

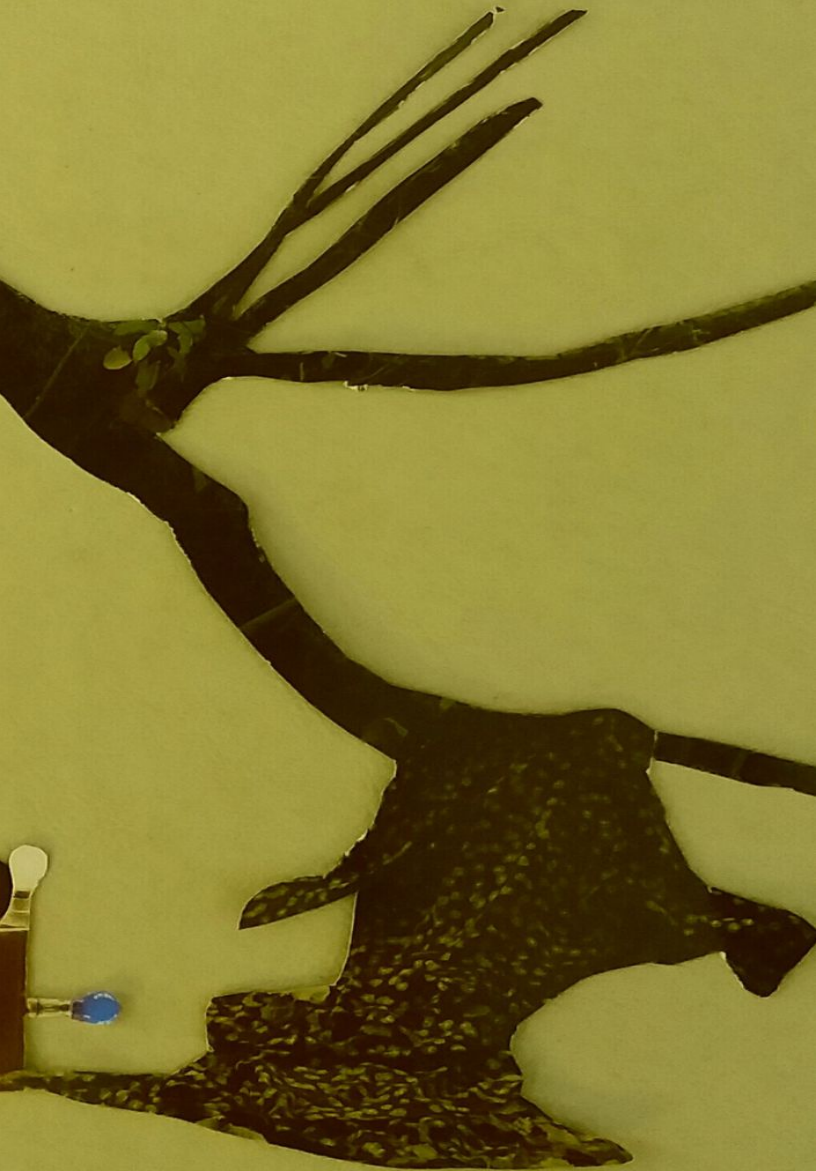
Issue #1

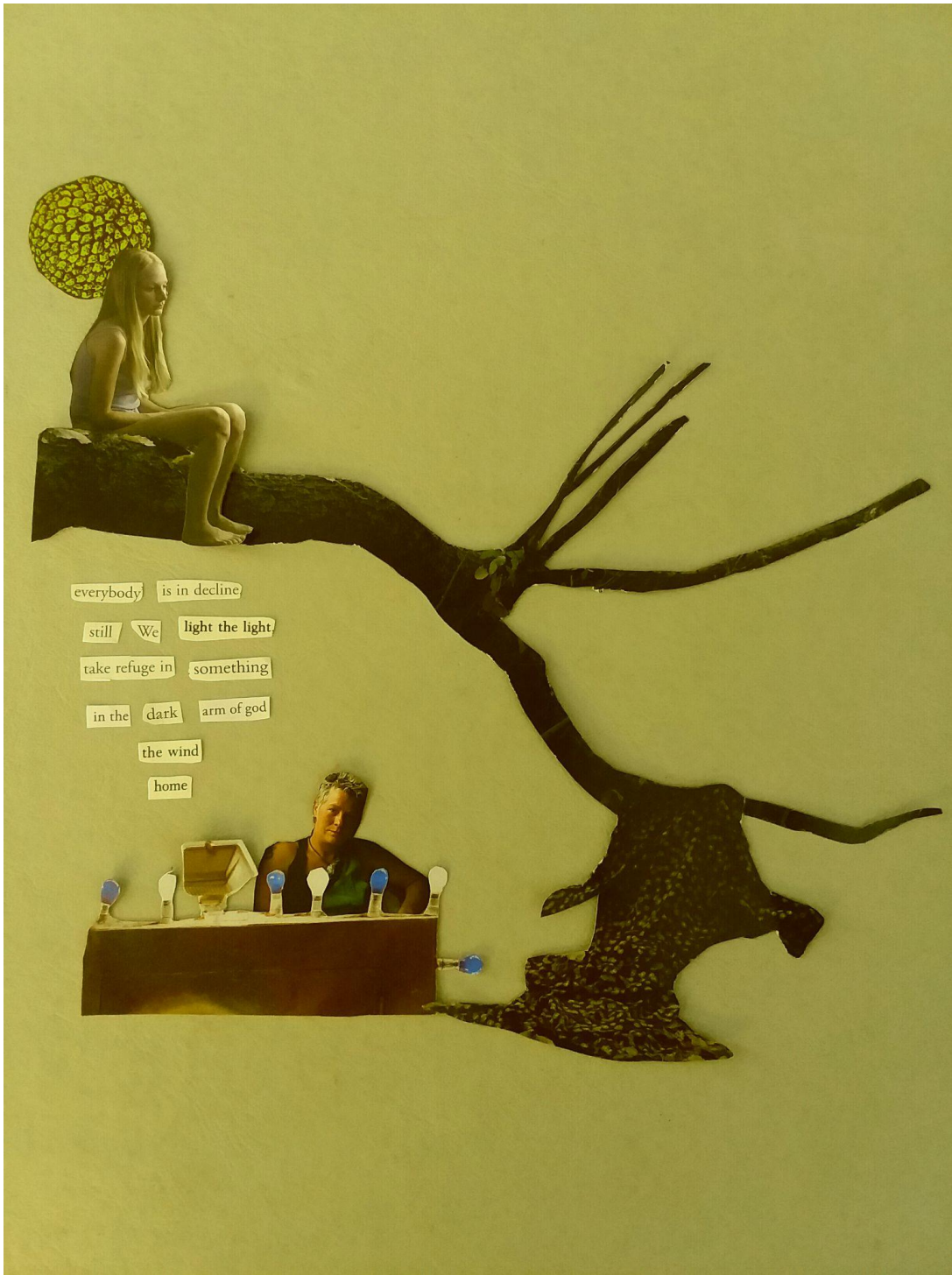
A WAKENING

Verum Literary Press

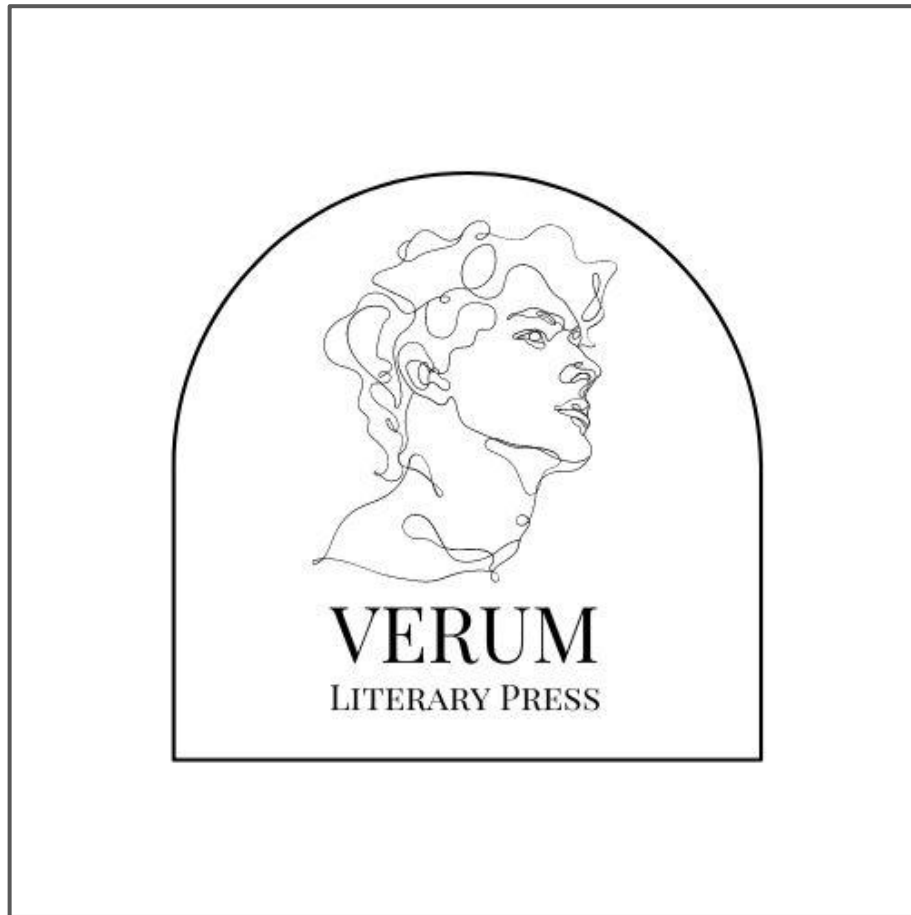


everybody is in decline
still We light the light
take refuge in something
in the dark arm of god
the wind
home





We light the light.....James Diaz



For the words that scream, words that take us on
journeys we hear in our bones. For the things
that construct a bigger world.

Jude Armstrong.....*Editor-in-Chief & Founder*

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Let me just say that I never thought that the inaugural issue of Verum would arrive. It was a dream, a vague fantasy—throw some Christmas money at a website and sit back to enjoy people’s writing.

Little did I know that I would find so much more in a literary magazine. I discovered an eager and kind community that welcomed me, a teenager with a love of words and a little bit of ambition. I messed around with logos, wrote and rewrote mission statements; creating and deleting a million miles a second.

And now, months later, wrists sore from typing and eyes dry from reading so much, I would do it again. Reading your poetry, your stories, and viewing your art made it worthwhile. Which is why this issue represents what Verum is at its core; presentation of all the art that embodies what it means to explore the beginnings of ourselves. What it means to be awakened.

With this all said, this issue is the starting point of something new, something beautifully strange and true.

Keep creating,
Jude

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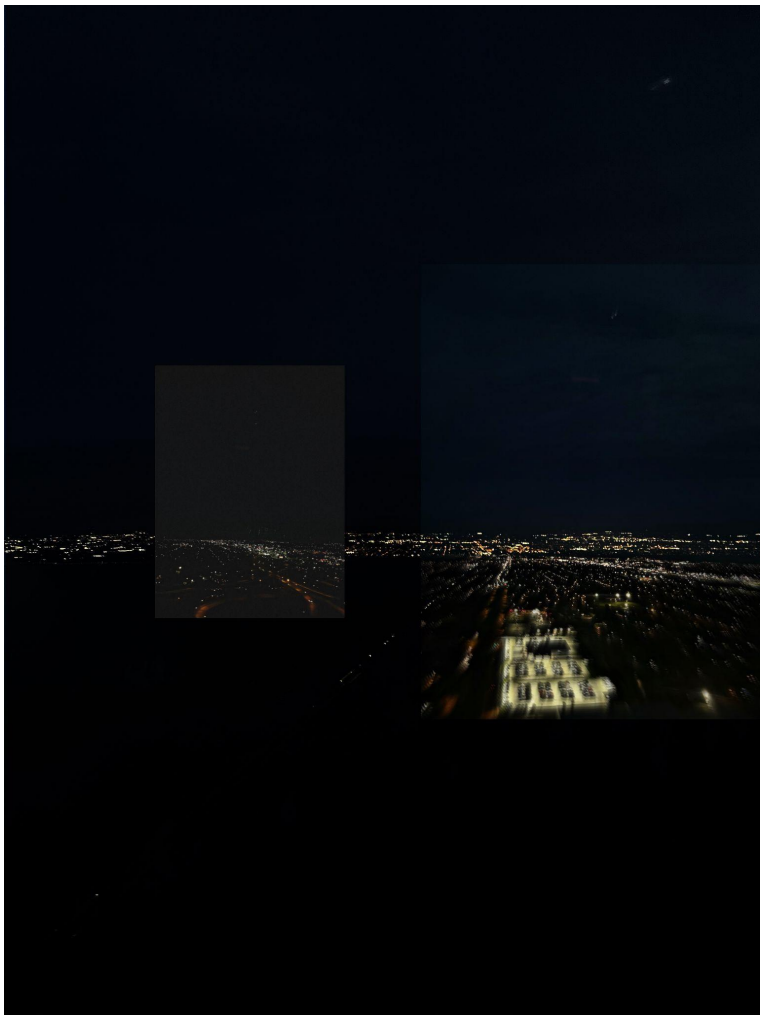


whelk shell: the whelk has moved on.....Morning-meadow Jones

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Air Drive.....Jude Armstrong



Poetry

pass(t) until present

By Mimi Rajakumari

starved of divinity, mango skin peeled back to reveal golden flesh, coaxing out
honeyed creeds pressed by nectar

bone hewn from dusky monsoon clouds who swathe treetops in silver, breath
keeping the earth in spin, now as one

in life before dawn, luminous vision held us steady in the midst of deceit, yet
today we stand alone.

Liminal Space Between

By Annie Liones Nguyen

if death is the end of everything
then birth is the beginning of nothing
and life is just a liminal space in between
if life is merely a passage between life and death
i'd rather it hurry
forget the decorated pathways
the twists and turns
the longer i walk
the more my soles bleeds
i don't want to step on shards of glass
beds of nails
or thorns of locusts
to get to my destination
i've fallen to my knees so many times
trembling of exhaustion
deep in the hollows of my bones
churning in my eye sockets
yet it is so far away;
i'm bruised and battered
torn and tattered
i lie on the cold harsh ground
come find me
and guide me to my destination
as gently as possible, if you please
yet it forbids
"you'll have to reach me"
but i'm tired
"such is life"
i don't even want to be here
"i'll wait for you to reach me"
what a mordacious offer

The Unknown

By Violet Rakauskas

The pupil grows.

 In circles
the mind goes.

With each blink

 an image just as vivid
as the sight of an eye
wide open.

Times such as these call for

a seat on the balcony paired with a minty smoke
no matter how cold is this gloomy, winter morning
in January in which I find no joy
for this unknown state won't simply blow over
in harmony with the crisp, saline ocean breeze.

No.

 As hallucinations are far more
likely to bring discomfort when the source
lies in the wild unknown.

 More so when it comes in waves
smacking you to the ground
without a warning facedown.

Nevertheless, all you can do
is ride the wave 'till it brings you to shore
without making a sound as you come down
perhaps finding a sprinkle of joy
in the skulls formed by the palm leaves above
and the morphing of the violets across the wall.



*In the Sweet By and By.....*Edward Michael Supranowicz

We could be them. We are them

By Asia Jade

paper thin hotel walls
the man next door is punching the mattress
head against the wall
you can hear his wife crying
you, he says
should've left me a long time ago

these water stains have feelings,
don't you know
you're listening but it doesn't make you
feel anymore normal
I told you so
if you'd answer the phone

we all say goodbye the same
a fading light
nothing sounds good these days
you could be everything
he wants but no one knows
how to keep beautiful things alive
and the coffee's always shit

step inside, crack a window so
we can imagine this is home
nothing has changed

a toothbrush on the mirror
a bottle of wine in the suitcase
you'd like me to pound on your door
to press every button so we're
stuck a little longer
what you'd really like is to forget like the rest of
us

it's all illusions and girls
with knives in their hands
eventually you'll like that wwe're the same
you and I and the man next door
and his crying wife

we'll put the sheets over our heads
so we don't see the knife
but we can take turns holding it
room service gave up days ago

you're pretending to sleep
so I close my eyes
later I'll dream normally
later I will leave you
and you will be the crying wife

Debt

By Braden Hofeling

I still owe interest
on all the love
lent over hard days and long
winter nights.

It was a pie, steaming,
bursting with ripe strawberries, I ate
until the fork broke, and then
thumbs and fingers and eventually,
elbows crimson with something
not unlike blood-
gorging myself on well wishes and kind words,
disregarding the bellyache, the payment for such
a feast.

Belly-cup overflowing, seeds gushed forth, littering
the roadside.

Wild strawberries there now, plump hearts begging
to be bitten.

Self-portrait

By Braden Hofeling

I see the wicked curve of the rain, in its reflection
a plump smile, bulbous, elongated,
-splat.
The circus grounds are flooding now,
but the stands still full of jeering crowds, point and shout
Here comes the clown!
With painted tear, he balances atop the unicycle, hammered
by raucous laughter, necks thrown back, joyful streams,
-their gaping mouths on an overcast day.
The snack tents have all run empty, and it seems
he is the last attraction left, absorbed, spent,
until there is nothing under the surface, no
not even the painted smile.

Things I Learned This Week

By Jeffrey Miller

Did you know that goblin sharks
Can launch their jaws at unsuspecting fish?
And that the suction created by the motion
Draws their victims in like a vacuum of teeth.
Neither did I, but I learned it this week.
I also learned how rare circles are in geology,
How a circular formation almost always
Indicates the impact of a bomb, or meteor,
And that my best friend of seventeen years
Thinks “gay marriage shouldn’t be illegal,”
Even though he says it’s wrong. He said this
Like it was progressive, encouraging.
He didn’t know that I was calling him because
I wanted to tell him I was coming out.
I learned that there is a species of tick
That can, through long-exposure, cause
Paralysis, and worse, an allergy to meat.
I learned about ball lightning, and about
Floating lights above a valley in Norway
Which science still can’t explain, and how
The longest animal on earth is not an animal,
But a hundred million of them, bound
Into a single strand, a siphonophore
Over three-hundred feet in length.
Can you imagine? Being so connected.
My parents’ love was never unconditional.
My brothers don’t know me and never have.
I have never been a man on the inside.
I learned that there is a whale known as 50Blue
Whom scientists are still trying to identify.
Its call is different than any other whale.
It’s unclear if other whales can hear 50 Blue,

If he is broken, if he is alone,
Or if he is another creature altogether
Than any that we know, following his own routes,
Making his own songs in the inky depths.
I've thought of 50 Blue so much this week.
I think my mother abandoned me.
I told my friends that I'm not what they think,
They said, 'we never thought you were.'
Under pressure, quartz can produce
Not only electricity, but light.
Over ninety percent of the ocean's floor
Is less well-mapped than the surface of Mars.
I feel the same way about myself,
But this week I learned that beneath
The churning layers and subverting plates
Of my shifting, life-making mantle,
I am okay. I will be okay. There are ants
Who carry their wounded back to the hive.
Almost all of them recover. Can you imagine?

Untitled 7.1

By Natassja Norwood

I ate glass and prayed for forgiveness.
forgot my existence and became smaller,
less than
to fit inside a box that promised safety
but only gave pain.
I wonder if God cried when she made me?
Did she weep into glass decanters and
store them away for winter?
Did she sit back and watch me grow into hatred,
stood witness as it became apart of my soul,
jealousy as green as the leaves she gave the trees
I've always wanted to die in the west.
Buried in the mojave desert so that the sun
Can witness my birth every morning
And remember why she exists.



Defiance.....Alejandro Gonzalez

A woman out of nowhere

By DS Maolalai

light eyes
and a light smile
and skin like dimpled
apple flesh.

you look like a harpist
or like someone dancing
alone in her bedroom
to the music of harps
and to blackbirds
singing in trees.

I brought you home
and in the morning
you told me where you'd come from
and why you were visiting the city,
and it was strange
I hadn't thought of you that way before
with a job which meant travel
or with reasons to be somewhere.

you were a woman
come out
of no time
and nowhere at all.
you were light and laughter
fading in misty and hills.

I thought you were built out of feathers.
I thought you were born in a glass of milk.

A watchmaker's felt

By DS Maolalai

a hotel in south dublin.
a small hotel balcony.
and the city spreads out
underneath and ahead
like a cold sinking platter
at a hotel buffet. you forget,
sometimes, dublin
is all girt by country,
except for the wedge
where the sea cuts
in deep. that there's no
skyline here; it just stretches
below us and ends.
a smear of grey paté
pushing down on the landscape,
though tonight silver sparkles
like a watch deconstructed,
laid out on a watch-
maker's felt.

inside my fiancée
is using the shower.
she calls me to try
out the pressure.
I sip some cold water
with my hand on my elbow.
try to see by the darkness
where streetlights fall short.
somewhere where the suburbs catch
hard on a place that they can't spread to.
where the land finds itself
in a stumble of nothing
and falls onto boat-
floating ocean.

Redemption

By DS Maolalai

the life is so fine
it could stun you. like a tree:
the weight of wet
leaves and swelled
apples. a house, a good job,
a dog and a girlfriend
who loves you so much
that you think if you asked her
she'd give you the palms
from her hands. and it feels
very recent, only a year ago,
you were curling, a crisp-
packet under your mattress,
giving up on adventure
and crumbling on your mother's doorstep,
a free and rained on newspaper
with smudged ink
and bad advertisements. in the morning
you make coffee,
eat toast, go to work, and in the evening
the dinner is good
and you pause the tv
to take turns
fetching beers. you stand in the garden
touching the grass at night;
the dew of autumn coating it
like liquid
and liquid suns.

Westie

By Peter Mladinic

The invisible man plants a kiss
on the forehead of absence is okay
but what can I do with it?
Put it in a washing machine
take it on a plane? Absence,
it's just going to depress people.
Balloons and seashells,
not a room everything's taken out of.
Perfume from Siam, a brown
hairbrush on a coil of blue towel,
a pistol's pearl handle, my mother
giving blankets to empty rooms.
Her Westie rests his head near a brick.
"That's what they like," she says.

Poetry Man

By Michael Lee Johnson

I'm the poetry man, understand?
Dance, dance, dance to the crystals of night,
healing crystals detox nightmares, night tremors.
Death still comes in the shadow of grief,
hides beneath this blanket of time,
in the heat, in the cold.
Hold my hand on this journey
you won't be the first, but
you may be the last.
You and I so many avenues,
ventures & turns, so many years together
one bad incident, violence, unexpected,
one punch, all lights dim out.

Incense

By J Renee

The fragrance of joy burns
At both ends of waking justice.

Beauty falls like ashes,
Fertilizing yearning soil
Packed beneath marching feet,
Dancing to drums murmuring
The sound of forgotten heartbeats
Accompanied by ancestral choirs
Singing triumphantly:

“Death, where is your sting?
Grave, where is your victory?”

genesis, first light

By Phoenix Tesni

in mid-february, two years ago,
i toss around in bed.
here is a girl who holds too much anger
in the back of her neck, suffocating
because life's moving too fast
and there's no one to guide her.
she loves fast and hard, gives too much,
sits at the edge of the sea, and writes
letters to the city she's in love with.
she has a habit of falling in love with places
& moments & people much too quickly-
even if it ends in anguish later.
they touch her in different ways,
leave unique marks- even if she lets go.
she knows the connection between intimacy
and the moments before dawn
like the back of her hand.
as the sun rises,
i wake up today, fall in love with the world
like a girl from an elliott smith song.
i forget to breathe when someone
says "i love you" to me. i paint
pink skies and red looped flowers
and hold the people who are important to me
as close as i possibly can.
my hands hold my own face tenderly.
my shoulder-blades are free.
i dream of the future with vivid, bright eyes,
knowing that some part of it
is already here, within me.

Morphing into everything

By Sanket Mhatre

Her perspectives - blood purifiers: virgin juices of basil running through my bloodstream
Delicate fingers that peel off the skin between two moments
unravelling the scarred beauty of time
A piece of darkness wombs yet some more was her lesson while lovemaking
Yet she held a torch while I discovered her forests where sunshine trickled in teardrops
A blink of her eye changes an era in me
I have learnt to gulp cities, pain and ocean in equal measures
She would cry and I could wash the dust off a star
keep it illuminated outside her green, empty window
I can shape shift, turn into a word, vaporize on her lips
Be the tail end of a reverberated moan echoed across the universe
The final scent of Om.
Turn into a cascade of gasps gushing like waves
when my fortresses crumble, dissolve in her waters
Take new birth, Germinate on her dermis. Every single night.
Sink into her navel, populate her mind
Disintegrate into a thousand birds
taking early flight

Farewell

By John Chinaka Onyeche

She came calling me;
an answered prayer

And I called her;
my saviour

And behind the scenes;
we watered our hearts with words

And the gathering of these waters;
we made love of our hand paddling canoes

As across the country and longings
we became one tied together

But the tales of untied tongues continued
we rained eulogies and apologise for the love

Not until last night that the silence was broken
It is over and these waters we crossed

It has dried up and our boats shall be used
to keep us warm in the wintertime

Farewell.

Ode to No One

By Catherine

I watch you bend
at the edge of a lake, mirror image

staring until you disrupt it
with the back of your hand.

You've never liked the look of yourself
and neither have others; it's those eyes

the color of the sky
at 3 a.m. and the way

they say: *do it, or don't,*
see if I care but

I know you. You think
you're impenetrable, stone-walled

nightmare but you wear your heart
in the mirror of yourself

and your heart tells me
there's nothing you want more than

to slap me with the back of your hand.
You can tell I'm watching, and

when I look at you I see: a carrion beetle
in a cave; two birds shot dead, falling

from a tree; a chasm opening and
closing. And yet, I'm open to you:

you, a whole fist to the side of my head,
the air purged from my lungs, my feet

kicked out from under me and
god watching and laughing: fool.

Watch what happens, but
there won't be a show; there are only two

options: do it,
or don't.

The question is which one of us
caves first.



Are You Lonely in the Space that You've Made Only for Yourself?.....Alejandro Gonzalez

I Don't Know What You Expected

By Catherine

Everyone always tells me
I'm not the kind of person
you bring home to
your mother. I don't know
what that means but I can
tell you: I spit
poems from between my teeth and
peel back my skin to reveal
metaphors. I scratch
mosquito bites until they bleed
and leave messages on read and
curse the moon on tuesdays.

Give me a chance and
I'll strip for the man
at the drive in, howl at a passing
train, carve my initials into
your femur to say
I have been here
and you'll know I've claimed
space that isn't mine and
thrown away any morals I had left,
not that I had many
to begin with. I've never been called
well-mannered but

I know how to shell an egg
without breaking the yolk
and can out-drink your uncle
and will smoke anything
you give me. I know
this doesn't tell you much
so I'll say it outright:

I am a cyclone;
a downpour; a comet
shrieking by.

Pig-Headed

By Catherine

In the swell of the storm we play
the game no one can win: follow

the street in opposite directions
and see who gets lost first.

To stay warm I act as arsonist
and set alight everything we pretended to

know: the room where headlights trail
ghost-like along the wall / the bleached-wood table

our self-imposed chasm / the cabin
in the backwoods where the coyotes

howl erratic love songs
to the January half-moon.

You were erratic and I was too
but that doesn't excuse the half-truths we threw

at each other in the dying candlelight of your room,
pretending to know who we were

and what we wanted,
and at least now I know: what I want

is to trail ghost-like back home and
not play this game anymore.

At least we know it won't last
forever; in the end we'll come together

at the edge of any chasm
just to see the other jump first.

Post

By Bruno Burgos Iñiguez

Introduction, development, ending. Introduction, development, ending. You ended believing your tales being life alike, so “after the winter” you promised, “behind the storm” you recited, making toasts on what was to come. But after the winter the coldness stayed, and behind the storm came the war, over and over, like a rejection of a parole. ¡Numbers! you declared then; let’s sow and build, work and sell relying in cause and effect, counting it all, measuring all. Endings are for kids; outcomes are for men. But whatever you regarded as well done and hard worked diluted in a bizarre matrix of destination where stronger factors are infinite, and you ran out of paths.

Today, languid odds disguised as mysteries of the beyond are still the faith of some; as for the rest, just living by. Raw non colored puppets lying aside a table, covered in dust. Ain’t that what we are, after all? So much struggle to cut the strings, *to set free*, just to realize you cannot move on your own anyway. Yes, It exists; yes, It creates; no, It doesn't partake. So much hearted praying and moral performing; turns out It is blind and deaf; by choice, which hurts much more. So much speeches about pursue, deserve, earn; clumsy attempts of decoding, barren spells you tried to possess life with. Anything achieved so far? Where did it lead to? Through hell, past the Seol, beyond the ultimate curve. No destiny, purpose, sense or fate, just the old road with the cadent air at its end, blurring wherever you ahead to.

Can you sleep at noon and without being tired, eat without hunger, and work without rest? Can you undo you and do you again, better? Can you evolve just because?

Deliverance

By Brooke Erickson

"...I have never cared to speak to him. He knows nothing about it. He shall never know anything about it. But the world might guess it, and I will not bare my soul to their shallow prying eyes."

—Oscar Wilde

there's a portrait
hanging in your room. I've never seen it.
it's hung backwards;
the paint on the canvas kissing the paint on your walls,
and it's been that way since you were thirteen
and your very first sinful desire bloomed
across your brush-stroked face.

we sprawl out, belly-down
on your bed, watching a copy of *But I'm A Cheerleader*
you had to torrent. I can't bring myself to look at it, so I look
at the flat, drab back of the canvas instead.
it makes my fingers itch.
I just want to see. I just want to know
if we match.

[let me paint you a picture: imagine a woman who looks a little butch. picture the shallow swoop of her short hair, her wrists sticking out of an old leather jacket when she raises a bottle to her lips. imagine the cocky spread of her legs when she sits on a stool. picture her with a flat chest, with big ugly boots and a men's shirt striped dark blue and maroon. picture the long, thick hair peeking out from the space between her cuffed pants and the top of her boots.] [maybe she's got a cigarette dangling from her lips. maybe she's got a glass of gin and tonic dangling from careless fingertips. call her handsome, and watch her grin spread wide over her rough-and-tumble face. call him pretty, just to watch him blush.] [now turn the canvas back over. let it kiss the wall again. you weren't supposed to see that.]

I have a portrait of my own.
when the movie's over, I go home
and take it down so I can hang it the right way 'round.
I catalogue every fleck and flaw; every
perversion, every naked, indecent
appetite. and here is the unholy, ungodly truth:
in the portrait of my most secret, most shameful wants,
I'm kissing you.

[sometimes I think my portrait wants to kill me.
sometimes the not-me tears itself away from
not-your lips and looks at me, disgusted.
sometimes I hang the portrait back up facing the
right way 'round, and watch the not-me kiss the
not-you until I'm flushed and guilty and sneaking
a hand down my pretty pink pajama pants.]
[the pleasure never lasts. it gets drained away into
the portrait, until the not-me is moaning with it.]

I dream, sometimes. about kissing you.

I wake up sweaty and guilty and [*wet*].
and just this once, I want—
I *want*—

I pull my portrait from the wall and settle it against the pillows on my bed.
and in the portrait, we're kissing again;
so raw and open
it looks like it hurts.

I tap on the paint, light. like a little kid at the aquarium, begging the fish.
the not-you turns to look at me and god,

it looks like you. it looks so much like you
I can hardly stand it. and so, I lean down
and kiss it.

[I wonder how you would touch me, if I
kissed you like this. if you'd cup my
cheeks. if you'd run your hands up my
chest. I wonder how you would touch me if
I looked like that—if I looked like the me in
the portrait.]

it's like kissing nothing at all. it tastes like paint.
but if I open my eyes, it's easy
to pretend. and so.
I get a little lost in it—the pretense.
I forget to keep my eyes open.
I press my tongue
to the paint and lick, tasting
the varnish and metal,
running my teeth
over the dried-out, rubbery, brush-stroke ridges
and wishing I could bite down, make you bleed, eat and
eat
and *feast*.

[god, I've kissed you so many times—in dreams and
half-thought fantasies—but that's all I'll ever get, isn't
it. you would never, and besides. nobody's ever wanted
to kiss me for real.]

it makes a wet noise when I pull away,
and there's a shiny pool of spit
in the middle of the canvas. it makes the not-you's lips glisten
until it moves, and the wet spot
smears
against its cheek.
and the not-me—it looks so hungry,
it looks so *angry*, and I can't help it. I lean down and I kiss it, too.

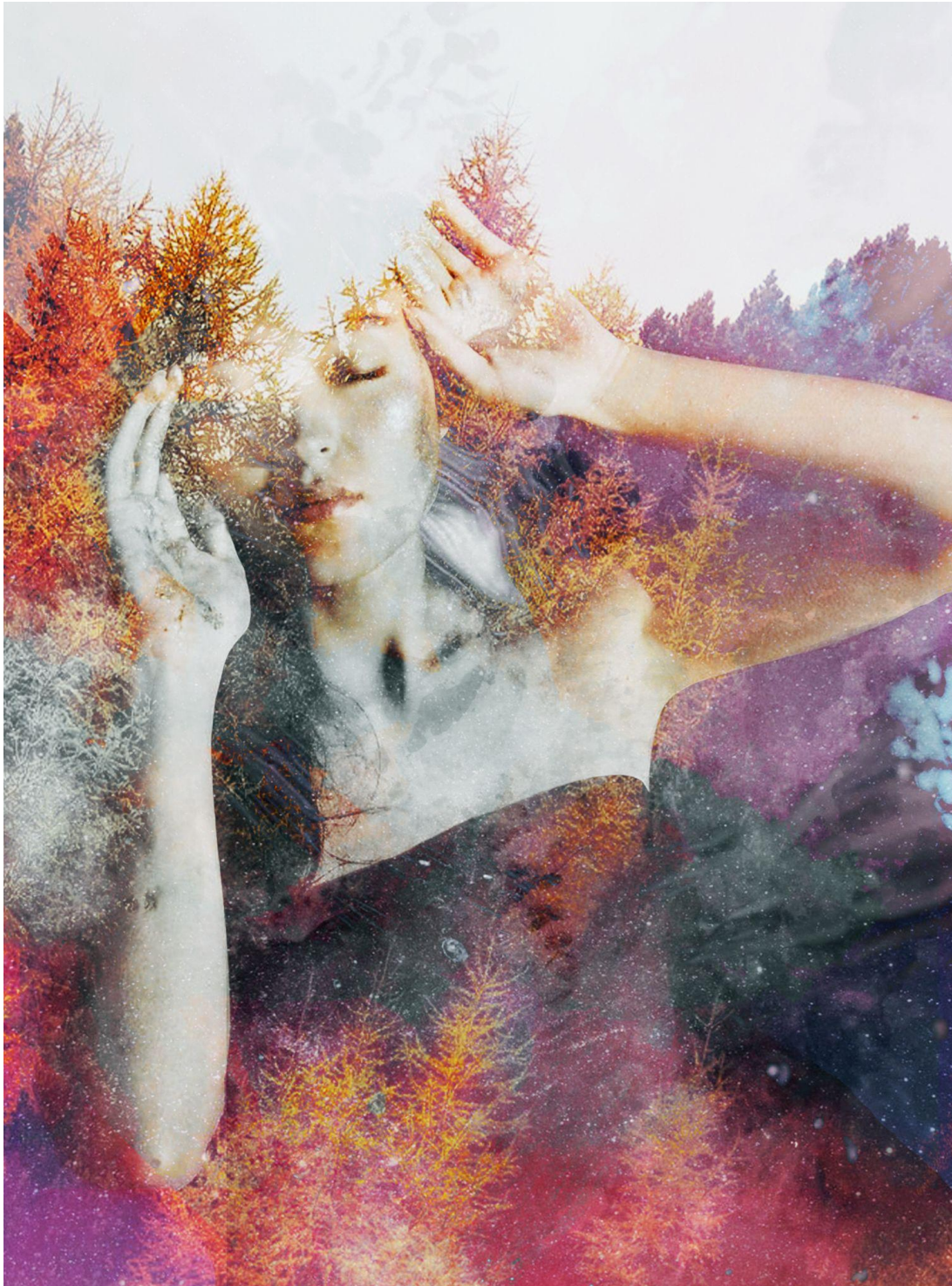
[sometimes, in the early hours of the morning when everyone else is asleep, I take my portrait down from its backward-facing perch and lean it against the bathroom wall, opposite the mirror above the sink. and then I strip, naked and raw, and stand next to it.] [sometimes, the not-me will tear itself away from the not-you and take off its clothes. and we stand side-by-side, staring at each other. and the thing is, I'm always prettier. the not-me is flat-chested and hairy, too big in the thigh and too soft in the belly. and I just stare at her—at the desire written across her body. the excess of her flesh. the mean, sinful look in her eye. and then the not-you will caress her; run its hands across her stretch-marked belly and too-small breasts, and god, I hate her. I hate her, and I want her, and I want to *be* her. that's the worst thing, I think. that I could look at the ugly thing in my portrait and want it so bad it hurts.]

the portrait kisses me sweet.
 it kisses me the way I always thought I'd like to kiss you,
 and the knife barely hurts at all
 when the not-me peels itself
 off the canvas and slides the metal between my ribs—
 gentle, the way that Judas kissed Jesus.

and then the not-me peels itself the rest of the way out with
 a wet, sucking noise,
 anointed in blood—my blood. birthing blood.
 and then it—she—he/she—kisses me again;
 a mother
 kissing her child, a child kissing his mother. and she—that other
 me—cradles my head
 as she lays me down on the empty portrait.

praise be. praise be. I never knew that dying
 could be this easy. the not-me—the real me—holds me close
 as I bleed and bleed and bleed. as I melt into the canvas like a
 half-remembered dream.

and then she kisses me once more, hot and real
 against my painted-on lips, and she hangs me on the wall
the right way 'round, so I can see it all—
and then she leaves. and I hope
 she's out there somewhere,
kissing you for me.



Winter's Dream.....Mirjana M

Hope's Return

By Viola Grey

*When somber is heavy,
empty its stubborn.*

I think of this - the closed eyes
from darkness singing itself to sleep
before my thoughts succumb to their ill.

This is the hushing. The humbling
reckoning of adversity rebirthing into peace.

The sky drops down a cord,
begging: *you can hold on to me.*

Convection

By Sean Patrick

The brain's a neural net, wrapped 'round a crystal ball -
inside a net of memory is spun,
macrame'd 'round yet another one -
and inside that, a fire burns and casts a pall
between them - the shadows dance across a mirrored plane
just out of view; the thing beyond reflects the flame
and shows it to itself - but through a screen,
a grated skein of warping shapes and jagged matter -
the flame burns ever brighter, til the crystal shatters
and thought awakens from a dream.

First Time

By Jodie Oakes

He sketched a bird on your arm
Until you felt faint
And had to dig your heels in
Warm linoleum.
A baby crying in the other room.
It's just a cat scratch he said
As the light glugged in
Lazy with dust motes
And stale cigarette smoke
From his wife's *Marilyn's*.
I had a dream
You told him,
That I got shot -
It was heavy in my guts
And the only time
I felt truly alive.
There's sex in death.
He digs the needle in
Until the bird begins to bleed
What about now
He asks.
The sea calls us home
It says
moreto ni zove u doma
Sea speaks home.
Of course,

Instead of all that
We sit in silence
The walls close in
With the heat of summer
Sharp objects
And atoms eating space,
Leftover particles
Of places past.
But there really is a baby
Crying in the other room.

Your husband picked you up
To fuck in the back of a van
In a corn field dressed for
Golden slumber.
He grabbed your naked arm
And didn't say much
He may have put a ring on your finger
But the other boy burnt a bird
Into living flesh.
He could roll over you like an ocean
Salty and slick
Calling you home.
But instead
He takes your tongue
And drowns it



remember when
you are alone.
you're not that far from home.
this is as good a place as any

As good a place as any.....James Diaz



Atrocities

By Connor de Bruler

In less than a week, Rajani's life was reduced to the plot of a horror movie. Her tenured colleague, Eliza Rothbaum, a well-known political-science guru, had heard about her breakup and offered her a job house sitting between semesters. It was the kind of charity-driven half-work reserved for grad students, but Rajani had nowhere else to go. She showed up to the house in her rundown, almond-colored Suzuki hatchback with nothing but her suitcase, a laptop bag, and one hundred and thirty dollars cash from the pawnshop. Derek had refused to take the ring, so she hocked it. It was a diamond solitaire that cost a little more than a thousand dollars. The pawnshop clerk wasn't impressed.

The luxury home stood, elevated by reinforced stilts, on a patch of cheap bottomland a few miles outside of town. She warned her about the mosquitoes and the occasional sunbathing alligator on the veranda. The walls of the many rooms were stark white and mostly bare except for a few abstract pieces in the kitchen and living room. The minimal atmosphere didn't seem to fit her renowned friend's personality. She expected something dirtier, more chaotic. Eliza struck her as someone who thrived in a mess of her own making. She treated everyone, student or teacher, with the same abstruse condescension. It was the way she sighed audibly after listening to someone speak, like a parent after a child's tantrum or a lover after an argument. Eliza gave her time to settle into a bottom-floor guestroom before handing off the spare key and her prepaid, international cell number. Rajani wished her good luck and told her to be safe on her symposium tour through Poland. Eliza said something about right-wing groups. She didn't catch it. She could hear that familiar sigh echo through the garage as Eliza closed the door to the kitchen. Rajani caught a glimpse of Milo, a young grad student, sitting in the Land Rover ready to drive her to the airport.

She listened to the garage door close.

The house was an empty vessel.

She spent the first two days sobbing in front of the TV as the mounted clock overhead contradicted itself.

A cold front moved in that Wednesday and she went out onto the veranda in her sweatpants and fleece jacket to listen to the rain. She brought her coffee and lit a cigarette, her first cigarette in eight months. She remembered her father always stepping out onto the sidewalk for a smoke break half a block down from the open entrance of the family wine shop. He smoked Pall Malls mostly, sometimes Parliaments. Relatives back home used to send him a carton of Gold Flake Kings once a year. Her cigarette was already three-quarters spent when she realized that she had nothing for the bent column of white ash jutting out of the red, burning end. She walked to the eave of the slanted roof and tapped it over the wet grass, feeling guilty about it, still unsure what to do with the filter once she was done. She felt even worse when she considered the lingering smell. She walked barefoot through the rain and into the trees draped in Spanish moss and flicked the butt into the mud. She made sure her feet were clean before going back inside.

The sky never opened up, as it sometimes did around midday. She gave smoking another chance in her car, puffing another American Spirit on her way to the grocery store. The closest place she could find had just as sparse an atmosphere as the house. The near-empty shelving was caked in a layer of beige dust. The floor was sticky, its tiles chipped and warped from years of leaks and spills. The cellophane appeared loose over the wholesale meat. The company mascot was an orange raccoon in a blue letter jacket. The character's image was printed around the store as if he were sneaking through the aisles, peering around the corners and over the tops of the buzzing refrigeration units.

She was trying to pinpoint what else it was that made the store so unnerving and noticed there was no music in the air. There was total silence. She looked out through the glass front of the store, past the hand-printed specials advertised in reverse, and saw a storm gathering beyond the palm trees. An old clerk massaged his thin knees in anticipation

Lightning flashed within the dark cloud cover as she drove back, playing a list of perfect breakup songs. The road was still dry and the AC smelled metallic.

She made it back just before the storm hit; wind and rain shook the engineered foundation. It was still early so she left the bottles of wine on the kitchen counter and rolled out her yoga mat in front of the TV. The sitcom was hard to hear over the noise of the storm and she only caught a series of disjointed punchlines and bursts of unprovoked laughter. She listened, halfway bent, trying to move her body in ways she was usually accustomed to, but her muscles were tight. She lost her balance and lay on the floor in frustration, staring at the ceiling fan like someone expecting to hear a scream from their own dumb spirit.

The lights flickered and then the power cut out. She turned her head away and saw a vein of lightning strike the edge of the veranda. It rattled the glass doors.

Rajani had spent her first year in the department of government in constant fear of losing her job and now, here she was, alone and nearly homeless, staying at the house of Eliza Rothbaum, someone whose essays she had quoted in almost every graduate-school paper she had written. But that fear for her livelihood, the fear of losing status, the fear of failure, was gone. Without Derek or any plan for the future, her adjunct position looked more like the leftover scraps of the impossible meal that had always eluded her.

She imagined Derek driving the Uhaul truck through the same violent storm, transporting some of her things along with his own, sipping that expensive chai drink he always bought online. His smile always hid something and she still didn't know what it was.

She stood and wandered through the house in the half-dark. Her cellphone screeched in the next room with a region-wide flash flood warning. The constant chatter of heavy rain on the rooftop windows drowned out her more desperate thoughts.

She noticed a strange little balcony through the French doors of Eliza's office. It looked uneven with the rest of the house, like a surgically grafted appendage. It was a square box with a waist-high railing and it was bobbing slightly in the powerful wind like a jawbone aching in trismus. It was a clear hazard, an accident waiting to happen in a home where everything else appeared as stable as a column of granite. Was this her meditation piece? Her singular focal point of chaos? A balcony designed to kill the first person to use it?

Rajani sat down in Eliza's chair and stared out at the wind-torn foliage and thought it looked like pictures she had seen of central Africa or even parts of her father's hometown in India. She adjusted the setting to recline all the way back and looked through the unlocked desk drawers which were mostly bare. She played with the jet-black ergonomic keyboard and spun around a few times with her feet pulled in close to the edge. There was a picture of Eliza with Al Gore on the bookshelf. It looked personal, casual. They sat beside one another in a red-leather steakhouse booth. She went back downstairs to the kitchen and took a shallow glass from the pantry and searched for a corkscrew. She popped open the Chilean Malbec and returned to the dark living room. The wine looked black in the whiskey tumbler. She took a sip and placed it back on the coaster and then reached forward again to have another. When the bottom hit the coaster again, it was empty.

Restless, she stood up and poured herself another, this time all the way to the brim. She chugged it over the sink, letting the wine dribble down her chin. The droplets hit the stainless steel like blood. She laughed to herself. The power returned and the pendant lights over the kitchen illuminated the magenta stains on her good yoga shirt. She laughed even harder. It was the latest gift from Derek's mother, the one from the expensive athletic wear boutique. She poured another glass and took a knife from the block and separated the front, slicing down from the neckline. The top opened up and curled behind her back. She cut off the straps and let the ruined shirt fall to the floor. She took off her sweatpants and panties and had one more half-glass, laughing at the formality of pouring.

The storm raged.

She pushed the sliding glass doors against the wind and went out on the veranda. The rain felt like thumbtacks on her skin and her long hair was immediately drenched all the way to her scalp. It stuck to her face like seaweed. She extended her arms despite her shivering and winced to see as well as she could. Most of the clover-infested green between where she stood and the palmbrush of the swampy woods had gone underwater. She imagined a giant alligator (the picture in her mind was actually a crocodile) circling the transformed lawn. She was a Tarot card: nude woman in the storm. She felt idiotic and embarrassed as she sobered up but she didn't retreat. She spat a mouthful of sour rainwater as lightning struck a tree. The crack of the falling branch carried through the swamp. Her arms dropped to her sides and she started to piss herself. The heat traced her inner thigh and then vanished in the rain. Her knees buckled and she crawled back inside on her hands and knees, a feral twitch in her joints.

Her dream was to teach a graduate course on the Congo Crisis, Katanga specifically, and not only the revolutions and the end of Belgian rule, but the American-backed shadow wars against the local Soviet allies and Mad Mike Hoare's battalion of white mercenaries: Vietnam vets, Royal marines and former Wehrmacht Nazi soldiers looting and murdering across the country. There had been Maoists too: the Simba rebels, who spread a magical, pseudo-communist ideology. An Italian documentary crew had captured haunting full-color footage of misfit white soldiers tying boiled skulls to their jeeps for hood ornaments. The region's political landscape was an ever-changing mathematical equation. Her interest had been piqued as an undergrad in a modern poetry class of all places. The instructor, Dr. Kayembe, was a soft-spoken man, older, with a white beard. He always wore loose denim shirts and took advantage of every pocket. He started the class by asking if anyone already identified as a poet. Two people raised their hands. He told them to treat the class like a math course. He dared them to be technical, cold, concerned only with the mechanics of the form. He asked them to suspend their egos, their past achievements, and their unused creative assets to allow themselves to learn from him throughout the course and possibly become better poets. To the rest of the class, he said, "You're all interested in other things, other disciplines. Other classes. Or this class just sounded easier than the other English core credits you'll need to graduate. Whatever it is, after this class, I would wish for you to continue to pursue your own passions, your own aim at a career, as if you were poets."

Rajani raised her hand.

"Yes?" he said.

"What if we don't know what we want to do yet?"

He put his hands in his pockets and looked at her and smiled.

He put his hands in his pockets and looked at her and smiled.

“I will answer this question after class. Just stay for a moment. I will not take up more than a few seconds of your time to give you an answer.”

She thought she was going to get some kind of lecture about choosing a path in life. She waited until the rest of the students had abandoned the room. She felt jittery, singled out, humiliated.

Dr. Kayembe sat informally on the top of his desk and looked at her.

“I start every class with the same speech. I do this every semester. I do this because the youth these days seem to already know who they are or who they think they are. Some of them do. Some of them only think they do. Teaching someone who made up their mind like that is like passing a note between prison cells. I have to disarm students before I can teach them. But not you. You may not like poetry. You may not like this class. But at least I can teach you something. You are aware enough to know what you don't yet know.”

“What does that mean then?”

“It means you're my only student this semester, the only true student. Just don't blow off the reading.”

She came to find that she didn't like poetry, but she was somewhat enamored with Dr. Kayembe. He read only one of his own poems at the end of the course. It was a memory of violence, of a massacre.

Throughout her short professional career, she had written only a few papers on the Congo Crisis, but she managed to get one of them published in a small Kentucky-based Journal; Louisville was home to a large population of Congolese expats, many of them academics. That was the closest she had ever come to achieving her dream.

She wasn't looking forward to another semester of American Government 101 and was actively dreading the elective she taught in the basement of the Harminus building: Asian-American Studies. She had just five students the previous semester and one of them dropped the class after the first test. Another was mentally unstable and would rage against the other students or burst into tears mid-lecture with everyone trapped in the musty classroom. They had to take an iron service elevator and walk single-file through a hallway crammed with the janitors' equipment to access it like blacklisted dissidents meeting in secret.

She lay in the guest bed listening to the noises of the swamp; the chatter of the nightbirds and molting insects in tandem with the damp trickle of the gutter. She thought about her near-empty apartment on the other side of town, the approaching end to her lease, and the fact that she couldn't afford it anymore at least not on her own. Giant moths and male mosquitoes tapped against the window above the headboard attracted to the light from the hallway. She thought she heard music starting to play in the living room. Her arms and legs seized up. She could feel her pulse in her ears. The music played low. It was jazz, a staticky analog recording crushed into a digital file. She stood up and grabbed her phone and tiptoed down the hall. Had some mad-dog killer seen her naked in the storm, a swamp-dwelling-pontoon-boat-operating rapist? Did they know she was alone? She peered over the corner to see the kitchen. The music was coming from the Amazon Echo on the counter. The security alarm was still armed (she could see the red dot on the wall-mounted keypad by the front door from where she stood) and nothing else was in disarray. She decided the storm had tripped the circuitry. She had seen stories about the device malfunctioning, even bursting out in eerie pre recorded laughter. She told it to shut up and ripped the cord from the wall socket. She didn't go back to bed after that. She lay on the couch and turned on the TV and started flipping channels until she reached the end of the finite loop.

She saw a man in a room with a gun in his hand in the dark; bathed half in shadow and half in flickering, dull orange light. He was burning a document in a trashcan in the middle of the room. The actor's face, what little she could see from the shot, said he was done. His eyes said to her that he hadn't slept in weeks and the pistol grip was the closest thing to an embrace he'd experienced in months, maybe even years. It was some kind of arthouse action movie. What was burning in the trash can? His birth certificate? She thought about the billowing smoke hitting the ceiling and filling that shabby room to the point where the protagonist (or whoever he was in the story) would start to choke. She thought about Derek watching these kinds of movies alone on the couch as if he had really discovered something special in his life. She thought about guns and hijras. She thought about smacking college students in the face. She wondered how good Derek's boiled skull would look on the hood of her car. She expected the movie's scene to change. Where was the flood of new images? Where was the story?

Nothing.

The film stayed in the room with the man. The light started to fade as the fuel to the fire burned up. She watched it die. She watched the screen fade to black as the end credits scrolled upward. The names looked foreign, possibly Turkish. The music sounded almost Japanese like shakuhachi. Compelled by something she couldn't articulate, she went out on the veranda for a midnight cigarette and listened to the cicadas. An island coyote howled in the distance. She flicked the butt into the wet grass and went back inside. She fell asleep on the couch and dreamed about Dr. Kayembe. He was sitting alone on a park bench, twenty feet from a pond where a few alligators and turtles sunned themselves on the bank like porcelain statues. She approached him from behind. He looked back at her and smiled.

She stepped closer and put her hands on his shoulders. He looked the same as he did eleven years ago. Her hands were her own, the blemished knick-scared, bony digits with the indentation of the absent engagement ring. He set his hand on hers. She felt the warmth of the sunshine in the fabric of his denim shirt. He said nothing. He just kept his hand on top of hers as she massaged his aged shoulders. He looked up at her and kissed her on the cheek.

She woke up on the couch. The sunshine poured in from the glass doors. She checked the concrete outside for the sunbathing alligators (there were none) and made a cup of filtered coffee. She sat in the kitchen and thought about the dream. She sipped her coffee in the kitchen and had her first great morning in weeks, but, as soon as she recognized it, she ruined it for herself. She thought back to undergrad, her lonely undergrad days. It had been another solitary Friday night in the dorm and she was free now from her overbearing father. She got onto a chat roulette site to talk to random strangers, the way lonely kids did. Scrolling past the menagerie of the masturbating men was no problem. She thought she knew what to expect. She kept pushing the random button to generate a new cam connection until a boy appeared on the screen. He couldn't have been older than thirteen. He smiled and asked her what was up? She panicked and slammed the laptop shut. Her cheeks flushed. Her heart was racing. She carried the guilt and embarrassment with her for years. She had known not to visit the site. She had seen all of the news specials and now she was burdened with what that young boy would see after her shocked face disappeared from his screen. She told Derek about it a few months into dating and he didn't understand her shame.

“It's not like you did anything wrong,” he said. “What if he was getting assaulted, or doing something...”

She interrupted him.

“I know it could have been worse and that’s what haunts me. I’m ashamed of having logged on in the first place, ashamed of being stupid.”

She remembered wanting him to tell her that she wasn’t stupid. She wanted him to understand her loneliness. She wanted him to offer clemency, to displace her father’s voice in her head, to say that he used to get on bad websites all the time in college, to say that she did the right thing, to tell her that he thought she was a good person. Instead, he just stared at her and shrugged and told her he didn’t really understand. He used to make jokes about it, telling friends and family that his girlfriend and, later, his fiance liked to talk to little boys online. Maybe he thought it took the power away, smoothed things over? Maybe he just didn’t care. He had always been an enigma.

She was crying over her coffee when her cellphone rang. She composed herself and went to the counter. The cellphone shuddered. She didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello?”

Her voice was raspy.

“Rajani?”

“Who is this?”

“This is Milo.”

She still didn’t know what Milo was to Eliza. He was neither a son nor a lover. “What’s up?” she said.

“Have you talked to Dr. Rothbaum today?”

“I haven’t talked to her since she left.”

“We can’t get in touch with her,” he said with a tremor in his voice.

“What’s wrong?”

“Did you not hear about the bombing?”

“No I didn’t.”

“Turn on your computer. Someone detonated six bombs in the main pavilion at the University of Warsaw. We can’t reach Dr. Rothbaum.”

She let go of the phone and went to the couch in the living room and turned on the TV. She had it tuned to the BBC. They only mentioned the university bombing once. She left a voicemail for Eliza. Milo tried to call her again and she ignored the phone on the kitchen floor. She found her pack of cigarettes in her purse and smoked one in the living room and tapped her ash on the pristine white rug.



There we were, warm pockets of air
perfect from this distance
I want to tell you what is yet unspeakable,
that I am a mother to myself. Now
milk-light and stitched whole

milk-light and stitched whole.....James Diaz

Playing Time in Tongues

By Vita Lerman

(18)

She opens her eyes. This wasn't supposed to happen. She was so sure.

She vividly remembers swallowing all those pills, one by one. All 90. Her tongue going numb, throat closing. In her dorm room, 11:30 pm. The Cure her soundtrack. Mind over body. Her will was something fierce.

So why? Why is she still here, with these bright lights and tubes holding her down?

It was I. I sent her back, to my chagrin. She was so fresh, so earnest, so ready to give herself to me completely. Yes, I flirted a bit, even though I knew she was off limits, underaged. But even I didn't believe she would really do it. So much desire, for me. It was seductive. Until she was there and waiting. At the threshold. I couldn't accept her, despite all my wanting. She needs more time, that I knew blindly. And I am no-time, no-place, no-thing. One day she will forgive me. I hope.

She feels mildly patronized. So much for freedom of the will. She did not plan for failure. And now? She can't do it again, she decides. She must find out why she needs to be here, in this world, in this life. At least for some time. She gives herself an extension. Thirty-five is a good age to go. It will all be figured out by then.

How easily she gives up, my love. How strong the lifeforce. A birthday of sorts.

(35)

The sacred Ganga waters caressing her chin. Marigolds floating. Holy man chanting. Gratitude, pure gratitude. And all her senses are alive. This is her gift to herself, India, for her 35th birthday. She wants to be here. In this world, in this life. A celebration. A cleansing. Yes, gratitude.

She comes to me in this ancient city. But she doesn't see me. She observes the burning ghat, the naked return, the letting go, in my honor. But she doesn't think of me. She doesn't know that I am with her, always. I accept that. I will wait.

Varanasi welcomes her, purely. The little boy named Shiva walks holding her hand, gives her flowers and a candle for the fire ceremony, to be blessed and offered floating in the Ganga. She smiles and faces smile in return. The cows, the goats, the saddhus. The gods watching. She sees and is seen. Darshan.

She feels for the first time the tangible undercurrent that connects it all. She is seduced. She still doesn't know it's all play. Amusement for the gods. She will learn.

(19)

How soft his lips on her lips. How shocking. How blissful to discover. His eyes, she saw it in his eyes as he looked at her a moment ago. Bright, dancing, intrigued, his gaze in the moonlight. They talk and talk, out on the quads. Each word a glowing thread, binding them, gently, slowly.

And then he leaves, two weeks later, graduating. She now knows parting as never before. And the world is jumbled, screams for her attention in all its disarray. Her heart overflows.

She yearns for me, and pushes away the thought. Her promise. Her promise holds her now. And art.

(6)

The girl at the desk beside her drawing so well, just like in the story book. She wants that. She wants to do it herself. She is determined. That night, she struggles with her first drawing, copying from the book. It looks all wrong. Frustration tears. At last, her mother makes it all better, makes it beautiful, just as it should be. And she is happy, proud.

She doesn't remember me. But it is I who guide her hand, in all its imperfection. And I will continue to do so as her skill grows, if not her satisfaction. Eventually, she'll think of it as a dance, with something beyond her. She doesn't know that it is I, always.

(16)

The first time she calls my name. She is in bed, not falling asleep. Begs me to take her, now.

She has sensed me for a while now. She feels my benevolence. No fear, just curiosity. She has questions, of course. Why is she forced to be? Does it mean anything? And who decides? I whisper existentialists in her ear. A minor flirtation.

Now she chants my name, in desperation. I want her too. But slowly, with time. I overflow boundaries.

(19)

She walks with them along the beach, skyline in the distance more defined somehow and flowing. She enters moment after discrete moment, but prefers the pauses in between. She marvels at the intricacy of it all, as they sit and watch the unfolding. What is this thing we call reality, he repeats with that smile.

This too is real, she thinks. This experience, these colors. An expansion of possibilities. The darkness does not need to have supremacy. Exhilaration, beauty. No longer a superficial distraction.

I am happy for her now. The values have shifted, the scales evened. She is learning to see. I am still present in her mind, but more distanced. A flickering shadow, peripheral.

(52)

She watches the sunrise, by the lake, absorbed, electrified. That moment the disc of color dissolves into amorphous light. A shift as drastic and elusive as falling asleep. Or awakening into newness.

She thinks of him, of course. Charged with wanting. A revelation. I sigh. I know what's coming. She won't listen, awake.

(30)

She sees him in the coffee shop, while translating her father's poems. Yes, says her everything. Their eyes meet, acknowledging. I'll follow you anywhere, he says. A poet as well. His words caress her. They intertwine. We have all the time in the world, she says to this kindred spirit.

Their love will outlast their togetherness. A shared fantasy. At times even I am jealous.

(21)

She is surrounded by plants. Shades of green, blooms. An endless afternoon. She sketches orchids.

A woman walks into the flower shop. The other sorceress. Her nemesis. Or the catalyst. Confusion, hostility, fear. Curiosity wins and she decides they can talk. They both love him, the betrayer. She feels sudden freedom and knows she can act. They both let him go. And their bond will be lifelong. Blasting expectations.

You no longer need him, my love. He is not your home. You are strong, in all your fragments. And she is by your side, an inspiration. Always will be.

(52)

She pulls on a glowing thread and he responds. Of course I remember you, he says. Always. She catches her breath. It's all still there, 33 years later.

The quickening heartbeat. The mind connection. The shock of recognition. She loves who he has become. Even more himself.

She tells him about me and he understands. Acceptance. She and I talk, regularly now. Old friends walking together, flirting on occasion.

(25)

She reads her T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets. His beautiful mother. Face on the pillow skeletal, only the eyes and smile remain. Can she hear it?

Yes, she can. Almost ready for me. We both listen to the incantation in silence. Until the very end.

(18)

That London night. They watch the saucer pick out letters, spell words. She too waits, breathless, only half-believing. Time is of no importance, says the saucer. And they stare astounded.

I have to chuckle. How attached they are to the before and after. Can't begin to imagine what I perceive. So simple, it is really, playing time.

(40)

She walks in the timeless Andes. Clouds low, concealing, revealing. Pachamama palpable. Ceremonies with coca leaves, just for her. Medicine men reading her spirit, guiding. Cleansing. Her intensity of gratitude astounds. She understands the power of it now. The opening. Expansion. Gratitude nourishes the gods, she thinks.

She is touching my realm. Without anguish this time. At peace. Receptive. Breathing the breath of the world.

(37)

She traces letters on his back with her tongue. Spelling her desire. Ecstatic joining. Riding the waves of sensation, pulsing. From her palms to the soles of her feet, burning her center. Come to me, she murmurs, you are home. And he does, at least for that moment, collapsing, still within her, as she vibrates.

She thinks she now knows the beyond time. But it's only a preview. An intuition of our ultimate merging.

(47)

She descends again. Entranced by the abyss. Time stands still. Same questions, same lack of answers. She knows this place too well. Her spirit calls me.

No, it's not our time yet, my love. You know better.

(20)

The tree feeling of life, she says, to remember. She observes the dancing silhouette, the way the branches move with the wind. Breathing. Rooted, resilient motion. It enters her center.

She will return to it again and again. Her salvation, her inspiration. I remind her, at those times when she seeks my presence. And we dance, as she paints.

(43)

She travels with her mother. Folegandros. Wild oregano blooming, goats roaming the hills. Each day a new adventure, walking the island, swimming. They flow well together. Follow the sun, the lunar eclipse. Wear matching smiles. Luxuriating in the unplanned.

I observe them from a distance. It is their moment.

(46)

She buys a silver ring for herself at a festival. Her sign of self-possession. She solemnly swears to accept, cherish and treasure all her disparate pieces. To gather and hold them with love.

Until I am ready to part herself from her self. I do, she says. Arriving.

(27)

She sits on the zebra rug, in her colorful apartment, and smiles. Living with an artist. It is all new, this feeling. Her senses sharpened, the world more vivid. She is in fuchsia. Thinking her lady love. And now she wants to cry. Presentiment of loss. They coexist, euphoria and the abyss.

Even I was surprised, I who knows her passion so well. Even I discover still.

(31)

She wanders the world, learning to create her home. In every guesthouse. Temporary but real. A desk, a flower, canvas, paint. Learning to decide. Follow her curiosity. Intoxication of freedom.

I follow her from afar. She needs her space now, to be in herself fully.

(51)

She names her Penelope, her new home, all her own. The light of it. The sky, the lake. Her colors. The place where she can return. To herself, at last.

She barely feels me now. But I have patience.

(9)

She's on the train, at the window, leaving the only home she knows, the only country she knows. They all stand huddled at the platform, crying, waving.

She too starts sobbing. Watches her grandparents, maybe for the last time. The immensity of this parting, she still cannot feel. The thrill of the unknown beckons.

I too watch this passage. A life ending, a new one born.

(30)

They get their navels pierced. Together. Same blue beads. Their always gesture.

And always they will be. The years bringing them closer and closer. Family. You are her daughter's fairy godmother. A gift.

(21)

She sits by the lake. A glorious summer day. And she hears his drums, talking with the wind. She knows him, somewhat, and waves. Walks over. They discover, laugh, gaze at the feathery clouds. She's drawn to his warmth, his rootedness. Yearns for that kindness, that solidity, that ease of being at home in the world.

Later, they will agree to be friends forever. And they are. He becomes her brother. He takes her farther and farther away from me.

(38)

They dance, laughing, undulating, following each other. In the scented air. Beneath the falling stars, volcano erupting.

Her Italian brother. She has no siblings, so she adopts her friends. Unconditional love. I know it well.

(5)

She returns to her bedroom, floating, sees her bed, and her sleeping self. Reluctantly she rejoins her body. After passing through so many stories, strange and bewildering. Wandering the dreamscape, scrambling time.

I saw her there, in the dreamscape. Became intrigued. The ease of her surrender to this realm. The budding desire to stay. I knew then that my waiting has begun.

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She closes her eyes. At last we are one.



I Dreamed of the Sun.....Ruthenium

The Bread-Maker and Her Boat

By Marissa Forbes

The white light of the moon seeps into the living room every time the door creaks open. Throughout the night, women slip off their shoes, then I'm closed off from the woods again. These women are mothers, and their silver hair shines brighter tonight. Their satchels are stuffed with herbs and flour, their fingernails crusted with dirt, their toes wear rings, and their necks are hooks to crystals hanging on leather.

Astrid is *the* great mother. She is old enough to remember when cities still twinkled with fake lights—flicked on and off at the whims of dwellers. Old enough to remember when men still roamed with us. Other mothers, great as well, but lesser, unpack their sacks and the kitchen table is stacked high with all the ingredients I'm told will make another me.

Sanja lays a tight-knit blanket over my lap. Am I scared or chilled? She grips my knees before leaving me next to the fireplace. My toes skim the ground, but I don't have to use the stool to get into the rocking chair anymore. They've counted 72 new moons for me and I've absorbed their long and lonely history for them. My stomach aches the way it did that time I drank sour milk. My elbows and knees are still raw from the fits I threw this morning.

Sanja floats through the room in her white dress and yellowing fern crown. The moon shows her curves through the thin cotton. The outline of moss, sticks out of her underwear, waiting for her blood. And that's why we're here. Our first blood celebrations are also birth rights—and for baking. Sanja will pass her Bread-Maker powers to me as she becomes a mother. But for now, until the last mothers arrive, Sanja's strong smooth fingers hold Astrid's frail shaking hands. Sanja's eyes are still puffy from crying with me all afternoon.

This night is about continuing the cycle. Sanja to me and me to her baby girl. Sanja is not my mother though. She'll be thirteen when the moon falls behind the tree line around the lake, but she's been my teacher since I weaned off my mother's teat. Sanja taught me of the moon, men, and bread. Her powers will become mine as soon as she holds her baby. In another seven years, I'll be her. But for now, I sip my dandelion tea and let my fingers fuss inside the holes left from dropped stitches in my blanket.

A small boat moves into the reflection of the moon on the lake. Tia and Jillian row in sync while Alice pulls her matriarch shawl tighter over her chest. I watch them tie the boat at the shore, step carefully over fallen branches, and up the path to the door. They're the final mothers to arrive. It's time to begin. Wood is added to the fire. More candles are lit. Eggs are cracked into tiny volcanoes of flour in a straight row down the long kitchen table.

Jillian is my mother, but she raised Sanja from 24 to 72 moons and then nursed me for 24 months before giving me to Sanja. Sanja will nurse her own daughter for two years before giving her to me and so on, because next time I'm supposed to be the new mother. In my own white cotton dress with moss stuffed into my garments, absorbing the warmest parts of me. Fingers become green and red from stripping leaves and berries from their spines and vines. Piles of earthy tones and dough make perfect patterns around the pine tabletop.

Sanja grabs my hand. Her fingers are swollen and when I squeeze, her pulse is like water pushing itself into the mud at the shore of the lake. And then she lets go and clears her throat. Signaling the beginning of my isolation. Rather than bowing their heads, the mothers all touch palms and raise them above their shoulders. They become a garland around the kitchen. Their hands are dry and cracking with gooey dough sticking to the creases of their fingers. My hands are clean.

Sanja says, “We are women who are windows. We are mothers. No fathers rest their weight on our shoulders. For now, we knead our share of pain until our arms ache like a scream in our hearts. And we are connected to the birth of this Earth. As we are all flowers—here from seed to grinder, to heat, and onward to sustain another life.”

We live in cycles of three but come together on blood-baker nights. This is my first, I am told I will come every seven years to recreate for the rest of my life. Following the same ritual: child-teacher-mother. And so on. I bite my cuticles until I taste my own blood.

In rhythmic rolls and folds, they hum and combine all the Earth bits and berries into the sticky dough. My heart throbs on my temple and my vision blurs. Sanja reminds me to blink as if she can feel the burning right behind my eyes. I look at her and I can see she feels her own burning. We really do exist connected now forever. But we are too young. I want us to paddle out to the middle of the lake and swan dive off the boat. But we are old enough to know it was harder for our great mothers because some still remember the before.

The sweet smells of foraging are replaced with the thick scent of compost and yeast. More flour is mixed with the dust from the corners of the room and thrown around. Slowly, one by one, each mother retrieves a hand forged knife from her waist and whacks off their own five or six-pound chunk of dough. They pull the pink floral kerchiefs from their heads and swaddle the dough before placing them into bread tins—little cradles hung from the pole above the flames in the fireplace.

Jillian gives Sanja a pine branch and after tears are wiped from her cheeks, Sanja begins to fan the fire. Then my mother leads me around the kitchen showing me how to clean the sacrament.

How to stay distracted so I keep my eyes away from the cradles of bread. How to dust off the table in small sections otherwise there would be paste on the floor when flour and water mix in the mop. Jillian's patient voice seems loud even when she's quiet. When she brushes my hand to give me a sponge, I'm startled by her unfamiliar touch. The third tin in from the right is bubbling and swelling and Sanja keeps fanning her pine branch.

The moon is high and all the mothers, great but lesser, load their tired bodies and bread loaves into the boats, except Astrid, Jillian, and Sanja. The night is clear of clouds and Astrid tells me the night I was born the sky was cloaked. Did she want her words to anger or comfort me? Sanja always said I was too fantastical. Whatever that means? I've already learned the power of the moon and none of them believe I will create my own plans, but my mind is already swollen with them.

Astrid knows I am a handful. Jillian told her of the latching issues and Sanja told her of my sneering and precocious resistance. It is Astrid's job to listen. She listens to twelve daughters and with her stubbornness she will have at least three more. She knows how to tell us our hopes and fears, how to keep the moon coming, the dough rising. She knows all the ingredients and some of our secrets.

I hear the extra breath as the moon light escapes the room. It is out of rhythm for a few minutes and then Astrid rests one withered hand on the doughy chest rising and falling and her other in Jillian's. In a circle: my mother grips Astrid's hand back while holding Sanja's gingerly and Sanja holds mine. My other hand—young and little—rests on Astrid's old warm fingers. Sanja's fingernails leave little crescents on the back of my hand—a beautiful row that looks like ripples of water in my skin.

Her cry breaks out through the flickering of the fire and our low groans. Sanja releases Jillian and my hand then pulls her daughter from her metal cradle. I swear her skin cracks like a loaf of sourdough, but she is soft and smooth in Sanja's arms.

"Her name is Kara," Sanja says. With their nods and glassy eyes, Astrid and Jillian smell gratitude. I smell sadness. There is first blood dripping onto the moss that has fallen to the floor between Sanja's feet

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Sanja is diligent during her time with Kara. She suns her at the right times of day and lays her in the lilacs after, just as she was taught. She pads Kara's bed with bearberry and lets her nurse through the 24 cycles of the moon. All the while, I find my places around the lake and dig my little holes alone while waiting for all the mother's wishes. Just as I was taught.

I swear if dreams were lighting and desire was thunder, these old woods would burn up around me. Astrid says that we're one with Earth Mama and there aren't many survivors out there since the men all turned to dust; so, I have to do my best to fit all the mothers' wishes in little pans. It's not often, but they do visit. When the moon is waning gibbous, they come with requests. Like a man to build a hothouse for their tomatoes, or a man to build a coop for the sudden fifteen chickens pecking their lawns, or a man to fix the leak under their sink. I give the mothers lists, and they come back on the next full moon with everything they need to get what they want.

Alice comes first, in the fall, asking for wood to warm her home through the winter. She's so beautiful but miserable. She asks to sit with me. I nod yes. She unties her hair and I brush my fingers through the graying waves left after her braid is released.

The water on the lake turns from blues and greens to oranges and yellows—the sunset refracting the last of the day's warmth on our skin. I read her my list before giving her the frayed paper: shavings from an ax, juniper fruit and pinyon pine cones—ground fine, and dust from her porch corners. I help her down the bank to the small boat and watch Tia row her away on the lake, now like black glass.

A week later the moon is full and my mouth tastes sour. Alice knocks gently. I stumble on the rug and fall into the front door. I can see she's weak from bleeding, but her sunken eyes tell me she's ready to see if I can bake her a useful man.

My kitchen table is covered with flour and two eggs wait by a cup of warm water. Alice empties the required ingredients into piles. She adds wood to the fire as I mix her shavings loosely into the spongy dough—looking like the bark of an aspen. She stirs her ground juniper and pinecones into oil and wipes the bread tin with it.

In a hollow voice I say, “We are women who are floors and roofs. We are daughters. No brothers rest their weight on our shoulders. Now, we knead our share of effort until our arms ache like a scream in our hearts. And we are connected to the birth of this Earth. As we are all flowers—here from seed to grinder, to heat, and onward to bestow another life, short as it may be, to provide and learn from.”

Alice furrows her brow. She never heard “and learned from” in a recipe. She doesn't understand, so she stays silent. We mix the dust from her porch into the flour and toss it, fistfuls at a time onto the dough that I've folded and rolled into a ball. We touch palms and because I'm barely seven, my arms are straight above my head, just above her shoulders. We sync our breath and when it's time to fill the tin with her wood-chopper-man dough, she taps her middle finger on mine gently, once.

I hook the tin to the pole above the flames that kiss the bricks in my fireplace. Alone, it looks more like a casket than a cradle. I place my blanket on her lap. It used to be tight-knit, but I've already stretched out the dropped stitch holes and nearly rubbed the fibers to fuzz. Alice says it's still serving its purpose. We sit together, smoke seeps around our toes. We wait for the bubbles to start popping on the top of the bread.

Our fingers weave into each other's. Just after the moon is hidden by pine trees, his breathing fills the space between our bodies and falls into our rhythm. He stands and Alice nods her head in approval and wraps him in a sheet. He smiles and his front tooth is broken—a perfect little triangle chipped away. Alice glares at me as she leads him to my room to put on clothes. We both know there shouldn't be any broken body parts.

“Three, three, three,” whistles through the space his broken tooth left. He will not be named. His countdown has begun. He will cut wood for three days and find a place of comfort then turn to dust again. Maybe he will choose the porch he was born from. Maybe he will mix with the dust of his uncles in Alice's kitchen.

I stand on my porch and listen for the tell-tale smack of the ax and the wood splitting then being tossed into a pile. It echoes through the woods, so I get turned around. The trees are sticky with sap and the leaves have changed their outfits, readying themselves for the bare months of winter. I finally find him, and I watch. Not him. I watch the way he holds the ax, the swing of it above his head, and the force he drives it down into the wood.

Late at night, when it's so quiet the mice are asleep under the floorboards, I practice with spatulas in my kitchen. I pretend a loaf of bread is the wood and I whack it until the crust and soft insides are scattered bits across the table. I gather them into a pile. With care, I press them into the shape of his broken tooth.

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Sanja and I sit at the kitchen table. Sweat rolls down my back and pools just above the top of my underwear and Sanja offers me her cotton kerchief even though it's damp from her tears. Kara is on her lap. Sanja's fingers glide through Kara's blonde curls the way I comb the great mothers' hair. I pour our cold chamomile tea. After a few sips I open the recipe book on my lap.

I read her the ingredients for my last few loaves of bread-men, and she smiles despite her worry over Kara. I show her a few recipes from my first loaves to let her know how well she prepared me for my time as the Bread-Maker. Kara slides off Sanja's lap and begins tying loose strings of yarn that hang off my tattered blanket. Sanja's pleased with my growth but knows my mistakes. Her ambivalence smells like sour milk.

Sanja is allowed to sleep over from crescent to crescent of the moon and I prepare Kara's room with my nice sheets and hang dried lavender. But Sanja stays only that first night. When she wakes in the morning, I serve her poached egg over wildflower honey toast. She pulls Kara's blanket from her satchel and kisses Kara on her crown. She takes the matriarch shawl the great mothers made her off the coat rack by the door and leaves.

I keep Kara in her chair until I can't hear the twigs and leaves crunching under Sanja's feet anymore. Kara and I hold hands as we walk to the window and watch her mother row away. We watch until the ripples in the lake are gone. Until we were truly alone, together.

I get down on my hands and knees and crawl a few feet. When I look back Kara is following me. She already knows I am her teacher. Does she know I will bleed in five years and leave her alone here in this lake house to bake on her own? Does she know loneliness rises with the dough and yeast will grow under her fingernails?

I crawl into my room and reach under the bed. Kara sits and watches me carefully unroll a muslin wrap revealing my collection of stolen tools.

Kara asks, with blueberry tinted lips, “Bake now?”

I say, “Shush,” and lift her to her feet. The wrench, now in her pudgy hands, is heavy. “Do you hear that dripping sound?” I ask her.

She walks toward the bathroom. I nod when she points to the cabinet under the sink. The hinges squeak when she opens it and I kneel beside her with my own wrench. I carefully show her left turn verses right.

The branches from the spruce outside the window cast short crisp shadows across the floor. Together we twist the rings and nuts on the pipes under the sink until the dripping stops. When we sit back on the tile floor the shadows are long across our legs.

She smiles and holds the wrench to her chest. I reach into my apron and pull out a folded piece of paper that once lived in the recipe book. It’s flat on the floor between us. It’s not ingredients. It’s a supply list and a picture of a boat.

“We’re not going to bake,” I say, “we’re going to build this.” She doesn’t yet know what I will save her from. Maybe she never will.

Etched delicately in graphite on the side of the boat is a picture of a tiny tooth. A tiny broken tooth.



*Where the Buffalo Roam.....*Peter Carellini

Bach in Oneonta

By Jason Lobell

The Episcopal church in Oneonta, New York was built by Charles Bramford in the summer of 1926. One year later, his son Karl was baptized in its chancery. Ninety-four years after that, Karl Bramford sat in the front pew of the church drenched in the same light that poured through the windows on the day of his christening. It had not changed in almost a century, it still held out the promise of divine reassurance and eternal life.

Rachel Branch was the holder of the Bramford Scholarship in Piano at the Mannes School of Music. She rode the train from Manhattan north to Oneonta. She traveled with only a backpack stuffed with sheet music and a single garment bag. The journey had been an unhappy one as it was not a journey she had wanted to make. But Dr. Landauer, the conservatory's director, had insisted.

"Every holder of the Bramford Scholarship has played at Karl Bradford's birthday concert for the last fifty years.", he explained. "And this is a milestone birthday. It's an honor."

"I don't feel particularly honored", she replied.

"Then feel obligated. He's paying for you to be here."

The train arrived in Oneonta at 9:30, Sunday morning. As promised, a car was waiting for her. It drove her through the leafiest and most expansive country she had ever seen. Open fields and wide vistas still startled her, the notion that so much space could exist between human dwellings. The car deposited her in front of a large, white house surrounded by Sycamore trees. A maid opened the door and let her enter. Once inside, an elderly hand reached out to greet her.

"So nice to meet you, dear. Always so nice to meet the young person who will play for father on his birthday."

Rachel stared at the woman. She had never seen an old woman, one at least seventy, who was so beautiful. Her skin was unlined and her white hair celebrated its lack of color.

“It’s my honor.”

“Dr. Landauer spoke so highly of you. He says you’re the best he’s heard in years.”

“He’s very kind.”

““You’ll want to spend the day practicing?”

“Yes”.

“Then I’ll show you to the music room.”

She led Rachel through a living room and a library and into an enclosed porch surrounded on three sides with bay windows. The piano was situated at the northernmost end, in front of the largest of the windows.

“You know that it’s the...”

“The Partita in C minor, yes.”

“Father’s favorite. We’re so looking forward to it. When you’re ready for lunch, just pop into the kitchen and Catherine will get you something.”

“Thank you.”

“Dinner is at seven. We should be ready for you by 9:30. Naturally, you’ll dine with us.”

“Actually ma’am, I don’t like to eat before I play. I like to feel an emptiness in my stomach.”

The woman paused.

“Whatever you think best. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

“Thank you”.

“I’ll leave you to it, then.”

She exited the room and Rachel was left alone with the piano. Like all pianos, it stood before her in naked defiance.

Karl Bramford leaned on the prow of the sailboat. He was no longer a sailor. The rigging of the sails and the piloting of the vessel had long since been given over to his sons, his grandsons, and now his great grandsons. He had ceased to be anything except a very old man. One fit to be celebrated at tribute concerts in London, Vienna, San Paulo, and Tokyo. Over the last month, he had listened to toasts made in his honor and then listened to his favorite music. The great orchestras of the world functioned as his court musicians.

He watched his sons, William and Charlie, seated near the bow. He had lived long enough to see his sons grow into old men. So old, so flabby and shrunken, that he no longer considered them his children. They had come so far along into adulthood and their childhoods were now so distant that he felt no paternal connection, no feeling of ever having been a parent. They were just two more respectful adults. He didn't know them. If he did, he suspected that he wouldn't like them.

The beauty of the day, the quality of the sun on the river, and the warm air rested gently against his body. He could feel each separate breeze on his face as a distinct pair of lips and each was covered with a varying shade of lipstick. The peach followed the pink that followed the lavender. All were dipped in soft, feminine colors. All kissed him with the guarded affection afforded a great-grandfather. None kissed with any passion.

Everything came slowly to him now, everything from handshakes to rainwater was mindful of his age. It allowed him to savor each thing as each thing held the promise of finality, the possibility of being the very last. He rated each moment in his mind comparing one smile to another, one meal to another, one phrase of music to an earlier interpretation. This game to weighing, measuring, and judging was how he passed his days.

Rachel had not popped into the kitchen for any lunch. She had worked for five straight hours at the piano. It resisted her like this music resisted her. It fought her over every note. The piano's tone was thick and deep, it demanded pounding and she was not a pounder. If she didn't master it, it would consume her and they would think its plodding tone was her tone and that she was unworthy of the music and its instrument.

She turned away and looked out the large bay window. A sailboat passed along the water. Its crew wore summer cotton, unstained and unruffled by either heat or labor. The sun was gentle on their faces, compliant and submissive before a higher power. It seemed, like her, one of the summer help.

Throughout the room, chairs had been arranged into six neatly ordered rows. She stood up and walked among them. She sat in one chair and then another. In this one would sit the cougher, in this one the whisperer, in this one the fidgeter. Also the candy opener, the program rustler, and the sleeper. Playing student concerts had taught her what to expect. In a crowd, when silenced, each individual is reduced to their most repellent characteristic. Every cough and murmur seemed like an attack upon the music, an attempt to pierce it with a dagger and rip it into pieces. She would prefer to play by herself inside an empty studio. To play for no one but herself. To refuse to be a supplicant to these people.

Karl sat in the library. One of his grandson's placed a tablet in his hands and he watched as a video of a great granddaughter unfurled before his eyes. He could follow her life almost moment by moment, from the day of her birth to her last birthday party. He could see her grow practically in real time. What a miracle, he thought, and how different from his own history. He looked about the room at the photographs that lined the shelves.

In his day, one never sought to photograph everything, just those moments deemed special and worthy. So there were pictures only of his triumphs, he was only ever smiling, only ever warmed by family, only ever clad in bright and festive attire. Looking at these photos, one would assume that he had never known failure, never known loss, never known bitterness or quarrel. It was the sequence of libertine's life, an atheist's life, the duration of a man who had never needed God. The pictures were as false as advertising. They were Bramford propaganda. He much preferred the tablet with all its scars and randomness. It reflected the truth of a dark and fallen world.

Rachel had determined not to eat at all until after her performance. She would make the emptiness within her so vast that it could encompass all of Bach. She would make herself rapacious enough to devour it without pause or hesitation. From that would come fluidity and strength. Even then, she knew, it wouldn't be enough. Nothing was ever enough for Bach.

A young man stepped into the music room. He was tall with light blue eyes and a crown of blonde hair that covered his ears and forehead. She recognized him as a member of the crew on the sailboat that had passed before the window.

"I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't."

"I heard the music and had to compliment you. That's no easy piece."

"You know it?"

"Since childhood. Great grandfather insisted. The C minor is part of being a Bramford."

"Which of the Bramfords are you?"

"Timothy. One of the great-grandsons. One of six. But don't try to tell us apart. We're interchangeable."

"Do you just listen?"

Timothy sat next to her on the piano bench. He placed his fingers on the keys and offered her Chopin's "Warsaw" Etude in halting, measured steps.

"Very good", she said when he was finished.

"Very mediocre, you mean."

"I mean very good."

"I know exactly how pedestrian I am. That's all I know. That was the plan all along."

"The plan?"

"The reason behind the piano lessons, and the tennis lessons, and the painting and the sailing, and the riding. To teach us our limitations. To circumscribe us. To keep us from getting any big ideas."

"About?"

"About who we are. About what it is to be a Bramford."

"What is it?"

"Something greater than any one person. Something more than one self. That's why the humiliating lessons to reveal our mediocrity. To get us ready."

"For?"

"Our lives. Our lives maintaining something that was here long before we were born and that will be here long after we're gone. It was to let us know that only our name makes us special, not any kind of precious talent. It was to get us ready and willing to spend our lives as caretakers."

"That's a good word, caretaker. That's what I am, too. I preserve music written 300 years before I was born. People would never guess to look at us that we are the servant class, the proletariat in chains."

He smiled.

"I never thought to call myself the proletariat."

"Your family is right about you, you do lack imagination."

He smiled again.

“Why not call ourselves proletariat”, she continued, “it fits. It’s worse, actually. We’re serfs. Chattel property.

“You think anyone will pity us?”

“No. That’s why we’re the most pitiable of all.”

“What can we do about it?”

“Try to forget how miserable we are.”

A connoisseur and collector all his life, Karl had now become a connoisseur of light. He watched it refracted through windows and falling on white surfaces, after downpours and conquering the night. It was so small and apparently harmless, no one took it for a parasite. But it was, insinuating itself into mortal flesh and consuming it, eating it away until it had grown fat on the remains. Nothing as minimal, as without armaments as light could triumph any other way but to advance in millimeters at a frantic, headlong rush. Light shared its nature with fleas and worms, it was minuscule but lethal. Before you knew it was there, it had obliterated you. Its simplicity, its very evanescence, fooled you into thinking it benign. Then it laid waste to whole cities and townships. It was the same with his favorite piano piece, the Bach Partita in C minor.

Rachel felt a sense of transgression just being in an upstairs bedroom. Timothy tried to lock the door but she pulled his hand away and led him to the bed. She climbed on and turned over on her back. He followed her. If they were playing a duet, their tempos were in conflict. She wanted to go faster, he wanted to slow down. She pulled up her skirt and took down her panties and then reached up to unbuckle his pants. His large, fumbling hands swatted at her small, determined ones.

“Wait”, he said, “I didn’t think anything like this was going to happen. I don’t have anything.”

Her hands moved precisely and implacably about their task. His pants came down, followed by his underwear.

“Forget it. Just go ahead and do it. Fuck me. Hopefully, this will annihilate us both.”

All his strength was needed to dress himself now. This was true even for a polo shirt and shorts, let alone a tuxedo. It battled him at every turn. The stiff trouser legs, the French cuffs, the bow tie, the cummerbund. They challenged every part of him, his hands, his knees, his eyes, and his balance. It was just one more once effortless thing that now required the devotion of learning a new language. Dressing, eating, emptying his bowels now demanded the utmost care and preparation. Each could easily take a whole day if he let them. Each had to constantly be relearned and given practice if they were to be successfully performed. He was reduced to taking pride in the triumphs of a three year old.

When finished, he looked at himself in the mirror. He couldn’t believe that the reflection he saw was his own.

As her skirt was stained and damp, Rachel changed into her concert dress far earlier than planned. It was simple, black satin that exposed her shoulders and fell just below her knees. The only jewelry she would wear were opal earring studs. She would not offer them the slightest relief of color.

She had left the house and was walking through the village at twilight. Amber streetlights guided her steps and brought her, without any hesitation, to the Episcopal church. She admired its simplicity and plainness, its bare white walls and plate glass windows. It had no one to impress. Her own church was lavishly decorated with hand carved mahogany pews, tinted windows, and a pair of vaunting spires. It announced to the Lord, we are here. It had been built by a people seeking recognition from God and everyone else.

It all began for her in church, the music anyway. In the basement, which served as a daycare center, there was a small, upright piano. One day, when she was seven years old, she climbed on to its bench and played from memory the hymn she had heard every Sunday, "Take my Hand, Precious Lord". Mrs. Darby, mistress of the daycare, watched in astonishment and quickly informed Reverend Knowles. Reverend Knowles, never one to miss an opportunity, soon moved her from the basement to the nave, where she played weekly concerts for an ever growing congregation. There were pictures of her in the paper and stories on TV. In every photograph her parents stood behind her, clad in the same dress and suit they wore to Sunday services. Those pictures were the only occasions where her parents smiled at the same time. The rest of the congregants still spoke of her although they now spent Sunday mornings scattered into different churches in various parts of the city. Her church, along with the dry cleaning shop and the Chinese take out place that abutted it, had been lost to taxation, failed refinancing, and urban redevelopment.

From the dining room came the familiar sounds of a party winding down, dishes being cleared, conversations atrophying, and the slurp of cooling coffee. Soon enough, they began filing into the music room. Rachel stood before them, ready to begin. Seeing her, they quickened their meandering pace and took their seats earlier than they would have liked. She looked out at them. This was to be her life, elderly and contented people who spent their days in the realms of commerce and then sought out redemption within culture. She was to provide them that redemption. Even Timothy, sitting in the second row, had a pleading look on his face, a need for absolution.

The woman who had first greeted her stood up and addressed the room.

"The high point of father's birthday celebration is always the performance of the young student who holds the piano scholarship he established fifty years ago. Tonight, we have an especially fine treat. Would you please welcome Miss Rachel Branch."

They applauded and Rachel bowed before them. She then directed a second bow, a deeper one, to Karl Bramford.

She began the Bach. The light, lilting notes rose up like ripened shoots to decorate the room. They then fell back like a shower of hail falling from the sky.

Karl Bramford began to replay in his head each great version of this piece had known, either in person or on recordings. They rose up and then retreated in the presence of this girl.

The initial joviality turned to terror so quickly, with one phrase moving seamlessly into the next, that no one could anticipate its coming; the bottom dropped out all at once and they found themselves plunged suddenly into darkness. The audience in the music room clutched for something to hold on to, something to suture the wound that had opened up inside them. Shock overtook them, then panic. They were bleeding to death before they realized they were cut.

Each note was fresh and felt improvised to his ears as memory was happily erased and the day began anew. His eyes filled with tears, he rejoiced in his second childhood, of hearing this majesty for the first time in his life.

She felt the emptiness within her fill with the weight of the music. They were wedded and made one as she was relieved of history and experience. If there had been anything of the past inside her, it had quickly been extinguished.

His tears had the force of a newborn's, they had were his only means of communication. He wept copiously, for something given and something taken away all at once.

She lived inside the music. It was hers and no one else's. She could not be removed from it; separating them would mean the death of both.

He was one, also complete, there was nothing more to him or to the world. All that was eternal existed in this music. It was the only light left in the universe. Upon its conclusion, there would be nothing left.

She drew out the last phrase to stretch the piece and allow its creator time to step up and welcome her. She let the final notes fall like caresses on his face, the proper greeting for anyone who had waited 300 years for your arrival.



*the past reflected within the present.....*Morning-meadow Jones

Author Bios (in order of appearance)

James Diaz (they/them) is the founding editor of Anti-Heroin Chic and author of three collections of poetry, the latest of which is "Motel Prayers" (Alien Buddha, 2022.) Their most recent work can be found in Wrongdoing Magazine and The Hyacinth Review.

Morning-meadow Jones (she/her) is a mother, migrant, and multi-medium creative, practicing various arts from her home in Wales, UK. She recently launched her writing career, at the age of 51. Morning-meadow's poetry, prose, and photography have featured or are forthcoming in TERSE.Journal, Overtly Lit, the other side of hope magazine, and Duck Duck Mongoose Magazine.

Mimi Rajakumari (she/her) is a queer Tamizh teenager with 45 previous publications.

Annie Liones Nguyen (she/her) is a Vietnamese-born multidisciplinary artist based in Singapore. Her main mediums of expression are poetry, short fiction, and filmmaking. Her works mainly explore themes such as humanism, human connection, grief, and empowerment.

Violet Rakauskas (she/her) is a 20-year old girl born and raised in Los Angeles, CA. She just completed Poetry Course One at UCLA extension and was published for her original poem Dance with Me in the New England Poetry Digest this past year. As she balances her life as a waitress during the day and exotic dancing by night, she returns to her creative writing roots during her free time in attempts to stay grounded.

Edward Michael Supranowicz (pronouns?) is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, Door Is A Jar, The Phoenix, and The Harvard Advocate. Edward is also a published poet.

Asia Jade (she/her) is a writer and artist. She will be attending Kingston University, in London, this fall for writing and theatre. Asia jade strives to evoke any emotion in any person through her writing and she hopes you may feel connected with some of her work. "To feel nothing, so as not to feel anything-what a waste!"

Author Bios (in order of appearance)

Braden Hofeling (he/him) is an emerging poet located in Portland, Oregon. He has two self-published collections of poetry out and is hoping to publish his third book through an independent small press. His work has been featured in the Gival press ArLiJo issue 153 journal, Death Rattle's Penrose Vol. 2, Prometheus Dreaming, Arc Prose magazine and New Note poetry.

Jeffrey Miller (they/them) is a queer writer and poet based out of Portland, OR. Their poetry tends to focus on the connection between the material world and the immaterial, how they see humanity reflected in nature and vice versa. Their own journey of religious deconstruction and gender exploration also spills over into their work, especially recently. They are working on their first poetry book and trudging through their debut work of fiction.

Natassja Norwood (she/her) is a current student majoring in English at Kansas State University.

Alejandro Gonzalez (he/him) is a Venezuelan Visual Artist, illustrator, and Graphic Designer, currently pursuing a Digital Arts BFA at Florida International University. His style can be described as a blend between expressionist painting, street style graffiti, and comic book inspired line work. Alejandro's work has appeared in a plethora of art shows and publications, including the Broward Art Guild, the Albrecht Kemper Museum, and Florida International University's Humanities Edge. Contrary to popular belief, he does have a heart.

DS Maolalai (he/him) has received nine nominations for Best of the Net and seven for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in three collections, "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016), "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019) and Noble Rot (Turas Press, 2022).

Peter Mladinic (he/him), an animal rights advocate, lives in Hobbs, New Mexico, USA.

Michael Lee Johnson is an internationally published poet in 43 countries, several published poetry books, nominated for 4 Pushcart Prize awards and 5 Best of the Net nominations, over 260 poetry videos on YouTube.

Author Bios (in order of appearance)

J Renee (they/them) is a Black Queer educator, visionary, and writer centering healing and liberation. J started writing in adolescence as a form of survival and now writes as a way to document and process growth, healing, and internal struggles that manifest in external realities. They are committed to writing as a therapeutic process of self-discovery and cultivating community. It is their hope that the healing they experience through writing reaches someone that needs to feel seen, heard, or inspired and does just that.

Phoenix Tesni (she/her) is a 22 year old poet from New Delhi. She has works published or forthcoming in Limelight Review, hand picked poetry, Sage Cigarettes, palest blue, Cloudscent Journal, tigers zine lit, and elsewhere. Phee likes to dedicate her life to creating and consuming art. When she's not doing either of that, she likes to practice falling in love with life over and over again. You can find her at phoenixtesni.carrd.co or @PhoenixTesni on twitter.

Sanket Mhatre (he/him) is a poet, curator, columnist and writer. He has been featured at Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, Poets Translating Poets, Goa Arts & Literature Festival, Jaipur Literature Festival, Vagdevi Litfest and Glass House Poetry Festival. His first book of cross-translated poems, The Coordinates Of Us won the prestigious Raza Foundation Grant after being shortlisted at iWrite2020 at Jaipur Literature Festival.

John Chinaka Onyeche "Rememberajc" (he/him) is an author of three poetry collections "Echoes Across The Atlantic", "A Night Tale At The Threshold Of Howl", "We Returned To Kiss The Cross" and a chapbook "Chapters Of Broken Tales". A husband, father and poet from Nigeria. He writes from the city of Port Harcourt Rivers State, Nigeria. He is currently a student of History and Diplomatic Studies at Ignatius Ajuru University Of Education Port Harcourt Rivers State.

Catherine (they/them) is a writer, editor, and illustrator living on the side of a mountain. Their work has been published in a number of online and print journals, and they are currently working on their first full-length poetry collection. When they're not writing, they can be found baking cakes, singing to their plants, or getting lost in the woods. You can find them on twitter (@catiswriting) and instagram (@junesprout).

Author Bios (in order of appearance)

Bruno Burgos Iñiguez (he/him) is a philosopher and author. With regards to work, he mainly teaches but, being Ecuadorian, he actually works on whatever is available. Bruno has been published in an Ecuadorian poetry anthology, besides professional texts about education subjects. Currently 44 years old, he is unmarried, has no kids and lives alone. People regard him as a sharp, friendly and awkward person.

Brooke Erickson (he/she/they) is currently working as a web editor. She recently graduated from UWEC with a bachelor's degree in science, and double majored in English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. His work is currently forthcoming in the fall issue of Barstow & Grand, and has previously been featured in None of the Above.

Mirjana M. (they/them) is a writer and digital artist from Belgrade, Serbia. Their work focuses on exploring how different forms of media combine and tell stories.

Viola Grey (she/her) is a black, pansexual poet from southern California. Grey finds poetry to be the expression of one's analysis of the human condition. She loves exploring, understanding, and writing about the realm of vulnerable truth within herself and the world around her. She is currently a poetry reader for the literary journal, Little Patuxent Review. Beside poetry, Grey has a passion for music, nature, and drinking way too many cups of tea.

Sean Patrick (they/them) is a scientist and sonnet aficionado. Their poetry has appeared in Grand Little Things, UniVerses, Blue Unicorn, and Lavender Lime Literary.

Jodie Oakes (she/her) is a poet living between a rusty transit van and a rural village in Bulgaria. After taking an unplanned break from creative work over the last few years, she is back to explore modern themes of quiet rage, survivorship, and rebirth. Her work has previously been published in the Emerge Literary Journal, Fire, Moodswing, The Global Tapestry Journal, Maybles Labels, and various anthologies. She is currently working on her second chapbook.

Connor de Bruler (he/him) is a queer, working-class writer. Born in Indiana, he grew up in South Carolina. He is the author of six novels.

Author Bios (in order of appearance)

Vita Lerman (she/her) was born in Ukraine and has lived in Chicago, USA, since she was 9 years old. She has graduated from the University of Chicago with a BA in English Language and Literature. Currently, she works as a writer at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. She is also an artist. Her paintings have been accepted for exhibitions by galleries in London, California, Texas and Pennsylvania, and for publication in the *Artistonish* magazine.

Ruthenium (they/them) is an artist currently living in a state of uncertainty. They believe creativity is real-life magic, and are obsessed with texture, context, light, and the question "what if?..." Their art has been published in *Rabble Review*, *Celestite Poetry*, *Vulnerable Magazine*, *Messy Misfits Magazine*, and *Warning Lines Literary*, among other wonderful places.

Marissa Forbes (she/her) is a mother, teacher, writer. Since 2020, she has published four short stories and four poems in literary journals and is currently shopping her full length poetry collection, "Bridging The Gap: Poems & Ethos for Emily Warren Roebling." She believes our stories connect us to a collective history to help us traverse our current climate. Marissa lives in colorful Colorado with her two children.

Peter Carellini (he/him) is a filmmaker, photographer, actor and writer based in NYC. His photography and poems, short stories, and essays have been published in over a half dozen publications - including *Smithsonian Magazine* and *The Firefly Review* - while his directorial film debut "Hello, World!" had its public premiere at the Greenpoint Gallery in October. He currently works as a background extra actor in several NYC film and television productions, while workshopping upcoming screenplays, stage plays, and a full novel. In his spare time, Peter loves to disco roller skate, find new things to do with his prosthetic, and travel the world!

Jason Lobell (he/him) is an MFA student in creative writing at the City College of New York. He is also a senior editor at *Promethean*, CCNY's literary journal. He has published fiction in *Promethean* and *Redivider* and has had work selected for readings at KGB and WordPress/NYC.



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