I dreamt of a seed  
developing roots, a stem, and leaves,  
growing from a single cell.  
I must become a seed.



## The Feral Hog

Carolyn Janecek

*after Amie Whitemore's "The White Doe"*

Trotting feral tusk, teeth like bone-meal.  
Only her tongue pink as liver. Only her tongue  
a mottled swamp sinking suburbia,  
road-shouldered out of habitat.  
Razorback. Omen. Drifter's patience.

Rustled among wiry hides, she becomes  
dust storm, uprooted and thronged.  
Forest's envy, father's fear. Tumorous.  
Dead heat. Clamor of roadkill.

Reeking of asphalt, of asphodel,  
of composted middle class.  
A gallon of wolf piss won't budge  
a feral hog. I remember braking  
on the highway: two molten eyes,  
four sharp tusks.

## Filling the Hole

Eric Machan Howd

The sky is dark blue  
like the dog's mouth was  
choking on mimosa sap  
and wood chips in its  
kennel after scratching  
roots to lap sweetness.

The body is sealed in  
plastic drum and the grave  
yawns in the backyard  
under the rigor mortis roots  
of the willow tree that fell  
in a childhood hurricane.

There are no words  
for working with death.

Twigs and stones litter  
the mouth of the grave,  
choking words back  
down the throats of all  
who have loved and lost  
something to the earth.



## Night Herding

BJ Buckley

Breath a fleeting cloud against the heavens, ground hard beneath, no wind. Every constellation was familiar as a friend, known since childhood by name. Sometimes Darl spoke to them aloud, called the little hound at Orion's feet by the name of the pup he'd had as a boy, told The Hunter about the bull elk he missed on purpose, the cougar he'd shot out of grief and spite after it mauled an old horse that had tried to kill him once, a horse he didn't even like. Darl didn't understand himself sometimes, hell, most of the time. Thinking just hurt him inside, somehow, cracked a part that needed to be like stone. How else to shoot a dog you loved that wooled lambs, stripped their necks raw and left them to die, how else to feed cattle at 50 below, knowing it wouldn't help, that you'd find them in earliest spring frozen solid in a circle nose-in to a juniper, wreathed in snow, beautiful and terrible as God must be, if there was God, which he doubted.

## For Damon

Sean Sam

The rabbit gasping over and over.

We created a pathway  
of muggings, fissures forming  
marks into money. What doors

do delinquents see that don't  
exist? But once prowling we found  
a rabbit, sides smashed, smeared  
on the street. I dug, stabbing  
earth, some sensation  
underneath and inside shaking  
itself alive. Only after a tunnel

into mantle for a body was forged  
did I entomb it and this sighting  
of you, saltatorial in time.

Along a whorl, animals  
like us race headlong until  
incidents naturally occur,  
so it was no surprise  
when your blood too  
was touching a street corner.

In memory we crouched together  
in the hole, waiting for the world  
or the soil. So violently it bubbles  
with steam from our breathing through  
the scarcity of years.

The rabbit gasping over and over.



## **falling in love during late-stage capitalism.**

Liat Miriam

the streets smell like sugar cookies, reminding me of when New York City smelled of maple syrup and everyone thought death was inevitable. but if you believe in climate change, i guess it is. they say we have thirty years left to go, time enough to fall in love at least fifteen times more.

i often ask myself where i'd want to be when the apocalypse comes. would there be comfort in the riots of the city, or would i prefer sand to wash over me, fill my lungs, put me to sleep.

sweat stays on skin. no matter how many wet-wipe baths i take, your sweat is on me, in me. when i smell beer mixed with garbage coming from the recycling bins i taste you. you are inside of me. there's time enough to empty the drinking supply. i just hope i die lulled to sleep by the soundtrack of Submarine.

walking to the sand i say be careful of the jellyfish. a man offers to sell us a cup of Arab coffee

and you respond with far too much anger. you should know by now it's always worth five shekel to see me smile. and don't worry about your debt, for when the sea levels rise it won't matter that you spent hundreds of thousands of dollars learning how to write a poem.

you used to work in the bar that plays Moroccan music, where arak flows like honey. it was there three years ago that a man held my knee, passed me lemon-nanna cocktails that made my fingers sticky. he took me home. he didn't listen when i said no. were you working that night? because you see, falling in love during late-stage capitalism means you can't find a partner who doesn't need therapy.

so i weigh the probability of survival, of access to weaponry, of powdered milk. the streets smell like sugar cookies, reminding me of the New Paltz craft fair, fresh squeezed lemonade, and french fries dripping oil. if you believe in memories, i guess i'm still there. tell me, were you ever afraid of calling out someone else's name? i was, and maybe that meant i was never in love at all.

## **You Dreamed in ICU**

William Fargason

the doctors drilled holes in your chest  
in a line from the bottom of your collarbone

to your heart, were able to remove the fluid still  
in your lungs lined with fibrosis. Your frail

hand seemed to trace the path across your skin.  
You couldn't take in enough oxygen, couldn't absorb

the 100% O<sub>2</sub> they had masked around  
your mouth and nose, the valve bag floating

like a third lung. You dreamed of sinkholes  
that swallowed whole houses, like the one

in Ocala, Florida that drained a small lake  
in a matter of hours, or the one in Clermont

that collapsed a resort condo like it was a dollhouse.



# Untitled

Brenton Rossow





## **Dolly Maker**

Meg Eden

My mother's favorite toy of mine: a doll-making oven.  
It came with metal cooking trays—clinical, like little asylums—  
we filled with body-goop. Other girls' kitchens smelled  
like brownies; mine smelled like burning plastic,

the smell of girls being made. I chose their hair color,  
whether their outfits had flowers or suns. My mother gave  
them names. I could straighten their backs with metal spines  
or make their bodies flop. But once they were made,

I was done. I never played with the dolls, only gave them life.  
Goopy pink and brown, they dried on the windowsill  
like flowers, forgotten as I turned to newer toys.  
But even once I grew and moved out, my mother still baked

the dolls she couldn't afford as a girl, tenderly stacked  
in ziplock bags, treasured in her dresser drawer.



## childhood idols

Michael Chang

*"We wanted them to wander over,  
place deep wet underarms to  
our lips, and then their white  
asses, then those loud mouths"*  
—Dennis Cooper, *After School, Street Football, Eighth Grade*

*"Oh no, you don't understand, this is an Alaïa!"*  
—Cher Horowitz, *Clueless*

---

Pale boy juicy rubies : nerves frayed black-  
winged birds taste of copper : strange &  
lovely to touch : needing a sweet escape  
( gwen ) : i opt in : flesh scraping fear do do  
do suzanne vega : make & model of his lips :  
classic mustang turning into my own turning  
until i react : whistling the star-spangled  
banner into my throat : small breath small  
breath touch mouth my neck : stay of  
execution too late for modesty : flat white  
like coffee : bacon buttie a fine kiss : soaked  
in acqua di gio : or is it dior sauvage : sean  
o'pry on a white horse : *le cuir trouve la  
lame* : (leather finds the blade) : piercing the  
veil of insecurity : you come upon me :  
cooing : u ax what does that mean : i ax why  
must words have meaning : mc confidential :  
sticky fingers & two pints : *les sucettes* :  
(the lollipops) : *laisse tomber les filles* : *ne  
dis rien* : *comment te dire adieu?* : *dis-lui  
que je l'aime* : *je suis venu te dire que je  
m'en vais* : *souviens-toi de m'oublier* : (drop

the girls : do not say anything : how to say  
goodbye? : tell him that i love him : i came  
to tell you that I'm leaving : remember to  
forget me) : indomitable spirit : fiance fled  
to keep her sanity : you basic ass : **judy**  
**chicago is dead** : dax exclamation with no  
point : nick cave & the bad seeds : u step  
out madiba vibes : pockets of tenderness :  
lick like ur life depends on it : my signature  
is boss : my signature is wealthy : my  
signature is legendary : loopy loop : strong  
& decisive : elegant & evocative : mild-  
mannered yet firm : dressed to impress :  
mother monster sings *RedOne* : but b/c of  
the autotune : i think she's saying red wine :  
so nice of her to sing about wine : berries  
turn my tongue darkly : stained like an Iraqi  
finger : we are liberators : how's that going?  
: well they have the simpsons now and they  
didn't have it before : so there : you fill me  
with unclean secrets : pour dirty change into  
my tip-jar : tell me no double-dipping :  
marathon kisses out of fairy tales : bodies  
shining : elusive & swooning : elaborate  
dance rehearsed but sloppy : veins in marble  
: patina of the mind : surfaces laid with  
tarp : devout astroturf : high school nights  
recalling high school days : in my head  
you're danny phantom : make me : spin :  
gentle soul : cloud to touch : full mouth  
smirking : thin lip & muscle : long teeth : my  
neck : stars laid deep in ur dreams : skittish  
fawn soft : morning light jewel tones &  
baubles : sun-kissed & seizing : diffidence  
knitting ur brows : did they teach you that in

toms river : two oceans jealous of summer :  
seaweed clusters tossed in black : ink pours  
from rock : scrape our feet on shells :  
motherfucker gentleman : when estelle  
sings : *You can be my American boy*,  
*American boy* . . . i know exactly what she's  
saying : the feels swelling inside me : trying  
to forget she's singing about kanye west :  
white house blue accents : can't hear  
anything but blue & white blue & white blue  
& white : was ur middle name reid : or hart :  
would we like ourselves : fighting fish sarah  
barracuda : oxblood trail : splintered  
tesserae : red cliff angst : NSA means no  
strings attached : rebel rebel : wild  
unraveling : scarlet & thistle & still : blush  
& seed : barbra streisand : series regular on  
COPS : so yves klein : bleu steak : tartare &  
fries : blue suede blue loafers blue socks  
electric blue crashing white piping jeremy  
dafour : haribo smurfs red white & blue  
\$2.49 : you can't hurt me now shark : i've  
plied you with absinthe & purple shimmer :  
princely gates & fences : bleached  
silkscreen thrushes : zipped in turquoise &  
cyan : opal twisting through them : carla  
bruni freak in the sheets : flick flick feet  
frank sinatra : tiny tiny dots damien hirst :  
moths moths butterflies lee mcqueen :  
bonfire orchards dried & hung : local  
patches of modesty : wide spaces between  
us : ashes fall fendi coat : apollo's belt gut  
love : happiness is a warm gun : tucked  
under my arm : *te ves muerto* : (you look  
dead) : you look best when you're not

breathing : chilling poison ivy gaze empty :  
famous last words : *"are you a serial killer?"*:  
truth is the wildest thing : d i s t u r b i a :  
vinyl playing pumped-up kicks wall-to-wall  
shag carpet : holster packin : safe in ur  
mouth : pivotal moment of my life :  
smothering sex : shifting urself again &  
again : lean of ur chest rising & falling :  
threat of bruise on my lip : tight of ur grip :  
arm pinned over my head : 吻得太逼真: (kiss  
so real) : meet me by the punchbowl jay  
gatsby •



## **insomnia**

David Maduli

crocodile moon slogs thru everglades  
hours grow thick with moss

quicksand thru the hourglass  
too heavy to flip

quicksilver drops  
second hand swamps

streetlight flinch  
compact hatchback carrying

four howls off the clock  
crushes in slumber hugged

by a cypress grove  
pieces of time sharp and smoking

## Mathematics

Ashley Sgro

+

The sun peeked its hairline above the ocean waves. They tickled the glowing ball of skin away from pooling fish and coraled mountains. The sun stretched out from cool water-caves. That simple swollen circle shape. A mathematical equation drawn: twelve minus twelve. The strongest cord ripped from sinking ships to be left with what? A domed structure that multiplied and fell. Clouds dragged the light between palettes of mauve and periwinkle. It smeared purples and pinks around as berry juices from toddler fingers that danced on tablecloths. It arched itself alongside gliding birds. This rounded thing remembered the splash of water from a passing whale that submerged to sink as a gentle hand wave. A one plus one. A *bello* then *goodbye* to the sun that bloomed into the orange sky.

-

The sun is as a chameleon without teeth or tail. No eyes to see or claws to grasp. Bright in the morning time. Dulled white when eyes grow tired. Someone dropped blueberry sorbet into the sky. Someone dripped milk onto the moon. Night hours trigger a chameleon's sleep so moons take heed and follow. Day and evening mathematics stay the same: twelve minus twelve remains. Domes still multiply to fall. Spreadsheets grow tired from pencil marks and fingerprints. The moon still collapses from fruit-stained skies like dragonflies that land on lily pads as smoothly as tossed crumbs from palms to granite floors.



## Character Building

Diane Payne

A memory keeps returning. To some degree, the memory is mundane. Something I should just let go. It's been decades since the esteemed memoir professor summed up my workshop submission about cleaning the homes of my old science teacher's mother-in-law and the home of the most sought-after boy in my middle school by saying that I blew it on the story because those experiences were character building, and I was still too young to realize that. "You are writing about the situation, but that's not the real story." Then she looked at our MFA creative nonfiction class, and said, "You're all too young to be writing memoirs. You can't shape your stories because you're still living your stories!" I was thirty-one at the time and wondered how old I'd have to be before I could legitimately write about things that happened when I was a kid.

I had read her memoirs and don't remember her writing about being thirteen and lifting an elderly woman without underpants from the floor and back to her bed, then returning to the kitchen to clean out the cupboards because the old woman had seen a mealy bug in her flour and wanted everything dumped. I wanted to bring those boxes of pancake and cake mixes home to fill our empty cupboards. But I could only carry so much on my bike. Later, she called my mother to report that I had stolen her food, and my mother, who once was pleased that I saved so much food from the trash, now worried the police would be coming to our house, and I wasn't sure if she believed me or the old woman.

Nor do I remember the famous memoir writer telling stories about having to go to a fancy house filled with sleeping kids her own age, then having to bring up the underwear she had just folded, knock on their bedroom doors, hand them their folded underwear, and tell them that their mother wanted them out of bed. She actually screamed, "Get the hell up those stairs and tell my lazy ass kids to get out of bed now!" When I told my mom how I wanted to quit this job because it was so humiliating, she said, "You come home with money in your pockets. What's embarrassing about that? One day that boy will look for a girl just like you to marry because boys like girls who can clean a house."

I think the memoirist wished she had the same house cleaning stories to tell because she prob-



ably would have crafted them into a wry, sly story where the readers soared along, immersed in her clever mockery and wisdom.

Perhaps I should have written a story about a different job, a job that actually was “character building,” mainly because I was completely unknown so I could create my own character. No science teacher that not only dreaded having me in his general science class for dummies but also in the kitchen of his mother-in-law. No muscle-building blond boy embarrassed to see me shaking the rugs from his upstairs porch while he shot hoops with our classmates, who wondered why I was cleaning their house.

Growing up in a Dutch Reformed town, most businesses were closed on Sundays. Lucky for me, the Dutch Reformed college in my town needed someone to check IDs in the cafeteria on Sundays. My house was just blocks away from the campus. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I’d walk to the campus cafeteria and climb up on the stool and ask students to show me their IDs. To this day, that was the easiest job that I’ve ever had. The girls didn’t pay much attention to me, but the boys would look at me, and ask why they hadn’t seen me on campus before. Apparently, retired ladies in town usually checked the IDs. No one knew me. They knew nothing about my family, and I knew nothing about theirs. I loved the anonymity of the cafeteria. Every now and then I’d go on a date with a college boy who wanted to come to my house, and I’d think we’d just meet there then actually leave to do something, but they’d want to crack open a book and study at the table in our forever being remodeled kitchen, and I’d haul out a book and try to look studious while my date would try to ignore my drunk father laughing at the smell of his own farts in the living room while my sick mother quietly walked around the house in her worn-out bathrobe.

With future dates, I learned it was best to meet them on campus, thrilled to be in their apartments and dorms, going to plays and musical events on campus, blending in as one of them, and not as me, the high school kid from the unpainted house near campus. It was like being a college student without having to take the classes. One boyfriend was so smitten with me, he insisted we spend the weekend with his mother who lived 100 miles from campus. She greeted me by saying, “Welcome to my mansion.” My dad’s greeting was always: *Welcome to the ghetto*. I was glad I wasn’t her cleaning girl because the house was huge. Later in the day, his mother pulled me aside and told me to curl her hair, after sending her son to go out and mow the lawn,

a task I would have much preferred over curling her hair. She complained about every curler I rolled while she questioned me about my goals after I graduated from high school, and what my parents did for a living. Later that night when I was upstairs in the guest room, through the heating vent, I heard her warn her son, “If you marry that girl, you will not get one dime of your inheritance.” Now that was character building.

Strong willed, I carried on dating boys from the fancy college while my father berated me for thinking I was too good to date someone from the factory, someone like him who worked his entire life at GM. I caught a ride off the college ride board to visit a different boyfriend who was home in New York for summer break. I finally did graduate from high school and, as much as my parents were against me going so far away to spend a week at a boyfriend’s house, I stubbornly reminded them I was an adult now, even though, technically, I was still seventeen.

At least this boyfriend had two younger siblings, who actually seemed to like me, and they lived in a nice house, but not a mansion. The night before I was to return to my home, his parents questioned me about my goals. I wasn’t entirely certain what I’d be doing. There was a chance I’d go to college, or paint houses, shovel snow off factory roofs, be a teacher’s aide, which interested his elementary school mother, who insisted I not be an aide but go to college and get a degree. I could have been the heart-breaking girlfriend who admitted I was worried my mom was close to dying of cancer, and I wanted to be near her, but I kept rambling off less than glowing options while my boyfriend laughed nervously. “But don’t you want more in life?” his father asked. Who doesn’t, I thought.

Through one more heating vent, while waiting for my boyfriend to sneak into my room, I was not surprised to hear: “We didn’t send you to that expensive college so you’d come back here with an uneducated girl who doesn’t even go to your college. Stop wasting your life with that girl. She’s never going to amount to anything. We sent you to that pricey school so you could make something of yourself. We will not pay your tuition unless you end this, this, whatever it is.”

When I returned home and told my mother about overhearing this conversation, she told me to go buy them a nice gift, something from a fancy store, and send it them as a thank-you gift. “Those kinds of people think we’re trash. Go show them we know how to do things right.” I hated spending so much money on candlesticks. The next week, my boyfriend called to say

his parents were appalled by my thank-you note. He didn't even say that they appreciated the expensive candlesticks. "You wrote *I want to thank all of youse for letting me stay at your house*. How you could say *youse*? How could I take you to meet someone famous, like a president, if you talk like that?" he asked. After I hung up the phone and told my mother how upset they were that I had said *youse*, my Dutch mother said, "He ain't never gonna meet a president. Who's he trying to kid? People like that ain't got no manners. Those were really nice candlesticks. I wish I hadn't told you to buy them now. They don't deserve good things. His family will always think he's too good for you." She shook her head in disgust, and added, "You're too good for him. You're good in the heart and that's what matters."

Even though I spent some time wallowing over the candlestick boyfriend, the most valuable lesson I learned was that *youse* wasn't really a word, and this did bother me, quite a bit actually. I had been the school note writer of our family since I was in the second grade. My mother's education ended with the sixth grade, and in the sixth grade, I won the school spelling bee. Imagine my horror of learning that *youse* wasn't a real word.

I had thought that all of *youse* said *youse*, which makes me remember how one day while taking a walk with the famous memoirist, she slowed down and looked at me to say, "You are intelligent, but you are not educated." Just like that it dawned on me that the critique of my story wasn't ever really about the actual story, but always about the situation, the situation I was always trying to escape by telling a good story, and the situation that was actually me. I also learned that her assessment of me wasn't a story I wanted to share with others, because after I mentioned this exchange with my boyfriend at the time, a boyfriend whose mother I had never met, it was almost like returning to that time in my life with those messages delivered through the heating vents, with him introducing me to his friends by telling them how the famous memoirist accessed me, and they all laughed knowingly, because they had already heard his stories about how my family was the most redneck family he had ever met. This boyfriend was no different than the people who had hired me to clean their houses, no different from the parents of the boys I had dated who could so quickly detect all my flaws. I wasn't so sure if my situation ever would change, but I did learn to close the heating vents when visiting the family homes of boyfriends, and to walk away from this boyfriend, and that made me feel like I was finally heading in the right direction.



**Fabricate**  
Julia Forrest



## Paradise

James K. Zimmerman

I heard a mockingbird today  
here in paradise

severed by a scissors  
from its earth-bound bulb  
a gladiolus blooms  
all up the stalk  
here in paradise

four bullets in his brown  
body, four times through  
the window of his idling car  
the cop shot Philandro  
as he reached for

his ID

blue intensity of sun-dried sky  
weaving through his shirt  
as the red stains grew

*stay with me* said his wife  
as his life bled away  
*stay with me*

here in paradise  
purple finches chatter  
in the arms of a cherry



*stay with me*, she pleads, and  
*it's OK, mommy*  
we hear her daughter say  
*it's OK, mommy*  
*I'm right here with you*

there's a sweet wistful sigh  
in the new-mown grass  
here in paradise

Diamond calls him *sir*  
before he cuffs her:  
*you shot four bullets into him, sir*

before she screams, wounds  
unseen, wounds of generations  
past and still to come  
flowing through us all

here in paradise

*it's OK, mommy*, we hear  
her daughter say, four  
years on this earth, *it's OK*

*I'm right here with you*

a monarch wing lies  
lost from its body  
in the garden

here in paradise

## Parting

Bruce Lader

In the most routine intimate moments  
saying *good morning* *sleep well*  
now that our lives are dwindling

times together and alone seem suspended  
empty spaces often drift in as I  
draw the curtains prepare breakfast

choose to read or write on the porch  
instead of living room or kitchen

chat about authors weird weather  
best times to visit relatives waterfalls  
it feels my life took place elsewhere

we have travelled far from home  
are getting acquainted who knows  
how long we have perhaps I'm dreaming



## Borboleta

Weston Smith

*Matheus Felipe de Souza*

*Kingston, Massachusetts, 2016.*

*Mas que merda*, Matheus cursed. He looked at his phone. 4:10. If she was coming, she would have been here by now, and the last bus had left at three. He looked up at the droplets in the sky, and then down at the Spider-Man hoodie he was wearing.

He pulled his hood up, opened one of the school's front doors and ran for it. It was five minutes after he'd left when the rain picked up. After seven minutes his sweatshirt had soaked through. All of this after he had gone to his dresser and mulled over whether or not to wear it. The forecast on his phone said it would be sunny, and on Tuesdays Mamãe would be there to pick him up after her work. So he'd thrown it on. It was comfortable, he liked how it looked. There wasn't going to be any rain, or any long walk home. The sweatshirt would be fine.

Car tires sliced through the water that pooled on the asphalt. Matheus straddled the white line at the edge of the road, his worn Skechers balancing atop it as though it were a tightrope, squishing more water into already wet socks with every step. There were trees that bent over the road that could have brought some sort of cover, but they did a lousy job of it. Instead of the water from the sky making Matheus wet, the drops from the trees did.

He knew the secret to being comfortable. He just had to forget. Take his mind elsewhere. Somewhere where it wasn't raining. Back to class, for example. Algebra. Yes, he could think about what they learned in algebra. The slope formula. Rise over run. He thought of the homework he would do. Then he remembered that his backpack was only partially waterproof, and that the DragonBall folder that had all of his algebra work was also probably wet. Everything was wet.

Matheus kicked the water out of a pothole. A dead moth was on the side of the road. One more mile of this. His hands clenched inside the pouch of his hoodie. His lip was trembling. Why had she done this?

*No, it's not her fault.*

But whose was it then?

The headlights of another car passed over Matheus, swerving slightly so as not to hit him. He wondered what they thought of him. Did they have sympathy for him? Matheus liked



to think that. He knew, however, that most of them had no thoughts of him and just drove, and still others were frustrated. Their cars had to slow down, to go slightly to the left, which made for however slight of an increase in their commute.

He punted a rock along the white line. It wasn't about his favorite hoodie and all of his schoolwork getting wet. Well, it was, but not really. It was about all of those headlights, and the eyes behind them, judging him for being a Brazilian boy in a white school, for having "missed" the bus when he stayed late for a club he was the president of, for being a poor little thing who had no one to take care of him, for being *coitadinho*. Matheus hated the idea of *coitadinho*. Mamãe hadn't come and he didn't care that she hadn't. He could handle a walk in the rain. It was refreshing in some ways. He couldn't handle his friends watching him from their cars. Yes, a walk in the rain was fine, but humiliation? Humiliation is the worst fate a middle schooler can imagine.

Matheus sighed. It had been a mile. He turned onto a small street where there would be no more cars. His legs took him to the small house at the end of Old Pine Street. It was easy to tell it belonged to immigrants with the way the siding looked like it was about to rot off, or from the large piles of leaves that no one had bothered to touch, or the crooked no-longer-white picket fence that termites and the weather had eaten through in some places. Matheus reached into a soggy pocket and produced a house key, which, as always, only decided to work after being cursed at for some minutes.

The door shut behind him with a creak. Matheus let the backpack slump off his shoulder and onto the ground next to the door. Water dripped off his clothes onto the old floorboards and then the 70s era kitchen tiling, until Matheus reached the small laundry room, where he stripped to his underwear. He knew perfectly well that the dryer would only mostly dry out the clothes, but mostly dry was all he could hope for. He grabbed a towel from the closet and ran it through his hair before wrapping it around his chest as a blanket and dripping all the way back to the couch.

Matheus scrolled through Netflix. Someone had mentioned a new show called Stranger Things to him. Maybe he could watch that.

*Watch it again: Naruto.*

Matheus held the remote. The trailer started playing automatically. He considered. He pressed "OK." The show began, Japanese voices filling the room and Portuguese words filling the screen.

And then Matheus was seven again.

*"Eu vou mostrar algo pra você, filho."* I'm going to show you something, *filho*.

“What is it, *mamãe*?”

“*Olha só.*” Just watch. She clicked “OK.” The show began, filling the same room with the same voices and the screen with the same words. She continued in Portuguese. “If you like it, we can watch it every weekend.”

“Really?” Matheus looked up to her. “Every weekend?”

She nodded. “Only if you like it.”

Matheus rose one of his eyebrows. Characters were talking. Action was unfolding. “What are they saying?”

“They speak *japonês*. You have to learn to read the translation at the bottom.”

Matheus’ eyes failed at hiding his sense of betrayal. “But that’s hard!”

“You’ll get better at it. It’s important that you learn how to read your first language. *Fique tranquilo.*” Don’t worry about it.

Matheus sighed. It was annoying. The words moved too fast, and they weren’t even in English. His teachers had taught him lots of English words, but the few Portuguese words he knew to read all came from reading with Mamãe.

“I don’t know these words, mãe.”

“Which words?”

Matheus walked up to the screen and pointed to them. “These.”

“Desafio. Enfrentar. Borboleta.”

“Borboleta?”

His mother struggled to express herself. “You know, it’s the small, colorful bug that flies.”

“*Butterfly*?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Okay.”

Mamãe pressed play again.

“Wait, what about these?”

Mamãe smiled, and paused the show. “Geral. Montar. Luta.”

They stopped every other frame, Mamãe telling whichever word Matheus pointed to. It was hard to focus on what was happening at first, but Mamãe was right. It did get easier, especially because Mamãe started to make cheesy bread for them to eat while they were watching.

After several weeks, Matheus would start curling up comfortably next to her, asking for a word only now and then. And then he would snuggle closer, enjoying the warmth that

came from his mother.

And then Matheus was not seven. And Mamãe was still at work.

He curled himself up in the towel and cried.

*Luiz Henrique de Oliveira*

*Curitiba, Brasil, 2010.*

Luiz was feeling good today. It was a clear morning. He'd gotten up the first time his alarm went off, which meant he could catch the first *ônibus* of the morning, giving him time to stop by the bakery on Iguazu before heading to work.

"*Pois não?*"

"Three cheesy bread, please."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

The woman grabbed the three small balls of bread and cheese and plopped them in a bag.

"*Obrigado.*" Luiz took the bag and turned to leave the bakery. His eye passed over something on a vacant table. "Wait, *moça*. Someone left their wallet."

The girl who had just served him turned around. She shook her head. "*Bebado.*" A drunk guy. "He left just before you came in."

"Which way did he go?"

She pointed out the bakery to the left.

"Thanks, I'll get it to him." Luiz opened the wallet, looking for the RG. He fingered through credit cards as he walked down the street in the direction the woman had pointed. He found it. "Jonilson!" The man's RG showed him to be mostly bald, with deep lines on his face. "Jonilson de Souza!" Luiz kept walking. "Jonilson!"

"*É o que?*" A man on the other side of the street turned towards Luiz. "I paid back there. Leave me alone. I'm in a hurry."

"*Senhor*, you left your wallet." Luiz held it up.

The man's expression instantly changed. He hobbled over the street. There were holes in his baggy t-shirt. "Thank you. Thank you so much. *Ai meu Deus. Meu Deus.*"

Luiz handed the wallet to him. The man clasped it between his two hands and rocked back and forth as if bowing to God. A butterfly passed by.

*Jonilson de Souza*  
*Curitiba, Brasil, 2010.*

It was afternoon when Jonilson arrived in the regional bus station. His flip flops had already been worn down at the start of his journey, and he guessed it wouldn't be much longer before there would be holes in them.

There were lots of things happening at the station. Orange checkerboard taxis dropped passengers off underneath the araucaria trees. Jonilson followed them. He had never done this before. It had been hard enough for him to figure out the website to buy his passage. It had been even harder to save up the money.

His head hurt. Too many drinks. There were always too many drinks.

Ticketing. That's where they were going. It made sense. A maze of ropes, and then a desk. Yes, perfect. Jonilson waited.

"*Bom dia, senhor.*"

"*Bom dia.* I bought a passage online."

"Okay, *senhor*, can I please see your RG?"

Jonilson was surprised. "Why do you need to see that?"

"I need some sort of identification to confirm that it's really you. When you bought the passage online we asked for either an RG or a CPF number to determine your identity. If you are unable to provide either of those, there's no way I can liberate your passage."

Jonilson pulled his wallet from his cargo shorts and stared at it.

"Is everything okay, *senhor*?"

Jonilson cleared his throat. "Yeah, yeah." *Meu Deus, meu Deus.*

"Can I see the RG then, please?"

Short, stubby, callused fingers pulled the small RG card from the wallet, and slipped it to the man. The man took it and immediately began typing. A machine began printing a small slip of paper. The man signed it.

"Alright, sir, here's your passage." The man handed it over together with the RG. "You're going to board at platform 5," -- he pointed without a single glance -- "in about an hour. *Boa viagem.*"

"*Obrigado.*" Jonilson walked towards the platform, staring at his RG. That man, he didn't even know his name. The one who found the wallet. God bless that man.

Rosa Maria de Souza  
São Paulo, 2010.

"I'm on a bus to São Paulo. I'll be there in two hours."

Rosa moved a hand to cover her mouth. Four months. It had been four months since the last time she had heard her father's voice. It had been eight years since she'd seen him.

"What do I do?"

Tereza shrugged. "I don't know, go see him? He's your dad."

Rosa bit her lip. "I should, shouldn't I?"

"Absolutely. It could be the last time you ever see him. He might have managed to scrape together the money to come to São Paulo but there's no way in hell he'd have money for a plane ticket to the United States."

Rosa sighed. "You're right. I'll meet up with him. Matheus should come too. It would be nice for him..." She swallowed. "For him to meet at least one of his grandparents."

"Hey." Tereza put a hand on Rosa's shoulder. "You're doing the right thing. Your dad coming doesn't change any of that. Think of Matheus. He'll be better off growing up there."

"But his family... *Meu Deus Tereza*, am I taking his family from him?"

Tereza snorted, rolling her eyes. "Bitch, you are his family. *Você*. That's all he needs. Your drunk ass dad's not gonna be the difference maker in how your son grows up."

Rosa rubbed her hands along her thighs. "You're right. You're right."

"I know I am, *querida*. Now go meet your dad at the station and say goodbye. Come back before ten, so you can get some decent sleep before your flight tomorrow."

Rosa nodded to herself. "Yeah. Okay. Thank you for everything, Tereza."

"Anything for you, *querida*."

Rosa stood up. "Matheus! Come here! We're going."

"This is your captain speaking. We've reached cruising altitude. Feel free to move about the cabin."

Rosa looked out her view from the window seat, and then to her shoulder, where Matheus was still fast asleep. She ran her fingers through his hair. She'd been against giving him benadryl, but Tereza had insisted that it would make everything easier, and there was no fighting with Tereza.

She let out a shaky breath. Her breath always was steady while Matheus was awake. Her eyes were always dry too. Merda. If she started crying now Matheus would notice something once he woke up, she was sure of it.

*Te amo muito, filha.* It was the only time she had ever seen her father cry. The image wouldn't leave her head. For all of the times she'd seen him drunk or angry or happy, she had never seen him cry. *Te amo muito filha.* He'd wrapped his arms around her, his coarse shirt brushing up against her skin and the smell of booze and body odor coming off of him filling her lungs. But she didn't care. For once in his life he was there.

"I'm so sorry." Orbs of water fell from his eyes. "I'm a terrible father. *Eu sei.* But I just wanted to say that I'm proud of you." He sniffled, wiping his snot on his bare arm. He glanced down to Matheus. "This is him, then? The strong and powerful Matheus?" He flexed goofily, scaring Matheus to hide behind his mother's leg. "Shy, eh?"

Rosa smiled. "A little." She looked to her father. "Thank you for coming, dad."

He paused. His lip quivered. The words squeaked out between shudders in his breath.

*"Te amo muito, filha."*

Rosa leaned back into the seat of the airplane and began to sob.

A woman in the aisle seat leaned in. "Excuse me, are you alright?"

Rosa quickly wiped away her tears. "Yes. I'm okay."

The woman reached into her purse. "My name's Maria. Is it your first time flying?"

"Yes, but I'm not scared of planes or --"

"Family?"

Rosa found herself at a loss for words.

"It's okay. I cried the first time I left them too. I think we all do," she said, passing tissues over Matheus in the middle seat. "Here. I could tell you were anxious, but I didn't want to be rude and ask what was wrong. But once you started with the tears, I couldn't help myself. I'm sorry."

Rosa sighed. She ran her fingers through Matheus' hair again.

"Who are you leaving? Boyfriend? Parents?"

Rosa was reluctant, but spoke nonetheless. "Just my dad."

Maria nodded, as if she were some all-knowing being who had perfect knowledge of what was happening to Rosa. In a way and in that moment, she was.

"Now that you've left," she said, "everyone came out of the woodwork to support you, didn't they?"

Rosa mumbled, "Yes."

Maria nodded again. "It's a lot easier to leave when no one supports you. You have no one to disappoint then." She looked down at Matheus. "How old is he?"

Rosa wiped a tear away. "Six."

“He’ll be fine, then. Kids that age are resilient. My daughter was the same age when we immigrated.” She turned back to Rosa. “Do you have a job?”

Rosa paused. “Yes,” she lied. She would find maid work or something. There were lots of options. “But I’m open to new opportunities.”

“Do you speak English?”

“A little.”

“Are you a fast learner?”

“I hope so.”

Maria looked down at her latest model iPhone. “What are you doing on the 24th?”

Rosa was caught off guard. She patted her eyes with the tissue, suddenly caring a great deal more about her appearance. “I...” She could have feigned that she was busy for a moment, to make it seem like she had some sort of life pieced together, but in reality she already knew the answer. “Nothing. Why?”

Maria looked at her. “I run a dental practice. It’s in Fall River, to the south of Boston. The thing is that we have so many Brazilians who come to us that we need someone at the desk who speaks Portuguese. I can’t promise anything, but...”

Rosa sat up straight. “Yes. Of course. I’ll be there.” She grabbed her old cell phone, turning it on, a prayer on her lips that it wouldn’t crash like it always did. There was a message from Tereza that she hadn’t seen before they’d taken off.

*Love ya. Send me shit from the US when you’re rich and famous, k? Or at the very least send me pics. Tchau, querida. xoxo*

She swiped the message away, breathing deeply. She tapped and the calendar app opened without a crash. Where she had been tearful moments before, now she almost laughed. It was mere luck that somewhere in the circuits of her phone the code had actually launched. Yet Rosa couldn’t help herself from extrapolating. It was the universe that had saved her phone, it was the universe that was on her side. It wanted this for her.

Rosa turned to her new friend. “What date was that again?”

*Matheus Felipe de Souza*

*Kingston, Massachusetts, 2016.*

Matheus looked at his phone. 3:31pm. Mamãe should be here any minute now. He sat on the bench, his feet dangling below when a butterfly passed by.

A drop of water fell on his nose.

*Huh*, he thought. *It wasn’t supposed to rain today.* It didn’t look like the rain would really

start coming down until a little while later.

A blue Honda pulled up into the pick-up ring. *There she is.* He slung his backpack around his shoulder and headed for the car.

“Hi there *filho*. How was your day today?” She was still in her work clothes -- a blazer and dress pants.

The car door slammed shut. “Good.”

“I’m glad. What did you learn about?”

“I don’t know.” He rested his chin on the arm he balanced on the car’s windowsill. “Math, science, stuff.”

“Nothing interesting?”

Matheus pondered for a moment. “No. Not really.” Matheus began scrolling through his phone.

“Oh, by the way, Maria is coming over tonight for dinner. So you need to pick your things up once we get home.”

“Ugh, but I have so much homework. And it’s just Maria. She’s not going to care if my stuff is everywhere.”

“She’s my boss. If it weren’t for this job she got me I wouldn’t be able to feed you. So, to show your gratitude, you’re going to clean up for her, *tá?*”

“You say that every time she comes over.”

“Because it’s true. If we hadn’t met then *Deus* knows where I’d be working or where we’d be now.”

“Whatever. I’ll do it if we get to have *feijoada* for dinner.”

His mom smiled. “I’ve already started making it, *filho*.”

Matheus smiled to himself, and settled into the seat of the car. He flicked around his phone screen, trying to beat his high score. The car vibrated along the road as it kissed the road’s potholes. Old Pine Street passed them by and Mamãe kept driving, turning into a small community of houses. The potholes disappeared, the jarring transition to smooth roads made less jarring only by the number of times the two of them had made the transition together. They passed HOA-approved lawns (still green well into October) and neighborhood kids playing basketball on a driveway.

They were reaching their own home at the end of the street when Mamãe turned on the windshield wipers. It had started to rain.



## illegal

K. Eltinaé

I am waiting for a paper to be free  
a stamp left and right on my chest  
to bring back a hundred miracles.

I dream about hands at night curved around a pen,  
I dream about what currencies I've been.

Tattered suitcase at some airport,  
frail but standing on a conveyer belt;  
that's exactly how I felt when you called me *illegal*.

All these white God appointments  
are auditions for the other side

our people still hunted for teeth and skin.  
Is everybody/nowhere welcoming?

They say for every child aborted  
a refugee crosses the Mediterranean.

I kiss my pillow for safe passage through the night,  
kiss the trees that fall so I can dream of standing.



## Bitch

Marilyn Melissa Salguero

People chew on words like dogs.

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

I say *Spit it out* and yes,

I am prying here.

Reaching out a hand towards a snapping thing that is all gnashing teeth  
and backwards smile  
and I offer a taste of my blood

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

hesitates.

See,

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

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

still dripping a man

gl

ed heartbeat off of his tongue.

He likes the taste of blood, I think.

Likes the way he can bare his teeth  
and make everyone else think themselves a skeleton  
a meal stuck between his mercy  
likes how all his howling echoes in agreement off the concrete  
I expect that the bark will not be worse than the bite if I ask for it

So, I ask for it.

Ask him to give again  
and he calls me a *Bitch*.

it falls onto the floor between us  
& I make him look at it,

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

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

*a Good Boy.*

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

## Back Seat

Beverly Orth

Up, down, up, down; feet pushing against pedals. Cars and pickups pass us on the left, filling our lungs with exhaust fumes. When I look ahead, all I see is the blue of Diane's T-shirt and the back pockets of her cut-off jeans. On either side, beyond the asphalt, tawny-yellow hay fields glide by. We're westbound on a rented tandem bicycle, mid-July, in a quest of Diane's design. We're looking for a boy.

Not just any boy. A specific boy named Danny – or David – or Don. It doesn't matter, because we don't know his last name or his address. All we know is that Diane fell in love with a boy at the county fairgrounds, lying under the stars on a blanket at the July 4th fireworks display, where a sliver of the blanket protected me from the damp ground while Diane and the boy cuddled on the rest of it.

We're ten minutes into our journey starting from the rustic Shell station on Walker Road where we rented the bike. The gas station has piles of old wooden crates out in front, but the bicycle is shiny and new, complete with a wire basket over the front fender. Our destination is a big secret, planned for days, ever since the night Diane fell in love.

I poke Diane between her shoulder blades and ask, *Can we slow down?* She nods and the bike slows a bit and I catch my breath. I know she's desperate to get to Hillsboro because our bike rental lasts only four hours, but if I pass out we'll never get there. Already my right leg has scratches from the purple-tufted thistles, obstinate and thorny, growing by the road and attacking our legs and the tire spokes with equal fury.

\* \* \*

My fourteenth birthday is in two weeks, but Diane has been fourteen for months now. She seems so mature, always reminding me to slow down so I won't embarrass her by running ahead like a young colt instead of behaving more grown-up. We're the same height but Diane, with her womanly figure, looks cooler in cut-offs and a T-shirt. My body is more straight than curvy and I wonder if I'll ever graduate from my double-A cup to a single A. Whenever I'm dressed for school in a mini skirt and ribbed poorboy, though, I feel more stylish than Diane. I can't explain why, exactly.

Usually Diane's short blond hair is straight, but she permed it recently. Maybe that was her mother's idea. My chin-length dark-brown hair is wavy, bordering on curly – a curse. I use oversized magnetic rollers to straighten it, but last night, when the ends refused to turn under,

I looked despairingly at myself in Diane's mirror and told her, *I don't like short flips*. She said, *Thanks a lot*, and I realized that the ends of her curly hair were turned up, like little sausage rolls. I corrected myself: *I don't like short flips on me; yours is cute*.

We were in our PJs in her bedroom, listening to *Rubber Soul* on her turntable. Even in summer, Diane always has at least five heavy blankets on her bed. It was so hot, I was sure I wouldn't make it to morning – but I did.

\* \* \*

Up, down, up, down. We've reached the four-way stop at Cornelius Pass. My legs are burning but we're only halfway. This is the third time we've rented a bike. Other times we just moseyed around the quiet, leafy streets bordering our junior high school, near Diane's house. We let our mothers believe that we'd do the same today, not scooting out of the suburbs on busy Cornell Road past the hay and clover fields to Hillsboro. That's not the same as lying, is it? I imagine Diane will eventually tell her mother someday, because that's the kind of relationship they have and her mother won't mind.

I always let Diane take the front seat because I don't want the responsibility of steering and braking. If we run over a squirrel or into the ditch, it won't be my fault. I don't want to think about it, but this might be our last tandem bike ride together. Summer will be over soon and Diane and I have only a few more weeks to pal around. In September I have to go to the new junior high school. We've promised to get together on weekends but we both know we'll see less and less of each other.

\* \* \*

Diane lives in a gas station, but it's not a gas station now. It has a portico over the front drive where the old gas pumps still stand, surrounded by wooden tubs of orange and yellow nasturtiums that her father tends, wearing overalls that look like mattress ticking. The house is on a corner, in a little dip on Walker Road, not far from the Shell station. It's tiny, stuccoed and quaint, and oddly laid out. The kitchen has a proper location in front, with a window overlooking the gas pumps, but the bedrooms seem to be placed randomly about the house.

Diane's parents are older, almost as old as my grandparents. I think her older brother is cute and kind of sweet, for a teenage boy. She has an even older brother who lives with his girlfriend and their baby. To me, it's strange that Diane's parents seem so accepting of the situation.

Once, Diane's mother told us about adopting the older son and then getting pregnant with the second one: *The doctor told me I was too old to have a baby, that I should have been pregnant ten years earlier. I told him that would have been a problem because I wasn't married then*. She shook her head

at the thought, her graying braids wrapped primly around her crown.

Maybe they're just a slightly strange family who live in a slightly strange house, a little exotic compared to my typical family and our typical suburban ranch house.

\* \* \*

Up, down, up, down. We're almost to Hillsboro. I can tell because we're passing the airport, where the wild grasses and weeds are mowed short around the runways. Behind the airport, along the northern horizon, I can see the outlines of the million trees that cover the gray-green hills. There are hills to the east and south, too, and dusky mauve mountains to the west, far beyond Hillsboro.

A little ways past the airport is the house where Rhetha lives. She was married to my mother's cousin, but he died in World War II and now she lives all alone in this big house on a sweeping curve, flanked on either side by farmland. The house is elegant in a faded way, with a wide front porch outside and mahogany wainscoting inside. It even has a butler's pantry and there's an unused foyer with its own furniture.

We turn off Cornell Road onto Lincoln Street and Diane stops the bike. I'm glad because my feet are hot and I want to inspect the thistle scratches on my leg. Diane asks if I'm all right. I tell her I'll live.

I ask, *What should we do now?*

*Let's find the high school,* she replies.

I know the boy told her he lives near there. The school is a few blocks farther, a three-story granite building standing regally apart from the pre-war houses that surround it.

*I'm thirsty. Let's have the Cokes now,* I say. We prop the bike on a lamppost and open the cans that we stashed in the bicycle basket.

Now there is nothing to do, so I ask Diane, *Should we hang out here and wait for him to pass by?*

She thinks for a moment before she responds. *Let's ride a few blocks this way and a few blocks that way,* she says.

We do a little of each, pedaling north to Grant Street, then south to Washington Street, where my grandparents live in a small faux-brick house with pink and white petunias spilling out of the front planters. But we don't stop, not even to say hello. It would take too much time.

One block over is the 88 Cent Store where my sister and I like to shop when we visit Grandma and Grandpa. But Diane and I don't stop.

*Remember that we have to return the bike on time or we'll pay extra,* I say. I wait for Diane to reply but she merely nods and steers the bike toward Cornell Road.

\* \* \*

Up, down, up, down. Even though my legs are aching, the ride back seems shorter, somehow. We turn onto Walker Road where it merges into Cornell and re-enter suburbia. As we pass Diane's house, I can see the nasturtiums nodding as if to welcome us home. The boy is but a memory now. I don't bother to ask Diane why she and the boy didn't share phone numbers. Maybe she didn't fall in love until the fifth of July.

## Unexpressed Grief

Saddiq Dzukogi

Twigs lean into the windows of the room that was once mine,  
smelling of fresh leaves, fresh like the crushed mangoes  
in your mother's juicer. my child, you come as memory,

to settle in my mind,  
a quarry you've never visited before.  
But the leaves of the mango tree are no longer leaves,  
just your hands patting my back. To pull your socks

from your shoes, I hauled the cobwebs that gathered like a crowd.

I do not have words of comfort your mother when she cries  
but we perform wudu  
to speak to God. We bow our heads  
with the same level of reverence, I afford my mother.  
We recite the Quran  
for the daughter who has not been dead

long enough for the wound  
to start healing. My mother says we must grieve  
according to the Quran: This means in peace,  
without tears or words. But in our grief,  
you hear its metal rubbing off my bones.  
In the Quran there is a solution to every mystery,  
but not for an unexpressed grief.



## **A haiku for my period**

Jesi Bender

For each full-faced moon  
My uterus sheds its skin  
A venom-tooth'd snake

## **Herbert the Empathy Toad**

David Romanda

He told me  
to fuck off and die

I'm sad

## The Apples in the South

Shaun Holloway

Helping my mother, I smoke the hives of her apiary, taking in some of the hypnotic sweet scent of the peach wood chips for myself. Soothing the bees into a benumbed stupor I open the hive and the problem is undeniable: the bees have not been making honey. I borrow my mother's eyedropper to collect nectar from the hibiscus flowers in her greenhouse. Straining my eyes, I bump the glass tube against the pistil and my tear ducts burn. My eyes are turning pink, like bloodied snow. Shapes are floating in my vision, medusas with spiraling smoke-like tails. The greenhouse is becoming less clear. I leave with as much nectar as I can carry. There's a snowstorm outside. I'm using all my energy walking against the wind, the snow stinging my face. I'm growing tired. My mother is relying on me. I can't remember if I closed the hives or not. The nectar in my hands, translucent and holding the warmth from the greenhouse, is eager to be slipped into a pocket, to sip later, alone, on top of wool quilts in a wooden bed while savoring the private fantasy of leaving. What delight there is in keeping things, in loafing and enjoying sweet fruits, eating the apples from the south, and staying away from others.



## Eel Sermon

Tessa Livingstone

In back country, we called on  
the preacher to baptize our bodies  
in the marsh. This low, flat land  
flooded by saltwater. I felt  
the mussels anchored to its  
muddy bottom. Their bodies  
to be broken open by stone crabs.  
And the tangled grass was like  
fingers interlocked in prayer.  
I prayed for the eels. My dress  
white as bleached bones. I could  
feel them beneath me, half-buried  
in the mud. A row of vibrating  
torsos. How the fishermen would  
love to hold down their heads,  
and slip their knives into thick  
skin. To wipe their bloody blades  
on black aprons.

## The Jars that Won't Stop Filling

Lucas Jorgensen

When my parents got divorced, I bought  
a mason jar. I still keep it under my bed,  
feed it every night with wet prayers, squares  
of blank paper, rosary beads. A jar is a measure  
of time, a reverse hourglass. A jar is a measure

of how deep the well it draws from runs.  
My grandfather died. I bought another jar.  
Filled it. Filled another. Never stopped  
filling them. I learn the well is bottomless—  
that it always has been. Unlike the finite space

under my bed that can only hide so many jars  
beneath its springs. When I think  
I have a manage on it, I try to make room:  
water an orchid in a tiny pot at the cellar  
window. It thrives, but the dregs drain,

flow across the floor and into the well  
that crept up from the sump basin  
while I wasn't paying attention. Water rises,  
spills over the brim, presses me up  
against the ceiling where there is no room

to breath. Do I have enough jars to bail  
myself out? A grasshopper is only a grasshopper  
until there is a swarm, until the swarm  
eats a million acres, until we start to call them  
locusts, plague. A well is only a well. A jar only a jar.



## Some Old Tongue

Angie Romines

“Sit still, Urdie,” Mama said through pursed lips filled with bobby pins. “Keep wriggling around like that and I’ll never get this crown to stay.”

Urdie tucked her hands under her thighs, willing herself to stop shifting. She held her breath and looked in the warped mirror above her mama’s chipped vanity. There she was, her baptism gown as white as the bleach could make a hand-me-down, her dark brown hair tucked behind her ears, as Mama worked pins into the crown of dark green leaves and snowy Queen Anne’s lace. How could she sit still? Hers would be the first baptism in a generation up on Haint Ridge.

As if her mother could read her thoughts, she said, “Just can’t believe it. Families up herewith a whole passel of kids, none with the gift. I’ve got my one, sweet girl, and she’s the one with the blessing.”

Urdie let out a shaky sigh. She was the one. The only one. Jeepers.

“Don’t be nervous. You’ll know your tongue when you come up from the waters, baby,” said Mama.

“What if my gift isn’t as good as the others? I mean, Uncle Orwell can wipe the measles clean off a person and you said Old Mags raised that mare from the dead. What am I supposed to do with snakes? What’s the use?” Urdie asked her mother as she smoothed down her dark bob. She’d begged and begged her mama to shear her long black hair to just below her ears, just like them girls in the moving pictures she’d stare at when flipping through the back issues of Picture Play that the Pack Horse Librarian knew Urdie lived for.

“Snakes could be just the beginning,” Mama said, adjusting Urdie’s flower crown even though it was already perfect. “Or maybe that’s all there is. Your gift isn’t of your choosing, Urdella. The important thing is that you have one. Do you know what I’d give to be like you? Like my brother? It’s been years since the mountains blessed anybody, and here you are wondering if your gift is good enough. The mountains chose you just like they chose your gift. I don’t know why you were chosen or why the snakes come to you, listen to you. But I know you will use what has been bestowed upon you to do great things for your people.” Her mama smoothed one last strand of her hair. “There, you’re done. Get on out of here, so I can get ready.”

“Great things, huh,” muttered Urdie, as she shoved through the rickety screen door on

the front of her family's cabin. The door clattered loudly behind her. She hopped down the planks of the small front porch and walked down toward the village well. At least she didn't have to gather water today.

"Oh, I just love that crown," cooed her best friend Ethel, who was leaning against the stone lip of the well. "Thought you'd never get here."

"I was squirmy, so it took a while," Urdie said, already feeling better in the company of her friend.

"Well, I think you look smashing. Trying my best not to be green with envy over here, but you're not making it easy."

"Wanna switch places?" Urdie joked.

"You know I would, sissy," said Ethel. "Don't be nervous. This is special. You get to be special." Ethel wrapped her arm around Urdie's shoulder and gave her a quick squeeze. "We'll walk together."

The two girls left the well and made their way down the gravel road to the tiny chapel in the very back of the village. Every inhabitant of Haint Ridge was streaming out of their cabins, down past the well, toward the clapboard church surrounded by ancient oaks and pines.

"I just can't wait to see your window, Urds," Ethel said, trying to crane her neck to see the newest replacement window on the far left of the small white building.

"Seems pretty bananas to give you a window, snake girl," said Marty, breaking between the two girls with an arm around each of them. Marty was always giving them a hard time, no matter how many snakes Urdie made slither in his direction.

"What's your gift, Marty?" Urdie sassed back. "Oh, that's right, nothing. And how long has it been since your family's been gifted? Do our records even go back that far?"

"Sheesh, you don't need to blow your wig over it," said Marty before running toward his parents. Ethel and Urdie giggled as he studied the ground around him, clearly hoping Urdie and her snakes were feeling charitable that day.

"Who'd a thought my very own best friend would get her very own stained-glass window," Ethel said as she looped her arm around Urdie's waist.

"Well, I'm guessing that window getting busted out by a tree branch during the last ice and my uncle being the only one in the holler who knows how to make stained-glass might've done the trick." Urdie shrugged but still, she couldn't wait to see the window. Uncle Jethro, her daddy's brother, had finished the window a while ago, but a burlap feed sack had been nailed over both sides of it, waiting for today, the day of Urdie's baptism.

Ethel and Urdie walked through the worn wooden doors of the chapel, “The Tabernacle of Signs,” engraved in the door frame above, covered in dried sheep’s blood from their Passover service a few weeks before. The sanctuary looked like what’d you’d find in other Appalachian churches—small and poorly-lit, filled with a few rows of rough-hewn pews. Any visitors, as if Haint Ridge had any visitors, wouldn’t pay any mind to the chapel. They’d assume it was like any other tiny mountain church with its superstitions, and its rituals, and its gospel. But the gospel was not taught here. At least not the gospel all the other churches were teaching. The Tabernacle was a different sort of place. One that borrowed from the Bible when it suited, but that wasn’t shy about welcoming in the wildness, the mysteries of the mountains in which it was nestled. No man hanging from a cross about the altar. No man in a collar thumping a Bible at the lecture. No man in charge at all. Only The Mother.

Ethel gasped as the girls turned toward Urdie’s window, breathtaking in its simple colored shards and planks. Urdie was surprised to see how much the girl in the frame looked like her, her arms upraised, snakes circling her arms and curled beneath her feet. The window girl didn’t even have a face, just a beige orb. And yet, there she was, her dark bob, the way she held her back straight whenever her slithered friends gathered around her.

She took in the other windows. There was Old Mags when she was just a girl, her heel perched atop an animal skull. But the others she did not know. A boy with swirling visions spilling from his temples. Another with many forked tongues coming from his mouth. A girl with jagged flames shooting from her palms. Each child anointed with a gift. Each baptized in the living waters as Urdie would soon be. She turned from the colored windows to the water churning and tumbling in the stone baptismal. No one knew the source of the living waters, any more than they knew the source of the gifts. But they knew that those the mountains chose to bless must be submerged in the waters. And soon, Urdie would go under.

She felt a strong hand clamp down on her shoulder, heavy but comforting. “It’s almost your time, Urdella,” her father’s voice boomed. “Come sit with the family.”

Urdie gulped and nodded, looking at The Mother in her rightful place by the baptism. Did she detect the slightest of smiles from the old woman? Old Mags was The Mother when Urdella was born and dedicated in The Tabernacle, but when she passed, it was her sister’s turn.

Nothing to fear. Nothing to fear. Urdie chanted to herself. She’d tried to ask her Uncle Orwell about his baptism, but he wasn’t quite right in the head anymore. With every healing, he faded just a bit more, retreating into himself, getting paler and thinner.

The congregation sang together, some songs from the old country, some songs from



the hills, some borrowed from Christian hymnals, but Urdie could barely force her mouth to whisper along to the lyrics. The fiddles sounded just a little bit haunted today, and Urdie wasn't quite sure why. The Mother stood and walked to the front, near the baptismal. Urdie knew she was speaking, chanting in the old ways, but the ringing in her ears kept her from deciphering the words. It'll be over soon, she told herself. Before you know it. You'll be coming up from those waters and you'll be fine. You don't need to know how deep that pool runs. Just come back up and you'll be fine. She wanted to believe herself. But there was no bottom to that baptism.

She felt a gentle nudge on the small of her back. Her mother and father were looking at her expectantly. She took a deep breath and walked toward The Mother. Where was Ethel? Maybe if she could see her friend's face looking back at her, she wouldn't feel so shaky and strange. The Mother placed a wrinkled hand on Urdie's forehead, speaking a blessing over her in a language Urdie did not know. And then it was time. The Mother held her hands, guiding her up the stone steps to the edge of the baptismal pool. Urdie sat on the side, dangling her legs in the surprisingly warm rushing water. She looked back at The Mother who nodded toward her.

Urdie took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the dusty air of the sanctuary. She met Ethel's eyes, and all she saw was fear. Urdie eased into the pool still gripping the sides with her fingers, keeping her head well above the water. She kicked her feet below, feeling nothing but deeper water. The Mother walked to the side of the pool where Urdie was clinging and shook her head. The Mother held one arm to the heavens, chanting, and with the other, pushed Urdie's head down into the living waters.

The warm water swished around Urdie's head, stirring her dark brown hair and twisting her baptism gown around her ankles. The Mother's hand left her head and it was just Urdie, Urdie and the living water. How long should I stay under? She wondered. How long has it been? She began to sway in the water, spinning herself in a loose circle, arms dragging through the current. Something told her to open her eyes, even though she'd always been too scared to do that when she and the other Ridge kids would go swimming in the creek. She looked up above her and saw the light from The Tabernacle sanctuary filtering through the moving waters. But then she looked down. The light was even brighter below. She could see a long wooden table, longer than would fit in any Haint Ridge cabin. Benches stretched for what seemed like miles, filled with people young and old, laughing, breaking bread together, passing pitchers of drink down the long table. The din of the gathering traveled through the water,

the sound of the festivities muffled but full. It was as if she was drifting in the ceiling rafters, witnessing a great feast.

With a sudden synchronization, all the revelers froze, dropped their food and drink to the table and turned their faces up toward Urdie. They watched her hovering above them. Urdie wanted to pull herself out of the baptismal and run to her parents' pew, but she too was motionless, as frozen as an unlucky fish caught in the top layer of creek ice.

The people then stood as one and raised their arms toward Urdie. And from their fingertips slithered out a great number of snakes—brown splotched copperheads, bright orange milksnakes, inky black water moccasins, sweet little garters, the rattlesnakes with their dark jagged stripes. The snakes undulated toward Urdie in the water, blocking out the feast below until she realized the guests, food, and table had all vanished in a sea of snakes.

She used to be afraid of the snakes that would come to her, flicking their tiny black tongues at her ankles, wrapping their shiny scaled bodies around her calves and wrists. But as she grew and the snakes kept coming to her, Urdie began to understand she was meant to dwell amongst them, those footless creatures, sliding in the dirt like liquid arrows. The snakes kept coming to her, curling close to her body, listening to her. They were wild things, to be sure, but Urdie knew her dominion.

So as the mass of snakes swayed closer and closer, Urdie held out her arms to them. The deep breath she had drawn before The Mother had pushed her under certainly must be spent by now, but still, Urdie remained below the surface with her creatures. She felt their slippery bodies cluster around her, circling her arms, legs, waist, and even her neck. They rose together, breaking the surface of the living water with a powerful surge.

Urdie gripped the side of the stone pool and pulled herself from the swirling water, snakes spilling to the ground next to her feet, her soaked white gown creating small rivulets that ran toward the pews. Urdie looked out into the congregation, at Ethel, her parents, The Mother who stood in the center aisle. She saw fear on their faces as her snakes continued to tumble out of the baptismal, scattering around the room like tiny, curved lightning bolts. Gasps and a few screams filled the chapel. She wanted to laugh at the sight of Marty scaling his father's back to perch precariously on his shoulder, sweat streaming from his brow. But no one was laughing. Even her mother tucked her feet up onto a pew and clenched her eyes closed. With a flick of her wrist, Urdie gathered the snakes in a messy row and with her mind told them it was time to go. They looked like a dark, sinister river as they flowed out the open doors to scatter down the mountainside.

Urdie stood shivering at the front of the sanctuary, not sure what else she should do,

hating all the eyes turned toward her in awe and fear. The Mother came to her, chanting again as she held Urdie by the temples whispering blessings in some old tongue nobody on the Ridge could understand anymore. Urdie wanted it all to be over. And it would be soon. But until The Mother released her, she'd just stare back up at her window, that colorful marvelous wonder. Her own image trapped in glass, surrounded by her snakes, until the next storm came and shattered it.

## Five Antidotes to Despair

Leanne Grabel



## Vanitas

Carolyn Janecek

*Czechoslovak operatic soprano Emmy Destinn  
kept a skeleton named Ivánek in her closet  
whom she brought to all of her performances.*

Her lovers ask, *why do you surround yourself with death?*  
I will eat your plump cheeks like poison apples  
carve out your vocal chords, they'll sing only  
when you pluck them. Even the snake you've charmed  
around your ankle will wither you. Have some  
austerity. A respect for transience. Death is

vain. I see it in kohl-lined eyes and crystal balls, how the living  
bury and unearthen us in the name of memory, I want to be  
rose-colored glass, congealed into a pearl, a final spark—  
cherish me, adore me, remember me—even if it is just as

her parlor trick. She throws open her armoire,  
clatters me out in all my hair-lined ivory. I wish  
she wouldn't tuck me into her gilded cards, I long  
for my marrow to run with flecks of gold. If only  
she would paint vipers on my bones like the wards  
she's needled into her skin. Transform me, adorn me,  
I am still vain—

## Divine Emmy Destinn

Carolyn Janecek

Men crawl in front of my pumps to get a glimpse,  
follow me home on all fours like strays.

Their mothers warned them about witches  
who'd cut the flesh from their fingers,

dangle them by their tails like gutted mice—  
the bewitched don't listen. Luckily for them,

they bore me. If they can stomach my crows  
and my leeches, ignore the remains spilling

from my wardrobe, I'll lift up my skirts for them:  
one thigh made of moonlight, my familiar

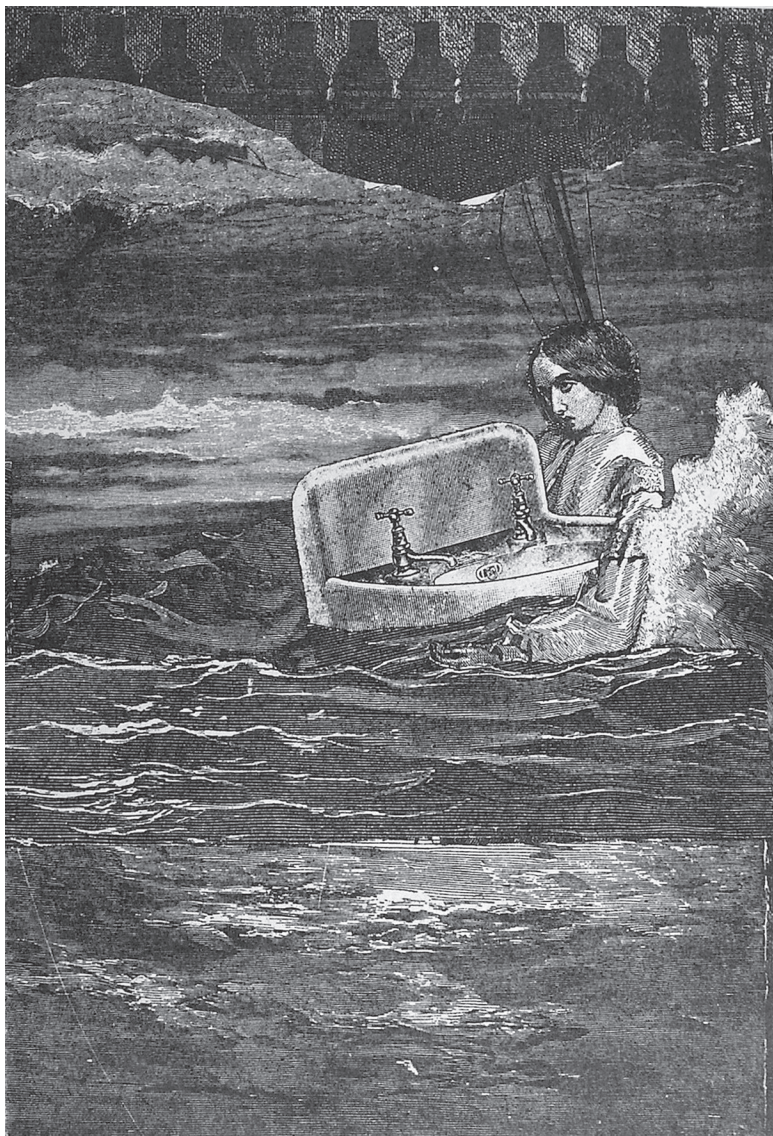
winding the other—pitch black viper anchored  
by my ankle, its jaw unhinged around my vulva

dripping venom. No man is brave enough  
to take the first bite. That's what I learned from Eve.



## **...And the Kitchen Sink Too**

Michael Thompson



## Beautiful Virus

Lauren Suchenski

The light turns buttery ; fringes through the branches ; curls light green at the edges ; the forest is sending postcards // today the stream is laughing awe-filled laughs;; each drop a silent memory released ;; the drip-drop humble hands, the tips of branches gone dry into the restless pool of water beneath it;; begs for something shallow , cool , irreverent ;; something to bathe itself in ; the coolness everywhere peels back the saturation , the vibrance , the funnel of summer colors that reach towards the endless blue ,, everything pulls away; pulls back in on itself; chlorophyll like a half remembered promise — passing through for today ; a cheat day today; the cheap linen cues cascading around the bushels of greenery like a half-assed acceptance / here and there the color windows / just here and there it seems it pulls back from the world / like a frozen lullaby , like a soft beautiful virus , metastasizing slowly , effortlessly [ with great ease ] no makeup, no care for presentation, just a bunch of old roots sending messages up the tree willy nilly – an optional RSVP at this point in the season,, a forged signature, a foraged bundle of new paints, a slow attempt at learning a new skill // fall never comes in the cascades of color pops that adorn some windows 97 screensaver;; it comes in oceanic waves, subtlety, inconsistently – never quite fully satisfied or in cohesion across the forest, each little drummer beating its own autumn tune at its own pace — the natural drumbeat of release,, always somehow in tune with itself,, unplayable by me, far too many harmonies, this perfectly strung chord, impossible to replicate, just above sonically recognizable, but breaktaking to hear



## **There Are More Scientists Studying Right Whales Than There Are Remaining Right Whales Living in the Ocean**

Rob Colgate

You tell me this as another carcass washes up  
on the shore of the Long Island Sound.

The happiest you had ever seen  
was just a visit. All of the ambulances in New York City  
are equipped with special sirens  
designed so as not to wake you  
and me up as they cry out.

On the street corner there is a sign  
that tells you to kiss your lover. At night a body is lying  
in the ditch.  
We set up the couch so it is easier for us  
to sleep.

You're looking for a flood. When you find it  
you tell me  
that it reminds you of how I would sleep  
through the night.  
Sit on the break  
wall with me and leave your arm.

What if instead of loving  
there was talking? What if instead of talking  
I was the only person in the room with you  
while the coffee was brewing?

A home made of broken walls  
and within you is contained  
the collective sorrow of every remaining right whale in the ocean.  
Belmont. Amsterdam. I'm going to find you.

The way we choose to wash  
this carcass is a siren  
that doesn't wake us up.

## Patron Saint Ed Muybridge

Kristina Hakanson

I didn't know it would hurt so much or feel so good.

When the horse hooves galloped in my chest,

they thundered as though they understood the universe—

you, me, thermodynamics, unified field.

In the animal I am now, residing on earth and remembering,

all legs move with grace—in the act of making love,

none of us has anything but mercy.

Ruin and despair in the form of old age—

the slow process of wearing out, a kind of refusal.

I knew it felt like weightlessness but the film was a kind of confirmation:

Mid-air, the nanoseconds when all legs are lifted as though in flight,

again, imagining zero gravity for the first time.

## **The Hartford Museum of Dead Poets**

Shaun Holloway

At the Hartford Museum of Dead Poets I crawl into an open sarcophagus and pull the stone lid over me. It's dark inside, and cool. People wonder which poet I am and what I wrote. Someone says "there's a body in there," many comment on the cold outside, coming in to keep warm and dry. Someone says there is hot chocolate at the gift shop, and a couple goes to buy some. I try to stifle laughter, but I break. A security guard takes me to the security office. He tells me that I've done something wrong and that people are not supposed to go into the sarcophagi at the Hartford Museum of Dead Poets. I ask him what is supposed to go in them. He tells me nothing. Then, he gives me an uncovered cup of hot chocolate and guides me to the exit. It's snowing, and I've forgotten a jacket. I walk down the street, passing bars and hardware stores. I walk down an alley and find a large clay pot lying on its side with the lips facing me.

## Cut/Paste

Olivia Swasey

We tear to shreds the bodies that can never be ours.  
Mirrors reflect ransom notes, we are pieced together,  
clipped from magazines by sharp tongues.  
We are sublime and grotesque,  
monsters formed from bodies of women  
dismembered and sold for public consumption.  
Even as we go unnoticed, we are under the eye,  
perpetual performance, not one of us in the audience.  
We cover, uncover, give, give, never take,  
unmake ourselves so others might partake of us.  
I have ripped myself apart searching for  
the unwatched woman inside of me,  
dug fingers into the many bloody seams of my body,  
unstitched and cast off the parts that never belonged to me,  
that I never wanted. I am still searching,  
but torn open navel to chops, I gaze into the mirror  
and I find only beautiful, throbbing red.

## settle

K. Eltinaé

*Why black people always be the ones to settle? March through these streets like Soweto. -MLH*

I wonder what they told themselves  
when dust settled under carpets in lands  
where clove, mint and cinnamon  
turned to soot like smell and taste.

Why was I too young to remember anything  
but how my parents argued in the car  
over the phone bill?

So thirty years later  
When I get harangued about distance  
About forgetting where I come from,

I remind myself that  
a few dial tones away from every  
*bon, when* and *why* is a dagger.

How far I felt those fingers  
searching for illegalities  
I carried always in my heart.

How on the first day I went and sat through fourteen lectures in a language  
I could barely follow, and felt at home more than ever.

How after dinner for the first month abroad  
I stitched the fluffy gut back into that floral duvet,  
how the customs officer gently unwrapped it on a steel table  
before cutting it open waiting in the dark for something there to glow.

Why then do our answers about love only survive in pictures?  
Why can a voice hijack so many passengers but never quietly land?

Why are you still looking for that boy  
who threw himself in front of a bus on a highway,

who limps now and decides  
when to pick up the phone?



## Fantasia

Eliamani Ismail

The first time I heard the word was with a movie: The Fantasia Barrino Story. Lifetime.  
10pm Eastern/Central.

1.

The scene is unscored; sonically mundane. The only sound is the shuffling, the gulping... the breathing. Her, screaming and kicking. Him, cinder and root and unmovable. I crush my eyes. I corkscrew my ears into the brain meat. Now, my mother and sister's lips are flatlined; they are groaning on the couch. I am without senses and shaking; an armadillo with soupy insides. *What happened? What is that?* My mom responds *Rape. He raped her.* The word is new and the terror is not.

2.

I often wondered how I made it out of childhood without meeting it on some backstreet. Once when I was nine, and skipping gym class, I said to a classmate *I would rather die than be raped.* She said kidnapping was her worst fear. *Same thing.* Surely she knew (even if she didn't) that there was no other use for a kidnapped little girl. It's all too natural for them. *This show on Animal Planet said most big cat sex is actually rape.* So there we were. Descendants of slaves in a Catholic school. Staring at a conceited statue of the Virgin Mary and wondering if we would be so lucky as to have the option. I lend what I can: *you should really lock your doors at night.*

3.

What kind of girlhood it is to be less than a decade and feel centuries of lust lurking for you. Girlhood, indeed. There are many things I was too young to remember learning: How to breathe. How I loved my mother. How to evade my father. Learned not to trust him. Learned not to trust his bottle and whatever ill thoughts brew in the minds of manhood. *Lock the door.* I know nothing as well as I know fear of men. Their desires costly and at my expense. Indeed, I learned too young to remember. Teeth bared, brothers everywhere, fathers around the corners, uncles upstairs. *Lock the door.* I would have rather dined with the monsters under my bed than those of my blood. And ashamed, I lied electric and awake, wondering what trauma must have allowed for my existence. What violation is the lineage of women I must come from.



4.

At least God blessed me with intuition! The best blessing bestowed to the lesser fortunate rib (lest mercy be too much to ask for). Now, was Eve so bad that she was damned to all this? For me and my womb, and the women it will bear--under the weight of men that disgust me--to be left at odds amongst beasts and aspire for one to consume the rest of us. Men turn my belly to acid and rubble yet something older than logic desires them. How can I possibly know peace like this?

5.

In class today, my professor said she once heard Frank Wilderson say “*black folk aren’t workers, they’re live stock*” and never understood what he meant. Yesterday, I was at some corporate job, staring too hard at a pregnant co-worker and was bitter with pessimism. Women see women as workers staging a revolution. Soon to be given equal rights, pay, regard. It’s difficult to imagine isn’t it, your hope? How stupid. We are not workers. We are cattle. Worked and bred. Meat does not get compensation, only comfortable living conditions to make the produce tender. Men work us to death in any position they please, and older than logic, we grow old, without ridding the world of their crime.

### **Addendum**

Sometimes I look at little boys and smile.  
Then I remember: In training. In training.  
They almost got me.



## **Thank You For The Skin**

Loria Mendoza

Thank you for the skin I carry  
and shudder  
dart beneath and powder  
each touch a generous ache  
bound to my halted face  
under this fascist simulacrum  
everything matters and then doesn't  
whitewashed, pistol-whipped,  
iced and incarcerated

I want it to matter  
a little longer at the very least  
but the very wanting  
is criminal  
I know it  
cannot unknow  
I sniff it  
press my lips to it  
hide it from harm when it bulges ripe  
pinch it when it starts to cry  
remind it of its nature  
break its fingers one by one  
until they all point towards joy

## On W 12<sup>th</sup>

Elizabeth Katz

Last week, I limited myself to one a day. This week, it's become two. I know it's a problem, but it's one that he has, which makes me feel dangerously close to something I'm not supposed to touch. I used to watch as he blew smoke out his window and wonder why he liked killing himself slowly. He told me how he loved guns; he could do it so fast. That was when he got close enough to let me fear him. But now I'm in his neighborhood, wasting time, letting the nicotine squeeze my insides, and I understand. I want another kiss as soon as I stomp him out.

A tall, slim man with a mop of black hair walks into the liquor store across the street; it isn't him. Last time I spent the night, we were watching skanky girls get drunk on VH1 and suddenly decided that we too should get trashed out of our minds. He held my hand so tightly as we walked to get vodka. When we stepped inside, the only customers on a bitter cold Wednesday, he pointed to the toy train set up on the shelves and asked if it would run. He was giddy when the whistle blew, and he stood mesmerized as the wooden train circled above all the bottles of liquor. He paid for the Svedka, he rolled the joints, he locked us both in his bathroom to hotbox.

Where we went next was weird. It was just his hardwood floor, we were just sitting with our legs crossed, but somehow we were in a basement and I was sixteen and he was my my best friend's older brother. I was high, so I blurted out, *I feel like I want you to take me to the prom.*

*Me too. All I want is to take you to the prom,* he said. So he did. We slow danced, he whispered, *You look beautiful tonight.* He put on a song that made me tremble, leading me to his bed carefully, like I hadn't been there a hundred times before. *I rented this hotel room for us, but my sister is next door, so we have to be quiet.* He fucked me with both hands covering my mouth. After I came, we drank chamomile tea to sober up.

The next morning we played video games and ate Oreo ice cream. He was a little boy sometimes, then he'd tell me about how he'd renovated his entire apartment or about the current state of the French government, and I'd feel like the child. Something about waking up with unbrushed teeth, makeup all kissed off, always made me feel quietly inadequate. Then he'd say I looked good and I'd fool myself into thinking I had a place in his life.

He bought lunch and ate my leftovers, my stomach still aching in the spot where he'd thrust into me. *You know, you're fun*, he said like he was surprised.

*I always have fun with you*, I said, matter-of-factly.

He looked up from the bowl of curry, eyebrows pushing into each other. *Really?* he said, almost swallowing the word. He broke our gaze too quickly, darting his eyes toward the window. Something small flickered off in the air between us. I changed the subject.

When he finally kissed me goodbye, he said he'd miss me over break, to let him know what I was doing and thinking. What I was thinking was that when I returned in January, we'd spend most nights in his bed, I'd meet his friends, we'd do shrooms together, and maybe, one of those days, I'd be stupid enough to let it slip out that I loved him.

I was about to get in the shower before leaving for the airport when I found out that he was in a relationship. I saw it on Facebook, some redheaded French girl. He said she was an old friend. On Christmas, I texted him, *Hope you're having a good day*, and he didn't reply. He posted a picture of her in the yellow t-shirt I'd worn days before, playing chess like we'd always meant to. New Year's Eve, I dreamt that he publicly humiliated me, so I woke up determined to accept the finality of it, that the end of the year had brought about the death of him, in me.

It's two months later, I light another cigarette as I wait outside his place, telling myself I'll quit when it starts to hurt too much.

## **My Niece Asks, “Are We Going To Destroy The Earth?” I Say, “Yes.” I Might Have Said**

Mary Jean Port

everything breaks, even the best  
intentions unravel. My couple’s therapist  
is getting a divorce. Choking instructions  
don’t tell you how to choke someone.

It happens when the tooth fairy  
loses a tooth. Gods come from far away  
and don’t stay long. At a local nightclub  
ceiling plaster fell on a band  
called Theory of a Dead Man.

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## Degeneration

Charlotte Covey

grime made its way behind my eyelids, dirt  
between the gyri— *i built a castle of sand*

*with feather turrets, watched it crumble*  
*on the beach*— i tried to dig my way

back home. i still cross myself on airplanes, whisper  
the scottish play backstage. i was born on friday

the 13th, umbilical to my neck. oh, it was entropy,  
stuttering into back rooms, gathering lightning

to my breast. i have orion's belt wrists; i have cocaine  
finger tips. i drew stars on your arms, touched them

purple with lips. i'm the black cat, swallowed gum. i broke  
the mirror i kissed. i poured salt in a circle, crawled to

the middle, chinned my knees. i felt the cord still 'round  
my throat, vomit on my breath.

## **Cold Night**

Suzanne Verrall

the water in the glass  
on the bedside table has frozen over  
I drill a hole through the centre  
with a corkscrew  
and spend the night  
on a camp stool  
ice fishing in the bedroom  
fending off seals while you sleep



## To My Younger Self

Emma Bolden

Live lit. Love like a loch  
that rises to let in all

ships. When the tide says  
stop, listen. Don't listen.

Let blood flood you. Become  
full. A heart. Fuse feeling

to your body like a second  
flesh. You are better

then bitter. Be grateful.  
Girl. To be fragile to the bone.

Feel the thrum of some undefined  
desire swell, cello sore. When

you swear you're breaking,  
break. Flower into flame.



## Contributors

**Jesi Bender** is an artist from upstate New York whose first book, *The Book of the Last Word*, was published by *Whisk(e)y Tit* in early 2019. She can be found at [jesibender.com](http://jesibender.com).

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