



# BRINE

*Poetry and Prose*



# THE PICKLING

— *Poet* —

*Presents*

# BRINE

**Issue #2**

*Brine* is a semi-annual publication from The Pickling Poet.

For submission requirements and other info, including our featured Writers of the Month, go to [www.BrineLiterary.com](http://www.BrineLiterary.com)

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“Japanese Maple”

by

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## Editor's Note

In his essay, “Art as Device,” the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky argues that we live our lives on a kind of auto-pilot, a term which he coins “Habitualization.” We wake up, have coffee, go to work, come home, watch TV, go to sleep, and repeat. Do this often enough and life begins to lose its color. We pass by the flower a hundred times and no longer see its beauty. We walk amongst a crowd of dozens of people and connect with no one. Even our interactions with loved ones become a series of habitualized responses. Cause and effect. Stimulus and mechanical response.

Good art, Shklovsky argues, breaks Habitualization by forcing us to see—to really see—some aspect of the world around us, as if for the first time. It makes us stop. It makes us think. It makes us feel wonder, love, rage, something, anything, it doesn't matter what. It opens a window into the life experience of a complete stranger, or makes us question our own. It shows us what is, or what could be. It stretches, it shifts, it distorts, it magnifies, it *transforms*.

As a pickler and as a poet, I'm big on transformation. How a cucumber combines with vinegar and spices, increases in complexity, changes irreversibly into the pickle. The way a metaphor forever changes the way we look at something. Neruda's lemon as stained-glass cathedral. Olds' glass of mucus as gold sun.

The amazing writers we have assembled in this issue are as diverse a group as it gets—we have writers from all around the world, of different backgrounds, perspectives, and of all experience levels—from first-timers to the President of the Poetry Society of America. But the one thing that they all have in common is that they all complicated our outlook on life, relationships, and experience. They broke us out of Habitualization. They transformed ordinary water, into *Brine*.

Alex Radison  
Editor-in-Chief



Nick Yingling

### **Portrait of the Artist**

How do you hold it so close  
To the tip, my teachers asked, pulling  
The pen down and loose.  
Drawing taught me grip. Legs first  
Then the too-round breasts  
And like any novice, awkward hands.  
I saved my favorite for last. Matted  
From the shower or wild  
Where the thighs kiss (years still before  
I discovered lips). I drew in private.  
Mother must have watched (like me)  
Through the door slit. Who showed you  
This trash? She tore my sketches  
From under the bed and I learned  
That day to swear. I cursed  
Her and art and pledged never to learn  
To hatch, to shade, to render  
The delicate line, depth.

Nick Yingling

**Refinement**

When the meat has made a thousand wings  
And woven green the ligaments, gather  
The bones and spread them  
Across your desk (what clutter  
They are now). The hips we no longer need,  
The femurs, the toes like wishing  
Stones. Discard them.  
A fingertip for your pocket. A rib  
On the mantel. Soon, little remains  
But an arm, the length  
You once clutched. Take it. Drill it  
Full of holes. Pretend  
It is a throat bone  
And it will play for you  
Pretty songs.  
When you tire  
Of them (you will tire  
Of them), raise the arm.  
Stave in  
The skull. Make of me  
Some final sound.

Eve Beisinger

## Mustard

The grocery cart stands idle,  
as I think of seeds pounded  
into liquid spice and bottled;  
what the sun would be if  
it were a flavor; the voice  
of yellow; soil's bright joy.

*Sinapis alba*, you say,  
proud of that wise bit.  
I nod – a tiny gesture  
that will never grow  
into a fruit but remain  
a globule of silence.

I want to tell you that bottled  
mustard turns bitter over time,  
especially when mixed with water.  
But infused with wine or vinegar,  
lemon essence or oil,  
even fish sauce,  
it rouses itself from sleep,  
kicks the palate, warms the chest.

I want to advise you to hoard  
its brilliance now, let it rule  
your throat now, live with its  
pungent punch before it forgets  
its sweet notes, its spice pinching air.

Just like how I wish to tell you  
why I stopped writing you letters,  
why I stopped telling you stories,

why I started bottling fruits,  
why I only speak *at* you.

Instead, I bite my fingernail.  
Outside, there must be mad  
spells of heat. I think of jars  
of spices stacked on shelves  
in other countries loved  
by sunlight. I imagine  
tender hands separating seeds  
by colors, by their skin,  
by how they deliver  
on their unspoken promise  
to grow, by how they speak  
even of a summer's breeze.

I take a bottle of mustard  
from the shelf, almost cradling it,  
afraid that the softest of shudder  
can shatter its tart taste, mask  
its bright tales, break its silence.

Kate Ruebenson

## Silver Lake

We refer to the typical:  
white, slice, orb

what about the eclipse  
our planet casts our shadow

at once miniscule  
and massive.

The whole scene  
stumps me into silence

the lights of downtown Los Angeles flicker on the horizon  
like fruit flies as I lean out over Madison's porch steps

*what we're doing up there, she says  
maybe we're the total assholes of the solar system.*

Hard to tell if clouds  
make red a dusk gray

casting preferences  
in morning sun

grays & reds, the slow slaughter  
of time on bodies

we hide in our shadows  
lengthening before us

& say to them at night  
in a whisper, *you are safe.*

Earlier down Sunset, I'd bought  
sunscreen, applied to my chapped shoulders

I let the wind hit my hair into my mouth to breathe  
it away and suck it back in and breathe it away again.

The office buildings are bright, bulbous, cumulous, competing  
for attention with this blood moon, distant but trending

when we went there, somewhere  
inside the lights or between them.

Kate Ruebenson

## **Mourning Ritual**

The light on the wing of our plane flashes  
twice every couple of seconds,  
like a heartbeat.

Is existence a hologram or isn't it?

Hundreds of miles out of Oaxaca,  
in a fit of mezcal-induced memory,  
you told it different, truer.

Why did I distill them  
like this? Primary experience felt  
indigenous, effects of disintegrated childhood

fermented poorly, left out.

You did not offer the generic terms  
loved for years, the antiquated method:  
“necessity,” “suppressed,” “stubborn.”

Espadín requires a decade to reach maturity.  
Tobalà, as many as fifteen years.  
I don't reflect in pink, rose

but in light, baby blue.

Harvested ideas, guard half-  
heartedly; where worms swarm  
words swarm, I get in trouble.

Kept same is not a craft per se,  
unless conservation is your focus.

What is bottled goes bad.

Before me, I see a string of  
phrases, once esoteric, poured  
out, just a wet spot on concrete.

What surrounds, sun

marinating Brooklyn  
in gold and silver,  
a city emulating only herself.

Here, now, you have a fortune.



Robert Julius

## **Snapdragons in Late August**

Sunflowers grow in summers across planes of time.  
I plant them until they tower above my head,

the same way they did in grandma's garden,

then yours, too. I never saw her sunflowers  
in person. Polaroid: mulberries purpling

the walk next to green-black walnuts

(how they would yellow your fingers  
like iodine, slick) beneath those golden,

reaching beasts. I learned all my gardening

tricks from you, which is to say I know very little  
except for the tenderness you lent me.

Once, our neighbor taught us to deadhead flowers.

I think about this often for no reason  
other than to recite its mantra:

to take away the dead means to make room for the living.

The snapdragons we grew the summer  
before we moved were crimson-pink

until they browned and brittle: stalks of paper skulls.

I wish I knew what it meant to make room,  
to take away. When I watched our neighbor

grasp then snip, I thought it would be as easy

as pulling weeds. I never expected  
the dead to rattle in my palms—

Michelle McMillan-Holifield

**From the Banks of the Red Sea**

Shore mud raging against sea gush.  
Army ravaged amid the cleaved  
sea. Ribs, shoulders, thighs, necks: churning,  
discordant, delivered to the spectral dark  
that boiled cloud-aroused, then settled spasmless.  
Bone-heavy.

## Katrina

John Weir

*In the fall of 2005, on assignment for Rolling Stone, I was at the Houston Astrodome, Hurricane Katrina refugee resettlement site, shortly after Barbara Bush came through and made her remark about how living in a sports arena 350 miles from home was a better choice for poor people from New Orleans than staying in their own houses in their own neighborhoods. My piece never ran, bumped by a piece about Sean Penn touring flooded New Orleans in a row boat.*

Here is how Americans lose everything: in public, within range of TV anchors taping standup segments for the nightly news.

A week after 23,000 people left their flooded city and the New Orleans Superdome and fled to Texas, I'm in Houston's Astrodome with a media handler and five other journalists taking notes and aiming video cameras.

There are still 3,000 people sleeping on army cots across the playing field of the Astrodome – a caravan of misplaced persons moving from dome to dome across the Gulf Coast. Reporters mill around, watchfully ignored by the arena's temporary inhabitants, until one or another of the women living here decides or is persuaded to tell her story.

Two-thirds of the people who sought shelter in the New Orleans Superdome were women, many of them young mothers, and the Astrodome is a makeshift city of stunned moms whose little kids, playing jacks and doing cartwheels, seem unable or unwilling to relate to the disaster except as a day off from school.

Beds made up with gray wool blankets are covered with boxes of Huggies, along with copies of the Bible, paperback novels by John Steinbeck, and inspirational books: *Walk on Dry Land*, a 12-step self-help manual that has been fortuitously named.

Whenever someone is reunited with a lost family member, a cowbell clangs over the stadium's public address system.

Postings on a giant message board speak of hope, and, indeed, in the past few days, there have been celebrity visitors here. Oprah came with her camera crew. George and Barbara Bush, Sr. showed up last Monday, with Bill and Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama.

Each of the dignitaries responded according to his or her faith. Mrs. Bush, a booster for Texas, welcomed the new visitors to her home state. “So many of the people in the arena, here, you know,” she told the radio audience of American Public Media’s *Marketplace*, “were underprivileged anyway, so this. . .” She paused for emphasis, laughing slightly. “This is working very well for them.”

Just whom she meant by “them” – not to mention “underprivileged” – and how much of the life and future of New Orleans has been permanently lost by their displacement, was a question that everyone was addressing, often in code.

There was the problem of what to call the arrivals in Texas, thousands of people, most of them African American, who had fled New Orleans, a city whose largest Parish, Orleans, had been 66% black, and a majority of whose black citizens lived below the poverty line, many of them holding low-paying jobs – as busboys, bartenders, and hotel maids – in the city’s tourist economy.

They were being called refugees. They were being called evacuees. They were being called victims and survivors. In Houston, the relief workers and city functionaries had begun calling them neighbors and guests and, finally, residents.

NBC news anchor Brian Williams, talking to Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, called them, defensively or apologetically, “Americans,” as if to distinguish them from those of the third-world poor whose poverty and periodic homelessness they suddenly seemed to share.

They did not fit easily into the national narrative of opportunity and prosperity and the all-inclusive American melting pot. Moreover, the hurricane itself presented problems for the media and national government, restricting triumphant photo opportunities.

There was the lack of a signature visual, as when the Twin Towers collapsed on 9/11. There was the lack of a unified band of police officers and firefighters whose heroic rescue efforts could be praised and shared. Instead, the media leaked reports of members of the New Orleans Police Department abandoning the Superdome and the Convention Center, of officers looting homes and businesses, of the Police Department's spokesperson himself committing suicide after spending a few days in the flooded city.

There was finally the complication of the people who had spent days in the New Orleans Superdome being, not assassinated by terrorists and mourned as American martyrs, but in fact still alive, still trapped in the ruined building days later, still needing government aid.

This time the victims were twenty-three thousand working class black people, many without cars or ready cash or means of escape. They had spent their lives within drowning distance of a lake whose levees everybody seemed to know would collapse, and they were corralled into a giant sports dome while the rains came and the toilets overflowed, and media choppers flew overhead without the intention of getting anybody out.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, while President Bush was keeping a rather aristocratic distance, members of America's shadow government – celebrities, NBA jocks, movie stars – were everywhere, flying over the Superdome to assess the damage and then touching down in Mississippi and Louisiana and Texas to talk to survivors and offer leadership and support.

For a period of two or three days it appeared in fact that Oprah was President. In any case, she understood how the language of "healing" and "recovery" would play to the American public. Visiting the Astrodome, speaking for the press and to those who had endured the ordeal at the Superdome, she said, "We owe these people an apology."

What they got instead was debit cards. The survivors of Hurricane Katrina were now being called "clients," and they were being invited to apply for ATM cards that were issued by the Red Cross on a sliding scale depending on family size, good for

anything from a few hundred dollars up to a couple thousand. Then FEMA announced it was issuing cards worth \$2000 to anyone who qualified for aid.

In America, when all is lost, someone gives you paperwork, and then you stand in line. On Thursday morning in Houston, a week after the flood, there are two massive lines snaking around the front of the Reliant Center, the convention center facing the Astrodome. One line is for people wanting to apply for Red Cross debit cards; the other is for successful applicants, cleared for access, validated forms in hand.

Twenty-five hundred people are out in the heat, some of them under umbrellas, some of them holding newspapers and cardboard boxes over their heads to shield themselves from the sun. They are wearing flip flops and sandals, shorts and t-shirts, and clutching whatever they own. People are in wheel chairs; the disabled lean on canes. One small red stand dispenses Coke.

I speak to a young woman named Trina who has fifteen dollars pinned to her shirt. She is carrying her clothes in two plastic Whole Foods bags, while her son drives his toy car across the Reliant Center windows, shouting, “Whee! Whee!”

Trina was in the Superdome for four days. “The government sending all that money to Iraq,” she says, angrily. “Whatever money they give us ain’t going to replace everything we lost.”

Lainez Fisher, a beautiful sleek woman in her mid-twenties, is wearing a Marilyn Monroe knapsack on her back and a black scarf around her head. She was in the Superdome from Monday until Friday. “The military [hired to oversee the people in the New Orleans Superdome] got the help, not us,” she says. “They treated us like animals.”

Her sister Gretchen, still stunned by her rough treatment by members of the National Guard, shakes her head in agreement. “No need for that,” she says. “Really no need.”

Gretchen owns a pit bull with eleven puppies that she shipped in a crate to Gonzales, Louisiana. Otherwise, she left New Orleans with the clothes on her back and her Betty Boop handbag.

“Back in the day,” she says, “we used to run on those levees. We saw the holes. We knew they would collapse.”

I am introduced to a woman named Miss Claiborne. She spells it for me. “M-i-s-s,” she begins, then her last name. I ask her if it’s true that the Red Cross is giving out money. “They’re supposed to,” she says, loading the word “supposed” with decades of skepticism and scorn.

She tells me, as do so many others, about living in the Superdome for days, about being treated like animals, fed like dogs, watching corpses rot, under surveillance by members of the National Guard.

And then, thinking back before the Superdome and the flood’s damage, she remembers what else she lost. “I owned a home,” she says. “I *owned a home.*”

I can’t convey how slowly and proudly she says it, how hopeful and tragic it sounds, how terribly sad, the beautiful American word, “home.”

Whose home? The ruined homes on the coast of Biloxi, the historical homes? The drenched housing of the New Orleans poor? The temporary shelters, the sports domes, the welcoming cities, the question, repeatedly asked, “Will you go home? Can you go home?”

In Houston, a week after the hurricane, people can name what they lost, their homeland, their families, their security – “Everything,” so many tell me, “I lost everything” – but the question of exactly what it was worth, and to whom, is only beginning to be addressed.



Daniel Putney

## **Miscegenation Blues**

What are you?

A Native American boy from the Sioux plains,  
heart buried in earth's blood,  
warrior bones underneath industrial growth.

Tell me who you are,  
the sun-baked Valley girl,  
born and raised along asphalt weeds  
of Highway 5's blinding grey mirage.

Where are you from?

An expat Pacific island land dweller,  
pores drowned in ocean breeze,  
body rooted in volcanic ash pulsing tectonic beats.

Tell me your origin story,  
the mutt in American clothing,  
ancestral sins warring within my muscles  
as lactic acid coats memories of Cebu.

How queer for the skin on my back,  
the chromosomes in my mixed cells,  
to mislead citizens of this colonial cesspool,  
confuse the Asian with the Virginian.

Daniel Putney

### **Evening Wear Realness**

The romper hugs my curves,  
sculpts my body into a warrior:  
armored skull,  
gilded epaulettes,  
dazzling bodice.

The steel on my chest protects  
a queer heart, manicured fingers  
coupled by battle-born hands.

I grab my thighs to ground me,  
the tickle of a filigreed skirt  
flowing through black leg hair  
while flesh and brain meld  
to break any semblance of dichotomy.  
I channel Prada, Versace, Louis Vuitton  
in every drop of foundation,  
twirl of an eyebrow brush.

Cruising along libertarian streets,  
my fierce lashes, hip swings  
repel villains of the panopticon,  
enforcers of biological orthodoxy.

If looks can kill, then I slay  
het naysayers, gaggles of normies  
who tell me no, no, no.

Honey, file your complaint with the god  
who preached love out of your bones,  
the devil in your commitment to a white picket fence.

My glittery blood is here to bleed,  
scars are destined to age  
toward an undetermined future.

Long live the flux.

Glen Armstrong

**Among the Forgetters #12**

We gather around the table,  
and Ahmet sends out  
for another Oh Johnny girl.

We gather in the gazebo  
for a drink and heart  
to heart.

The glowing corridors of yesterday  
make the children  
giggle and mock,  
not so much the past or the way  
reflected light  
invests equally in the absurd  
and the solemn,  
but

the way that *glowing corridors  
of yesterday* falls  
in love with itself  
while despising the language  
from which it's carved.

Glen Armstrong

## **Massachusetts**

There are reservoirs  
that we can swim in and ex-lovers  
we can have  
over for French bread pizza.  
It takes a while to get there.  
It's okay to wear the pants  
from an old tuxedo  
in the summer time.  
We have the right to quarter  
a Red Coat or refuse to.  
As the Captain used to sing,  
the past sure is tense,  
but now the Captain is dead  
and protocol is sketchy.  
There are reservoirs for love  
and reservoirs for raccoons,  
reservoirs  
for liberty and reservoirs  
for pursuit.

Remi Recchia

## **Kitchen Talk**

I guess sometimes Billy Joel reminds me of how my papa used to sing while cooking, cleaving raw meat—delicate and wrinkled—on the counter, me afraid of the way the cutting board internalized the knife edges—and recalling restaurant women—the fifty-something waitresses with saggy breasts, customers with attempted-elegance for a cheap diner—and assuring me that all of them did, in fact, desire him.

My papa says that sometimes girls only mean what they don't say—see, that's the 1950s for you—but I suspect instead that women are like raccoons, eyes encircled with an elegant robber deception swathed in black to reflect whatever lighting I have to offer. Sometimes the kitchen windows highlight the dish soap suds, sometimes I leave the stove light on all night in case you decide to come home.

I ran a flu last night on purpose to see if you would stop by on your way back to a place that wasn't ours. You didn't. A bottle of scotch scratched my fingers, the brown paper pressed up against the neck as I listened for the turn of a lock or your shoes on the gravel driveway. I don't think I fit inside you anymore, either. But I still collect your buttons and the way they gleam up at me from the floor, threads spun out in supplication.

Sarah Etlinger

**In Which We Discuss W.S. Merwin and I Become a Thief**

I.

The angles of your voice  
slid into slow geometry,  
lengthy as the afternoon haze  
that crept into your hair—  
your syllables heavy  
with the heat  
and the dark gestures  
waving across your forehead—  
as we talked about Merwin.

II.

I leaned against your car,  
watching the heat seep  
into the pores of the afternoon  
and the blue-dew satin blink  
of your eyes as you told me  
about the shape of Merwin's soul:  
deep and wide,  
hollowed out by the sadness  
that drowned him--  
but I do not think this is true  
(you have never been so hopeful as I),  
for I take instruction in Merwin's commands:  
In "Beginning," Merwin implores,  
"Bring your nights with you"—  
and I think he means  
come as you are, bring everything  
you ever held close and feared  
packed in a black suitcase  
lined with neatly folded squares  
of guilt and padded with the grease

of dried tears—  
Or perhaps he means  
bring your nights with you  
so you can lie with me,  
languorous as the summer afternoon,  
drowning in the waves of my touch

on your body;  
the call, like hungry seagulls,  
of my kiss pecking your flesh—  
bring your nights with you  
so we can dip, naked  
as emergent butterflies  
with droplets on their wings—  
into the gentle ocean  
of our dreams,  
where all is healed and new  
in the baptismal water of caress,  
in the beautiful shape of sleep.

### III.

The heat hung above us like power lines  
and you turned to me  
with your quiet, magnetic look.  
I saw the shape of your soul,  
a quick, quivering blip  
flickering among the sinewaves—  
I reached for it, grabbed it,  
and put it in my purse  
before you noticed.

## Slug

Gabriella Souza

That morning in May was really the only time I can remember Mia taking BeDe out of the basement on Charles Street—that was in the good times, before the forever sleeps and the pill bottles. It was that morning, right after I'd gotten the job as a line cook, that BeDe named where I work—the Green Tile Diner. She's two and a half and had just gotten old enough to know what things are. I tell you, that girl has got a memory like a donkey; she remembers everything.

She came into the place and asked, "Mama, what's on floor?" I searched and searched but couldn't see what she was pointing at because Toni the cook had just finished mopping (she's obsessive like that.). But then I realized BeDe was pointing at all the tiny pieces of stone that together made this pattern that was just like stars. I said, "Oh, honey, that's tile." Since then, she's been calling it "Green Tile Diner." It's funny, I never realized how beautiful it was until then, a floor, something I walk over every day. But that's what it's like with BeDe. Her eyes are like big telescopes that make me see the world different.

I'm thinking about that when I wake up in the summertime heat, and I feel her hand in mine. She's wiggling in the bed next to me, and I squeeze her body that is just like I imagine a little bird would feel, her ribs filling up with breath like a balloon. She is so, so tiny, and I'm afraid to break her, scared my hands will crush her bones to powder, that if I squeeze too hard she'll become just a pile of dust on the sheet. Her eyes are so much like her momma's, almond-shaped and shiny, and she has this way of staring long and hard at me. Her skin almost matches the olive color of mine, but there's something about it, tinged gray and thin as tissue paper. Probably cause she never sees the sun, but her momma tells me to hush, that she'd rather have her safe inside than out on the nasty streets of Baltimore. When BeDe looks at me this way, I want to tell her so much, but I don't know if she'll understand. My brain



starts whirring, and I want her to know about the hamster named Myrtle that I had at St. Elizabeth's Home for Girls, how I thought a witch lived next door to that one foster home where I was when I was five, and how much I wish she was mine, just mine, that I'd carried BeDe in my tummy and felt her move like a fish under my ribs.

We hop out of bed and I carry her to the kitchen to dance. I plug my phone into the speaker, and she is swiping her finger on the screen to find what she likes. Katy Perry, and I giggle, because "I Kissed a Girl" reminds me of me and her momma, and she giggles right along with me, even though she doesn't know what's funny. She loves to turn up the stereo, and I twirl her around and around, and then there is Mia, her momma, standing in the doorway. Her face is scrunched up in this really awful way, just like I imagined the witch next door, and when Mia looks at me that way, I want to shrink up into a ball, all 300 pounds of my flesh, just roll up like one of those bugs with all the legs they tuck up inside them. But if I did that, my dreads would still be trailing on the floor and Mia would stomp on them.

"Turn that down!" she bellows. "I can't sleep with all this fucking noise."

I look at little BeDe and each second her eyes get wider and wider, saucers that are about to overflow.

"You're all crazy to be dancing this way. And what the fuck is this shit?"

I hate it when she says things like that. I reach over for my phone, but she grabs my wrist. I see BeDe out of the corner of my eye shrinking, becoming smaller and smaller like in Alice in Wonderland when she takes the small pills. I wrench my arm free.

It wasn't always like this. A few months ago, Mia and I were so in love, happy like babies in a wading pool, giddy as crushes. We bought each other those roses the crazy man on the corner sells and smoked joints in the back alley, giggling ourselves silly. And the sex, man, the sex was on fire, all hot and intense, and it was the one time I didn't mind how big I was, didn't think about my flesh rolling in folds, even when Mia grabbed fistfuls of my

stomach when she was coming. My heart beat even faster when I met BeDe. I'd always wanted a family and this was it. But the blues crept back into Mia's head and her body started hurting her, and she started talking about how she needed the pills, to make it easier, it was just a bit, she'd say, just a little bit—but a little turned into a lot real fast. I told her I loved her, I wanted her to be happy, I'd take care of BeDe, give her money from my job so it wouldn't just be child support. But Mia just lays there all day, numb and not feeling, and it bubbles like lava in my stomach, burning my insides.

Mia glares at me, then turns and lumbers down the hall. I change into my work shirt, and put BeDe in this pretty dress that's all frilly and white and lacy makes her look like a princess but it also makes me sad because no one will see her like this.

“Mama J, pet?” She asks me this almost every day. She remembered about the hamster, and she's been talking about it ever since.

“No pet yet, BeDe Bell. Someday.” Her face is always asking me questions and I know I can't tell her all the answers. I put on the TV and make sure she has goldfish crackers in a bowl and a sippy cup of juice, and then I hear her Tinkerbell voice.

“Mama Jess, no TV.”

Fucking Mia, not paying the bill. I grab a bunch of BeDe's stuffed animals from her room and put them around her like she's some kind of queen on a throne. “See, here's Baby Blue and Puppy Luppy,” I say, fleckin off the dried-up juice before I hand her the stuffed horse and dog. Their fur is a little gray, but other than that, you can't tell that we got them at the Salvation Army store. She looks at me like a confused rabbit, and she reaches for me, and I want to pick her up and carry her on my back out of the basement into the sunlight.

\*\*\*\*\*

At work, my brain floats above me, and I almost slice the fuck out of my finger with one of the big knives when I'm cutting up onions, and Toni says, “Damn, girl, you better check yourself.” When it's time for my break, I don't bum a joint like I usually do,

and instead I find my feet carrying me back towards Charles Street, towards the basement apartment. All her juice and crackers are gone, her diaper is so full it's almost dripping, and her eyes are so wide. "Hey BeDe babydoll," I croon to her, stroking her head.

In the bedroom, Mia doesn't even move, and I check the orange pill bottle by her bed and it's got two more in there. It's like I'm floating as I carry BeDe out the door with me, wrapped in a blanket, even though the summer air is stifling. I can't stop from picturing tissue paper on fire, and how fast the flames lick it all up.

"Well, hi there cutie," Toni says when she sees BeDe, and I've never heard her say something that nice. BeDe hides in my stomach.

"She's a little shy," I explain. I can feel BeDe's heart flipping like a fish and her lips are so white. She starts to cry when I pull her hands off me and tell her to sit in the corner with her toys.

Toni is looking at me when I go back to chopping up the onions. "She all right? She looks kind of .... different. How old is she? She ain't walking yet?"

"Mind your own business," I growl.

"Just sayin'," she says, shrugging, turning back to the fryer.

It's going ok, but then I have to leave BeDe for a sec to go pick up a tray of potatoes. Before I get back I hear a crash, and then a wail. I come back and there is blood on the floor and a big gash in BeDe's arm, and shards of glass. Toni is holding BeDe and BeDe's giving me a look that's like I killed her.

"She tried to stand up... It ain't that bad, sister, but you better take her," Toni says.

I don't care what that means because BeDe's cries are slicing me open. I hold napkins on her arm, running through the streets of Baltimore, dodging trash cans and bicycles, pouring sweat and tasting fire. When I get to the basement, Mia is awake, and when she sees us, she screams and screams that it's my fault, how could I take her out, look how bad this cut is.

I stand in the living room, trying to ignore her words that rain down like nails, and my head feels like it's inside a balloon.

BeDe's arm has stopped bleeding, but Mia doesn't notice. I hold BeDe tight because this could be the last time ever, and I carry her to the bedroom and put her on the bed. She whimpers and pulls at me. I stand there for a minute, not wanting her to let go, but then I wiggle out of her tiny arms, and kiss my hand and hold it to her bud of a mouth. But it's boiling up inside me then and my fingers are rolling up into themselves, my own powerful bug. I stomp down the hallway to where Mia is screaming, and I can feel all the big weighted force of me with every booming step, crashing down mountains in my path, ready for the lava to pour out.

\*\*\*\*\*

I lug my stuff outside in black trash bags thudding against my leg, my knuckles stinging and bloody and raw. I head to the Centre Street Motel that smells like a fart. They don't ask me why my hand is all wrapped up.

I go for days without seeing BeDe. I feel like someone's carved out my heart with a spoon. I wander by a pet store on my break one day, consider buying a fish, but then I'd have to buy the aquarium and the rocky bottom, and clean the water and all that. My dreads start to fall out, one by one, like loose slugs slipping their way out of my scalp.

In between the haze of joints and chopping onions at the Green Tile Diner, I wonder what will happen if I just leave, man, really leave, somewhere like New Mexico. Mia probably won't call the cops, but it freaks me out enough picturing her going to the hospital and the doctor's eyes with all the questions. I grab an old receipt and the motel's pen to write a list, but I stop at "get driver's license."

My weed guy, Rocco, lives two blocks down, and I'm there more and more after work. "Hey, ma darlin," he says, the dank smoke heavy around our faces and I want to tell him that nobody calls me darlin except my bio momma when she was drunk, and how would he know that, and what's he calling me darlin for, he knows I'm gay. But my head feels like cotton has crept into all the cracks, absorbing all my thoughts like sound waves, and when I open my mouth to say all that nothing comes out. Plus, I don't

want to be a bitch to Rocco. Deep down, beneath all his hustlin, I know he's a good guy, too sweet to be working the streets.

The Centre Street Motel kicks me out after I don't pay for two weeks. Toni lets me crash with her on the pull-out sofa, so small I have to pull my knees into my chest, and I can feel my stomach, this big, round Jello glob jiggling with each breath. And then one night I've had enough and I grab it with both of my hands, pulling at it, my nails piercing it like knives. I look at my thighs big, thick, oozing bubbles, and I scratch and tear at them, wanting to peel away all the layers until there's nothing but bone.

After that, I know I have to see her. It ain't so hot outside now, and the bench across from the basement on Charles Street becomes my fort. It's real close and I wonder what I will do if I see Mia, and then I know that I won't see her, that she's probably still under that haze of blankets, and that scares me for BeDe even more.

When Toni isn't home, I practice walking up to the door and knocking. The best scenarios in my head are where Mia cowers in fear, doesn't say anything, and hands me BeDe in her white dress. In others, she's a boulder that grows larger and larger, crushing through the ceiling and the floors of the building, dwarfing my big ass. In still others, no one's there at all, and the apartment's empty, like no one's ever been there, and it was all in my head.

One day I wake up and I'm a giant slug, can't move, my body oozing slime all over the couch cushions. Toni isn't there, and I pull out my pipe and it's black and hollow, nothing but charcoal inside. I slide off the couch to go see Rocco, and I stink like rotting mushrooms and I really want someone to pour salt on me, put me out of my misery. It's even worse than all those times with their teasing, "Hey big fat bitch," "Thunder thighs," "Earthquake ass," when I wished I would grow smaller and smaller and smaller, a bug that could be squished. I slither down the stairs, each step a shot to my ribs.

My slime is like sticky, clear icing on the street and when I get to Rocco's I don't know how to use my slug mouth. But he doesn't ask questions, just steps to the side.

"Hey ma darlin," he says. I want to cry because all I've been hearing is "Nasty fat cunt" on repeat in my head. I hit his bong over and over again, and I'm swimming in my own slime then, but it isn't bad, it's soft, like being in a big pool, and I'm sleeping, and I can feel BeDe's little bird body next to me, her ribs rising up and down.

Then somehow, she's standing over me. She's grown so tall, and instead of white, she's wearing a sweatshirt. And she's grown stubble. No, no, it's Rocco over top of me, but maybe he loves me enough to understand, and my arms come free from the sides of my body. I reach them up, all their mighty strength and pull him to me—I want my slime to make him stick to me. But his body is rigid; he is pulling at my hands, using my chest like a big board, pushing himself up, like he can't even tell that I'm human, that I am who I am, that I need him to show me it's all right. I look up at him, but he doesn't say anything, just kind of shakes his head, and looks down at the ground.

I know I have to leave, and I can feel my legs kicking me off the couch down the stairs. I need to feel her little heart, her hand in mine.

\*\*\*\*\*

The door on Charles Street is closed, but I know just how to jiggle the lock. When it opens with a pop, the lights are on and so is the TV, and I hear the sing-song voice before I see her. There she is, in the living room, her toys all around her, and when she sees me, she yells, "Mama Jess!" She's so much bigger and yet so much littler and then she stands and starts to stagger towards me. My eyes are wet, she's gotten so big, she's such a big girl. I catch her in my arms, and hold her to me, feel her heart beating up against my ribs.

The door screeches. I know she's there before I see her. "BeDe?" Mia calls.

I hear her steps, and then she rounds the corner. I expect screaming, but instead her silence screams in my ears.

“Jess, put my baby down,” she says quietly, firmly.

I turn and see the shadow bruise around her eye, the missing spot where her tooth was. I shiver, knowing that was me.

“Jess, please,” she says when I don’t do anything. BeDe has gone still in my arms. “I don’t want to call the police.”

And then I run. I bawl up my fist and stick it in Mia’s stomach as I dash by and we’re off. We’re flying up the stars, floating down Charles like feathers, the wind carrying us through the cool fall air, the lights in the windows guide my way. BeDe is quiet. I don’t want to look at her arm, but I do, there’s a shadow of a scratch, and I want to squeeze her so tight, but it still feels like I could crush her. I smile at her, pull out my phone and find a Katy Perry song. I know that Toni will let me take her in. She’ll sleep on the couch with me she’ll come to work with us, she’ll be happy.

“Mama Jess, where we go?” BeDe asks. “To Green Tile Diner?”

“No honey. Somewhere special.” I point to the sign at the pet store. “See BeDe? Pet. Like you wanted.”

A white and brown puppy runs over to the window, yapping its head off, tail wagging, but BeDe is looking somewhere else and I follow her eyes to the cages with the fancy cockteels and bright birdies with candy-colored beaks.

“Mama Jess, they sing?”

“Yes baby.”

“Outside?”

“They’re inside now.” She looks confused. “Do you want one baby? I’ll buy whichever one you want.”

Her eyes are still wide and I squeeze her close, but she kind of wiggles like she’s never done before. I look at her and there’s something in her eyes that I’ve never seen, and I can’t put her down. I might be dreaming, but I hear the screech of a siren.

“Come on BeDe, do you want to go inside? We either go inside or we go home. Well, not home, but another home . . .” my voice trails off.

I hear more sirens wailing, and BeDe's eyes are all wet. We have to run again. She's moving her arms, fluttering like wings, and I cup my hands around them, feel their motion on my palms. I try to move, but my legs are stuck in tar, I'm dragging everything behind us as I lurch forward. They're going to catch up to us and I look up at the stars, all over the sky—not together like the tiles—they're scattered far apart.



Toren Wallace

## **Thanksgiving at My House**

the smell of charred marshmallow  
on the candied yams  
billows from just outside the oven  
to the sitting room

where Uncle Runky  
drips across the chaise lounge  
with one eye open  
slurring his favorite Jeffers line

*I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk.*

he's drunk on the Crème de Menthe  
meemaw uses to make grasshopper pie

on the other side of the house  
Silly Bird calls Scab Apple  
over to look at a picture on Facebook  
of a boy stringing up a pit bull puppy

*I don't wanna see that shit.*

Scabby says unaware that later in the evening  
everyone will laugh at her for announcing  
Blink-182 is her favorite punk band

Ms. Walloday is losing a game of cribbage  
in the den while Sheila Topsy-Turvy  
carries on about how she can't eat  
doughnuts out of pink boxes because

*Sugar, it just ain't right.*

when the credits cascade  
on another mediocre holiday movie  
the little ones sit motionless on the Chobi rug

Auntie Saggy Socks  
who proudly remains a Satanist  
smiles and slides across the living  
room floor to remind me

*I might not be much, but I'm all I think about.*

thank God mom stopped smoking crack  
in the 90s and married Samuel  
an amateur psychic and professional bartender

he once stabbed a man at O'Connell's  
then whispered in his ear

*Hey, I don't go down to the docks at night and slap dicks out of  
your mouth, don't come in here and tell me how to do my job.*

Dani Dymond

## **Ode to Brother-Sisterhood**

*After Sharon Olds*

We remind me of wolves, in how members of the pack maintain a certain distance but will rip out the throat of any creature that threatens their kin. Quite Irish of us, like the time you busted the lip of that sloppy drunk at Roscoe's Pub when he harassed me for a kiss, freckled knuckles bloodied around a pilsner minutes later. But secretly, I feel your candy-stained baby teeth buried beneath my skin, tiny fossils of you forced into dermis, the pads of my feet, settling there like pieces of concrete—one decaying molar for every slight that I've muttered under my breath, another fragment of dentin to chew my heel when I find it tough to love you like the brother that you are: clawed, flawed, wont to overdo it at the bars and call me for a ride (at least you call, I tell myself). Now, I study you across a dinner table whose flaked belly still boasts our carved initials from the second and fourth grades, and my heart wishes desperately for difference. How would you react if I confessed to not knowing you very well: nod your brown curls in solemn agreement, aware of the aging dissonance; or would your eyes, bluer than mine, widen with shock at the thought of our DNA failing to fasten a rope bridge strong enough for us both? Guilt gags me as the words begin to bubble to the surface, a howl for truth caught in my chest where we like to live and pretend to still be children. I'll go on hibernating there instead of seeing the grown man that you are tonight, one who catches crumbs in his beard, pours a fifth beer, and goes on blindly loving me—like he always has.

Jennifer Ruth Jackson

## **The Bird at My Father's Funeral**

You won't see  
The blackbird with the broken wing  
Driving my father's hearse  
Unbandaged feathers molting from  
The steering wheel  
Dripping, sans ceremony, on the scythe  
In the shotgun seat

I will ask  
Why it is him directing death  
His beak will click and snap around  
A cigarette worm suspiciously smelling  
Of smoke-veiled soil  
Like the gravediggers with ringside seats

He won't say  
A syllable or caw as he stops  
For the pallbearers to retrieve their burden  
Marbles of midnight watch their progress

I will pilfer  
His preened wing rain  
And cast it onto the casket  
Instead of dirt  
Only shedding sorrow when  
His taillights disappear

Jennifer Ruth Jackson

## **Elegy for My Sanity**

I wonder where you go when you aren't with me,  
clicking and plinking as rain from a slot machine.

Do you even know, or do you slip between  
couch-cushion sewer grates and into darkness?

Would you tell me, if you knew?  
An elephant strolls away with my skin

and you play games.

Did you send it? The message spelled out in loose

buttons that rattle like my teeth?

I watch them roll out of reach

(buttons or teeth, I'm not sure which).

My fingered hands form a cage to catch you.

I just want to talk to you about the striped, singing  
owl in my shower.

SaraEve Fermin

## **Reassigning my Pain**

There is a vampire that lives in my left ankle.  
Takes small, steady sips from the inside, I know  
not to tattoo anything all the way around it,  
ink does not take to scars well.

At night, a polar bear sits on my left hand until  
it is a warm and fuzzy mitt, twice its normal size.  
I shake and shake and shake my arm, but polar bears  
are heavy and I don't have all night to redistribute blood.

Sometimes the tiny machine men who punch the clock on  
my heart decide to quit early and put bourbon instead of coffee in  
their lunch tin thermos. They keep themselves laughing by pulling  
various strings, releasing floods of adrenaline. Or misery.

In group meditation we are instructed to scan our bodies and set  
aside  
what is not necessary, to look beyond the constantly changing  
rhythms.  
Just then, gatekeeper reels in the horses, puts all my serotonin back  
to bed,  
and I try my hardest to ignore the tears running down my face.

Someone tells little girl me 'if he pinches you, he must like you.'  
Soon, a  
man bites my shoulder, hard. The next day a half moon rises where  
the violence was. I call myself celestial. Do anything I can to turn  
the pain  
into a memory that does not make me want to swallow the tides.

## Salt & Vinegar Award for Translation

Introducing the winner of the first ever Salt & Vinegar Award (for translation): Allison M. Charette!

Here is what our guest Judge, Rajiv Mohabir, had to say of her work:

In this translation, Raharimanana, a Malagasy writer, implicates a story structure that differs greatly from American notions of story. Bearing, however, the mark of a colonial heritage, what is revealed is a kind of story telling that trades in the affective, where the archive that the writer mines is one of the personal and historical—whether through folktale or the historical atrocities of French colonization. Raharimanana claims that as a postcolonial subject he is “the child sunbaked in regret and begging oblivion’s mercy,” a statement that calls for a reckoning of history.

This translation renders with verve a kind of flow reminiscent of translations of *Discourse Sur Colonialisme* of Aimé Césaire, and feels important in a similar, surreal fashion. This translation reads as a frenzied poem where every happening and instant pulses with immediacy and the unexpected. Filled with missives to the reader, this translation urges to “Keep dancing, dig a wound into the belly of this earth.”

-Rajiv Mohabir, translator of *I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara*, author of *The Cowherd’s Son*

**Nour, 1947: First Night**  
**November 5, 1947**

Jean-Luc Raharimanana  
translation by Allison M. Charette

*Drafting the first lines*  
*For the story,*  
*For the memory . . .*

*Ambahy* – Night ripping and rending itself at clarity’s dawn, on eyelids closing in dream. Gently pours me into the cold shadows that open bare onto the rocks. The sun unclothes the world and, out of modesty, the wind blows through the sand, blinding eyes. I continue walking, race ever faster over my wandering paths. So slow are the shadows to take us . . . I’m nothing more than a dream, a trace of time as it flits through dreaming. Drift through shadows that stretch, that elongate. I am stumbling, my breath over gravel blocking my lungs—cough! cough!— and my steps over the beach, still heavy with darkness.

Blood, my blood on the black sand.

Say:

“This blood that splatters on the rocks is painting the face of the wounded.”

Say again:

“We gathered shadows on the rock, we clothed ourselves in them, and the night stayed outside.”

A ponderous tree splits the dawn, scattering a thousand shadows upon my soul, a thousand leaves upon my skin. *Ambahy*, this island of all regret. On my lips, I carried the salt of its beaches and I saw with my stunned eyes the mother that our stories spoke of, born of light to give herself to the ocean. She opened her womb and the shadows within her poured forth.

Sing, as in a vigil from legend:

“The shadow swelled the mother’s womb and created us wretched and black.”



Sing, again:

“In the black, we will return. In the black, we will revert. In the womb black. In the tomb black.”

The mother has dissolved like a wave on the dunes and I wonder again whether I hadn't been dreaming. Silence. The ragged wind heaves silences. This island of all regret. Children kill themselves here while I think only of saving my sorry skin. Unfamiliar animal cries. Invisible insect screeches. Leaves rustling in steady swishing waves. I'm drunk on uncertainty, sunk in shadows. It was a night much like this one that I was lost. A night on the other side. A night on the Great Island. A night that should have been our salvation. June, 1947. Spears against guns. Magic against bullets. And colonial convoys. And our frantic flights for the forests . . .

I wait for the song to rise in my soul. I wait for death's song of calling and love to cut through me, for its voice to slip out from beyond the horizon and pour into the very depths of my being. I want to swallow it inside me, to feel it inside me, welling up in my throat, tingling my tongue, stroking my saliva, beguiling my mouth. And I want to wrench it, rend it with my teeth, grind it to a pulp, spit it out onto the sand to die.

My heart beats. It has, for a long time, marked the rhythm of my life. Like the tom-tom echoing across the savannas, betraying the presence of a life. From far away death's song answers. I wait for it. It will come, without fail. The heartbeat is a call to death. Silence. I give the wind back its breath then take it again. I wait for the wind, weary, to convey the breath of death. Again I seize the silence, drape myself in it, like an exquisite shroud. Dawn seeps in slowly, saturating us in shadows and dull colors.

Malaria devours my body. Is it perhaps due to the animal skins, dragged out of the mud, which are lashed tight across my chest? Due to the curse of the sacred texts they contain? Or simply the spirit of this godless, soulless island? My toxic black thoughts?

*A time when the wind has passed,  
When sleep has merely come close . . .*

Nour . . .

Will I tell you the story one day of these children who  
threw themselves off the cliff to reach the horizon?

Will I tell you of their bodies dashed on the reefs, torn and  
bloodied on the slicing waves?

Will I tell you of their eyes, so dazzling that they burned  
their souls?

I saw these senseless children, my love, tracing the edge of  
the abyss with their falls. They disappeared into the water and  
nothing more held their memory.

Today, my love, on this shore, overcome by waters,  
devastated by storm, I dream of what had been lost. Hope. All the  
hope of the Earth.

I cry.

This child, I came across him one evening while he was  
crushing shells of all colors. He was snuffing the resulting powder  
and soon his eyes were lost beyond reason. He stood, walked,  
staggered toward the cliff.

Sing. Sing.

*Dying in the end from snuffing too much of the rocks' scent.  
Dying in the end from dashing reason too hard against reefs and  
cliffs.*

*Night weeping in the fleeting hour. Deranged screaming of  
a being banished.*

*I come, O mother, to run my soul aground on sands that  
are not sealed, on muds that are not restored.*

*Dying in the end from wanting too badly to peel back the  
horizon to find the gods. Dying in the end from grinding reason too  
hard into illusion.*

*I come while the flames bite into your skin.*

*Water covers the whole horizon. Who would pity the butterfly, flattened by drops of rain?*

*I come, O mother, ripe as twilight, heavy with the day's suffering, I am the child sunbaked in regret and begging oblivion's mercy.*

I sang. Sang.

From the clifftop, the child flung himself toward the horizon. He flies.

I read the story to you, my love, that he left me. It was written on the rocks, to be read in the indelible ink of shattered reefs, dust-filled, heralding souls stripped bare, crumbling shrouds, laden with the ash of loves burned away.

This is his story.

*I will leave, my mother, I will leave. Shred my dreams and plant my steps within. I will hold my sights fast to there and never again tear myself away.*

*I will see her, my mother, I will see her again, sitting nude upon her rock. "Dziny," she'll sing. "Dziny." She'll laugh and her hair will still be flowing down along her hips. I will sit frozen, studying her, still woman, studying her, already water. She will flow and soon be nothing more than the clear water that trickles quietly, transparent, beyond compare, streaming clear from the rock, brisk, slipping toward finer rare sands. I will have seen flesh become wave, blood become salt. I will not hear the sea roar, I will not hear the waves pushing back against the horizon, the wind telling me of elsewhere. I will remain there, standing, waiting long hours, in hopes that the marvel will recur, that the water will surge forth and return her to me, return her more beautiful still. I will remain there in hopes that the water will again become woman and that she will again sing to me, "Dziny, Dziny." I will whisper*

*to that wellspring for it to answer my prayers. Without end.  
Without tire.*

*I will leave, my mother, will not sleep, girt in my dreams,  
cloaked in my fury. Will think again of the children, all those  
children . . .*

*“You must, Dziny, you must offer me your mother’s heart  
for mine to be transported. You must . . . ”*

*. . . like those nights when I took up my rock and struck  
those children’s chests. Like those nights when I removed their  
hearts and spilled their blood into the unquenchable shadows.*

*I’ll see her on her rock again, her hair flowing down and  
disappearing into the wellspring:*

*“Why do you lie to me, Dziny? Why?”*

*“I brought you my mother’s heart, my mother’s heart . . . ”*

*“Why lie to me, Dziny? These children’s hearts smell so  
foul.”*

*She will finally know, my mother, that I’d picked up an iron  
scrap to open her throat with one slice. She will know the heavy  
axe that split your breast, the clay pot where I gathered your heart.  
She will know, my mother, the sun that baked the arid soil in the  
village, the spreading shadows, washing me in dark and disquiet.*

*I must, my mother, I must. Tears streamed onto your face. I  
pushed open the hut’s fragile door. I undressed you. I stretched out  
over you, stroked your face. Don’t cry anymore, my mother, don’t  
cry. The blade had sliced into your throat. A thin red trickle  
dragged down your soul as it flew to the heavens. Axe, clay pot: I  
gather your heart.*

*I will leave, my mother, I will travel further than the  
horizon to offer her your heart . . .*

*The wellspring had emptied completely into the ocean. She  
cries to me, she cries further away: “Dziny, Dziny . . . ”*

That is the child’s story. I received it on this island of  
Ambahy that all have abandoned for the Great Island, in this  
village where no souls survive, where the huts are made of deaf  
rock, where the earth shrinks into eternal shadows. This story,

received near a spring where children, turned up from who knows where, from the Great Island, from the very heart of the oceans, crush rocks of all colors, rocks of the naiads, women of the water. They snuff the resulting powder, and soon his eyes were lost beyond reason. “Elsewhere,” they say, “elsewhere.” Their bodies obey nothing but that obsession . . .

I sang. Sang. This shore will one day pitch me over the horizon.

Hear my steps crunch, how I left the Great Island for this tiny one that they say has no gods . . .

### **The Great Island—June 1947**

Nour . . .

I am the Dziny-child flinging his lost body toward the horizon. I must leave, cannot remain in this land where gunfire in the mountains answers waves crashing on the cliffs. I must leave, pierce the horizon and sink into the ancestors’ pirogues. And lose myself, naked, within their breath. And let myself drop, my unmoving torso, into their creating hands . . .

Nour . . .

What do they say in the villages?

Men in the distance swallow their spit down throats burning with effort. They trudge through mud, stamp the earth to extract its fertility. The wind sneers. Souls rot in it, eternally sad for gods. The wind sneers. Colonial bullets split the rhythmic rustling of the tall grass, without cease. Men swallow their spit, they choke back shame and wounds a thousand layers below their thirst. They trudge through mud and pretend not to have heard anything . . .

Nour, the wind sneers and strips you of breath. I do not cry. I stroke your hair. You do not move. What do they say in the villages? They sit around the fire, in constant debate, roasting tubers and maize. They say that, further down, a strange being who's lost his love prowls the seashore. It's forest creature, a being of deep soils. Tracing his sadness into every furrow. Spilling his love's black blood on the rocks of the path. The creature then curses the sky. He clutches his love. His tears stream all down the dead woman's face but she remains immobile, prostrate, frozen. He dances. He dances all night, allowing the waves to lap his lover's body. When day comes, the only living things left on the beach are crabs venturing out of their holes to bask in the sun. In the villages, they say that pregnant women, young mothers, shouldn't bathe in the cool water of dawn or twilight, they'll lose their child that way.

Whispers.

Say:

"I implore this earth that holds the breath of my love."

Dance! Brush and caress the earth's skin.

Revive the force that moves things and beings within it.

In the villages, they say that the ground thrums under our dancing feet and that the earth answers our raving trances. Endless spasms of delight, over and over, its terrain a landslide, waves of undulating hills, the abrupt hard edge of a valley. Dance! Sing! And the waves and sand will magnify their touch. Waves and sand will lick each other to the point of roaring and groaning with pleasure. The tide will mount in an inexorable surge, swelling in the frenzy of sex. Keep dancing, dig a wound into the belly of this earth.

I collapse and cry silently. In the villages, they say that the colonial army has come back, that they've burned, shot, hunted rebels and shamans. I remember . . . A woman . . . A spear shaft planted into her still-burning belly. Next to her, a dog licked the milk from her breasts that had run out and congealed on her chest. Her child lay further off, head smashed. "The colonial soldiers will perish the same!" we cried. We retreated, fire behind us.

Remember, the very next day of the rebellion, those young men who were arrested, party members or just fit to serve, the old men who seemed influential and would dream of nothing more than to contest the benefits of civilization . . . Remember my love lying on the rails, heavy with bullets that had riddled her body, and my steps following in everyone else's and carrying my soul through unending defeat. Remember that body—so beloved—that I dragged away and said I threw into the ravine. I walked between the foot soldiers, head hanging low, humiliated. My love's hair swept the ground, red with clay and blood. I drew back toward the forest . . .

What do they say in the villages? They say that a forest creature is prowling, a spirit that plucks young children's souls from around a bend in the road, they talk and are not brave enough to recognize him as one of their own, one of the men wounded by this nameless war. In this way will the land remain in colonial hands. In this way will we lose our souls and our pride . . .

In the villages, they say . . . but I merely await the night to scream outside their huts. I insult the men. I curse them. And when some woman crosses my path, washing herself or taking a late-night crap outside the village, not one of them ventures a glance toward the screams of terror.

“Look at me, woman! See the creature from the very bowels of the earth and tell your family! Tell them that, on a day of revolution, you were all hiding away in your huts and you did not rise up as so many others did. Tell them that this creature you see has lost friends, family, and love to the colonial bullets. Go on and tell them that, among those you gave up to the peacekeepers, some are still alive. They wander the forests, spears in hand, idols around their necks. They have the power of the spirits and the strength of the land. Fate is on their side and soon many nations of this world will come to their aid. Do you know of the Americans, do you know of the British? You will not be alive for very much longer. . .”

The woman, naked, still dirty, stumbles back to her own kind. She knows that furtive and fleeting looks await her, with unclaimed gobs of spit and silent maledictions.

Nour . . .

Dragging your body along the paths. Wailing your name through the buzzing of the flies devouring your skin . . . Nights spent dancing in my delirium, nights spent crawling out from this split rock, hatching you under dazzling stars, between rock fragments and puffs of dust. Nights spent hunting moist lichen on granite walls, pasting my dry lips onto the humid moss. Swaying, breaking myself against faraway reefs of the rolling horizon . . .

Nour . . .

Say:

“In us flows all darkness of the world and opens us to the Void.” What then is this destiny, which delivers us defenseless into the hands of our enemies?

We were Those-of-the-Savanna or Those-of-the-Peak, we were Those-of-the-Shore, Those-of-the-Forest or Those-of-the-Thornbrush . . . We were chosen to inhabit this land. Some emigrated to the south, climbed west, others turned east then reached the north. Those-of-the-Peak cut to the center and inhabited the hills. When we came upon each other again after our migrations, we no longer recognized one another. These no longer believed in those, those no longer tolerated these. We tore each other to pieces, we fought. The ones who’d gone south wanted all the land. The ones who’d cut to the center saw no frontiers and limits besides the seas. Those who’d gone east claimed to own all the power and writings of the ancestors. We believed that this island, in its vastness, was the whole Earth. That out there, beyond the horizon, were only the dead. We’d forgotten, or pretended not to know, that we’d come from elsewhere, from an elsewhere that had chased or pushed us out to sea on our puny pirogues. Within



inventions of celestial origins, creations of new myths, we erased our past, shrouded our true history. Now, Those-of-the-Shore profess that they are descendants of the Prophet, that, begrudged and persecuted, they'd preferred to leave the Holy Land and washed up on these shores. Those-of-the-Peak insist that the daughter of God came down to this earth to marry their ancestor, the first man. What say Those-of-the-Savanna, what say Those-of-the-Rock, what say Those-of-the-Isle, Those-of-the-River, Those-of-the-Sand . . . ? Forget. Naught but forget. We have shut our eyes so tightly to our origins that the thread of time has snapped and made us blind. Who now can boast of knowing our true origins? We have lost our past and our time is thus stripped. Our present hobbles along, our future withers away.

Will we one day understand that we form just one nation? Those-of-the-Savanna pillaged the central lands and taken slaves and livestock. Those-of-the-Peak extended their power so far that they imposed taxes and forced labor.

Then other men came. From very far away. From beyond the horizon. They told us of other lands. They told us of other gods—a single other God. Their very language was different. Their clothes. Their customs. And for all that, did we forget our rivalries? For all that, did we gain some awareness through that prism of the other of our deep-rooted unity—unified in our language, unified in our gods? For all that, did we renounce our narrow vision of the world—thinking of the whole Earth as merely the surface of our island? We sold them our brothers and friends as slaves, cleared hills and villages of their inhabitants, reduced our kin to chattel, forged chains, sent women and children down rivers and across forests. For muskets, alcohol, silk, furs, we purged our forests to bring them ebony and rosewood. Those-of-the-Savanna believed they would help them expand their kingdom and diminish Those-of-the-Peak's power, while Those-of-the-Peak obtained their arts of war. We did not think for an instant that we should be finding or knowing ourselves again. We did not know that they had proclaimed this ground as their own the moment they'd set up their

headstone and cross! This ground that our ancestors had sanctified and conquered! We didn't know or want to believe that they came to us not as a man to a man but as a master to his slave. And thus did we act against one another. We didn't know that they were denying us our very humanity. But would we truly have been prepared for that—we who had until then believed ourselves to be the only men on Earth?

Today, this land burns. The villages are empty, plots turned to ash, churches destroyed. The colonists have reached the capital, so few of them, considering their first victory, considering the strength of their weapons and the fear they have incited. Some say they are going to ground there in stone houses and many of them have gone back to their home country, never to return. But I know this is merely passing euphoria. The colonial officers will return and rain more bullets still. And the people here who shake their spears, praise the strength of their idols, are gravely mistaken. What are they in the face of these soldiers, what are they in the face of the infantry that has braved German cannons? Soon, they will be as those children who snuff the powder of the rocks and throw themselves off of the cliff. Soon will they hear the song of waves against their soul. “Dziny, Dziny . . .” they'll hear. They'll go to span the horizon.

Nour . . .

Our only force to this point had been fire, axes and spears, a few old rifles inherited from slavers, muskets, even firelocks! We rushed into villages, sowing terror and fire. “Friends?” we roared. “Friends,” they answered us. Farmers came out from their huts, trembling, supporters out of fear. We moved across the countryside. Our ranks swelled. Rumors preceded us. *“We will save you from the colonial army. We will give you back your land and your freedom . . .”*

But planes have been crossing the skies for several days, sowing leaflets and handouts everywhere. This rebellion will be nothing more than a chance for Those-of-the-Peak to reclaim their power and enslave still more people. The capital, the City-of-Thousands, will not rise up, Those-of-the-Savanna will be among the soldiers marching toward that place. The rebels are alone. They'll have to surrender. France will welcome them again into its paternal, protecting arms.

Prayers, my thoughts. They reel in dizziness. Founder and explode. Words of solitude pouring down my throat, rotting in my stomach. Are we truly alone? Have the other regions fallen? Does the world know what is happening in this country? Will they come to our aid? What will the British do, the Americans . . . ?

Nour . . .

I stretched out my hands and the fog cleared up high. Shadows from the hills slip through my fingers and in this world, I am nothing more than wax. In this world, I said, in the blue of these damp lands, in the green humidity of these silent leaves, I spread out my hands and the flies came to roost there. You lay. Already destroyed. I seem to feel nothing but cold and cruel clarity. You decompose like all dead flesh decomposes. You burst like a rotting carcass as the winds tear into you. I do not bury you. I do not lay you in earth. This land burns. It is stained and engorged by all this blood. I can't and don't want to offer you to it. I strip myself of tears, peel away my consciousness. I turn over my hands and liberate the flies who flit greedily to your lips. I kiss you. The green flies burst between our joined mouths. They burst and their ground flesh lubricates our crazed kisses, our sordid embrace. But I shake, push myself back to the darkness as the flies scatter to the sparkling cliffs. Shadow running over black pebbles, I sink down, sand and dust, fear and hope.

"Dziny," I hear through bullets raining down and mixing with the crashing waves. "Dziny . . ."

This shore will one day pitch me over the horizon.

Claude Michel Cluny  
from *Inconnu passager*  
Translation by Frederick Lowe

## **Leptis Magna**

I.

The scent of pines  
like a dress  
lifted off in one sweep  
in the light;  
or the blue gasoline  
they don't burn  
anymore.

II.

Flat smell  
of the silence  
of crushed stone  
shattered  
like a cry on the ground.

Words don't give  
us any shade.

III.

The storm has washed the gods  
with its mournful waters.  
An insect swoons  
with the smell of your sweat  
as you walk by.

IV.

Down there – close by,

where the air trembles,  
the violet eyes of the sea  
replace by the thousands the missing eyes  
of an immense dead city.

V.  
and the desert wind  
stirs a puff of dust  
that smiles  
in the teeth of the silence.

Jacques Viau Renaud  
Translation by Ariel Francisco

### **Water of the Mountains**

Water of the mountains charged with acid  
opening throats through the rocks,  
sculpting the orbit of my voices  
unleashing blooming roots and corpses.  
Outcroppings of elusive minerals  
enamel-less mirrors,  
naked,  
fixing the winds embrace,  
a silence parted by my lips.

I scaled those mountains,  
there I questioned my furrowed beaten being,  
there I buried my sweat  
its drops seeded in the granite walls  
my name  
making words from rocks.  
The lost plants of sage  
my multitudinous cry  
like seeds scattered by night  
searching for the udder or matrix of the rock,  
its inhabitants,  
its hissing,  
the traces of its passage in the cracks of the sky  
or in the breaks of the ever-repeating echo.  
From the throats and torrents  
descend bouquets of flowers whistling their dead,  
and from me the man who lives here  
throbbing.

Marc Stallion

## **Murder**

### **Sunshine**

outside our wooden outhouse  
morning touches the oak  
oak made for mourning  
housing little ripe fruit  
hanging like Scarlet Sentinel Columnar, busy roots  
planted deep,  
every morning  
a new branch will sprout  
carrying ornaments decorated like warnings, lifeless purple we all  
see the silence  
we can taste the gravity  
like we taste the air after the fifth day  
afraid to pick the fruit from the trees  
to ask why  
afraid to become fruit  
outside our wooden outhouse  
prayers seem unanswered  
we don't really belong  
dust for the trees to grow  
maybe an anchor for the sun  
we pray for a meaning more than hanging  
we pray for a Jesus  
for life outside the outhouse  
for a house with an outhouse  
we pray for the mourning oak  
holding purple boys  
for the moon to come  
for silence in the outhouse  
for an answer

Marc Stallion

**We**

**real black**

*After Gwendolyn Brooks*

The young hustlers.  
Five at the seven eleven.

We real black. We  
Rock hats. We

Lurk late. We  
Stack cake. We

Rap sin. We  
Sip gin. We

Love crew. We  
Die blue.



## My Bath tub was Magical

Nyeree Boyadjian

“Dad doesn’t make me sit in the booster seat anymore”

Mom’s demon eyes came out. The tinier, evil twin versions of her eyes when she was happy.

“Well dad seems to forget that this car could flip in two seconds and you’d be dead.” Her face was already red, and she was shaking real bad. I shoulda kept quiet and just got in the seat right away.

I looked out the window to see if anyone was still waiting at school, but climbed up in the seat and put on my seatbelt anyway. If someone saw me right now I would get made fun of all week. In ten months I’d be double digits, that’s like three years older than booster seat age. I grabbed the water bottle and clackers out of the net.

A police car was waiting next to us at the red light, so mom kept prepping me on what to say if they pulled us over. Dad taught me two things about this- that the cops wouldn’t pull over a mom and kid if they weren’t doing nothing illegal, and that mom did nothing illegal when she was driving. But when cops were next to us, mom said the entire side of her body that was facing them started to hurt- so I repeated my lines about how I didn’t have to talk till a lawyer was here.

I was starting to get the hang of clacking, I was waiting to get into a good rhythm till I brought them anywhere. Except, Chloe’s or Moe’s house. We practiced together, we’d countdown from three and then start, hoping our balls would hit the other at the same second, to keep at one loud beat, instead of three spread out tiny ones. After we’d look at the bruises on our hands, and I’d think of things to tell my mom they were from so she wouldn’t take away the clackers. Dad said getting hurt was part of childhood- but she always answered with accidents only happened once. Mom pulled into the driveway, I took off my belt and waited

till she clicked the button for the door to open itself. I took her hand and walked to our door.

“Hurry I need to pee” I said, squirming. We just added another lock on our door, it was the fourth one and now it took even longer to get in and out of the house. I ran into the bathroom, with the clackers still in my hand. I peed a little on my underwear, so I took them off and washed them in the bathtub and then dropped them on the bathroom floor with the rest of the dirty clothes. I turned on the faucet for a second to make it sound like I was washing my hands, and then walked out.

I took my workbook out at the dining room table. Nana was behind me, making a big salad. I had sixteen long division problems for homework, and still had no idea how to do long division.

“Nana, do you know how to do this?” She walked over, and took the book with her raisin hands, bringing it real close to her glasses.

“Oh Lammy, I haven’t done a division problem in over fifty years. Ask mommy, your mommy is great at math.” I got up to pretend like I would, but went in to my room and used a calculator. I was just going to say I did the work on a separate paper, and left it at home. Mom was having a really bad day today. She spent all morning screaming about the couple that moved in next door. The man, she said was no good, and that he came here to hurt us. Knowing dad lets me ride without a booster seat must’ve pushed her over the edge. I could hear her crying through the walls. Cause of the calculator, I breezed through the problems quickly, and went to eat my salad.

“Did you give her some?” I asked grandma. Her face looked even more wrinkly. I felt like she needed a nap. She gave me the pink, plastic bowl and said

“why don’t you go give it to her?”

For some reason, mom only ate food if I made it- or pretended I made it. Every time grandma or dad got her something to eat, she’d dig through every part with a spoon, like she thought they put their

boogers in it. Then she'd always give it back, without even taking a bite. I held the bowl, and walked to moms room.

I half tripped on a cardboard box filled with clothes, but caught myself- not spilling even a piece of lettuce. Mom put heavy stuff curtains on the windows, so the room was pitch black even now at three pm. She was laying completely still in bed, crying with a lot of different noises; loud and soft, high and low. She was mumbling to herself, but I couldn't understand any of it. I stood next to her bed, my eyes still adjusting to the darkness

"Mommy what's wrong?" I said. The room was stuffy and smelled like sweat.

"I had a dream, they put me on a chair. All these doctors had me tied to a chair, asking me all kinds of questions. They said I was being evaluated because research confirmed that I was the craziest person in the world."

"Mom, you're not crazy! You're smart and nice and pretty"

I knew by now, nothing I said would change her face. She opened her arms, I put the salad down and climbed in them. She kept mumbling and crying, until her voice got real weak but clear,

"Lammy" she said

"I really feel like killing myself right now."

Tears built up in my eyes, and I had a lump in my throat so big- it hurt. But I swallowed hard, and didn't let a single tear fall. Getting sad cause mommy was sad just made everything worse, but this was the most I ever wanted to cry in my whole life. Mommy talked a whole lot about dying, I knew cause of her how many things could kill you, things that seem so sweet like candy and Ferris Wheels. But I never heard anything about anyone killing their own self. I wished that she stopped wanting it, that she'd want to do anything else. I didn't know if I should say that. Saying the wrong thing also made everything worse.

I squeezed her body hard and said

"I'll take it from you" like me and dad would when she was sad

It didn't seem like enough to say. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to ask if it was possible to kill yourself. To make

yourself dead. And why did she teach me so much about how not to die if I could just get old and want to kill myself. Why wasn't she teaching me more about how to kill myself when I really felt like it. I wanted to tell her that I would miss her a lot if she was dead, but I didn't know if that was mean of me. To stop her from dying if she really wanted too, just cause I missed her.

After a long time of hugging and quiet, mommy told me to go take a shower. I got the towel I kept in my room. Before I went in, I walked back to the kitchen.

"can you kill yourself?" Grandma dropped the wooden spoon she was holding, and turned her back so fast

"what did you just say?" Her eyes were wide, like mom's when she thought someone was trying to hurt us.

"Mommy said she felt like killing herself. Is she gonna die?"

"Lammy lock the medicine cabinet now, hide the keys, then call your dad to come home." She ran into mom's room, forgetting to turn off the stove. If I left the stove on, I'd be dead meat. I turned it off and took the keychain hanging by the front door, and found the skinny key that locked the bathroom medicine drawer. I hid the keys in between my two mattresses that were stacked on top of each other. I usually trusted my memory on dad's number but this time I looked at the index card taped on top of the phone, to make sure I was getting each one right.

"Hello" he said. I giggled at his work voice

"Grandma said to come home" I tried to sound like everything was normal

"what happened?" he raised his voice, and I heard something move.

"Mommy's really sad, she said something weird" I didn't want to repeat it after grandma's eyes.

"Alright baby. I'm coming now. I love you so much"

"I love you too" I said, to the dial tone.

Mom's door was left a crack open, I peeked in but everything was dark except for the hallway light that shined on the side of grandma's face. She was screaming at mom to open her eyes,

repeating herself over and over again. Until she finally tilted her head back, held her palm to her chest, and let out a deep breath. She disappeared for a second to a part of the room I couldn't see. The little light that came in from the hall now was focused on mom, who was still laying down, mumbling with her eyes open. The thought of her seeing me there made me run back to my room. I played with the clackers, but it was like the first time I ever picked them up, all over again. I sucked.

I heard the front door alarm, and knew that dad was home. I shut my door quickly and put my ear on the wall that was closest to their bedroom. I jumped up when I heard my dad cry. He would never break one of our mom rules, and not getting upset about her was the first one. Nana was sitting on the couch, rocking herself like a baby back and forth. It was weird to see her eyes puffy, since there were already so many lines on it.

“Is mom okay?”

Grandma stopped rocking,

“She’s okay Lammy, she’s just upset”

“why is dad crying?”

“He’s upset too”

“dad never gets upset”

“everyone gets upset”

“can I make them feel better?”

“You’re actually going to sleep at Chloe’s baby”

“I can’t! They’re both crying!”

“Lammy, I’m going to tell you a secret” nana cupped her hands together, I stuck my ear in

“You can’t say a word”

I nodded

“Chloe’s been having terrible, terrible, nightmares and begged her mom to let you sleep over cause she’s scared. You should go, mommy and daddy have each other, Chloe really needs you.” I still didn’t wanna but I couldn’t help but smile, her mom probably only said she could have one friend over since it was a school night and she chose me over Moe!

Grandma wouldn't let me go in the room to say goodnight, because adult things were being talked about, which was stupid because why couldn't they just talk to me and then talk about their adult things. I wrote a note with a cerulean blue crayon and slid it under the door.

*Dear mom and dad*

*I hope you feel better. You are the best parents in the whole wide universe. I love you. Love Lammy.*

Chloe only lived a few blocks away. Right past 214, the playground with the bridge that would move with you when you ran on it. I thought about mom and dad the whole car ride.

"I forgot my clackers" I said, right when I saw Chloe

"shit" Chloe said, then looked towards the door to make sure her mom didn't hear. She had her blonde hair put back in tight French braids. Her mom tried sometimes, to teach me how to do it but I just couldn't get the hang.

"Wanna play homeless?" She asked

"sure."

Playing homeless was our second favorite game right now, after clackers. It was easy. We'd walk around and try our best to survive homeless. We'd take crispy orange leaves and weird berries off bushes and pretend to eat them. We'd pick peoples flowers and put them in our hair, calling it "earth fashion". We acted like we were cold even though it was September and we had sweaters on, and talked to each other about going out to look for jobs. We stayed out till it was dark, and I almost felt guilty thinking of what would happen to mom if she found out I was out so late with just Chloe. Mom wouldn't even let me go in our backyard without an adult. She would say someone could take me in two seconds and turn me into a sex slave for life. This used to make me cry and not want to get out of my room but dad pinky promised that stuff like that didn't happen in Flushing and that bad things only happened in the dark or when you walked around

alone. On the walk home I realized both Chloe's parents thought she could walk around the block as long as she was back before dark. They both thought she was allowed at a friend's house if they met the parents at least once. They thought so much more alike than my parents. Mom and dad were always telling me two things that were complete opposites.

That night, when I tried to go to sleep it felt like my sleeping bag was getting smaller and I was stuck. I heard Chloe's snoring, like a baby pig. She didn't seem like she was having a nightmare, I must've really done the trick.

I had nothing to do but stare at the black behind my eyelids and hear mom's voice over and over again saying the same thing. Taking a break from the crying to say in a far away voice "I really feel like killing myself right now." I counted the words with my fingers, eight. I tried to think of other things moms said that were eight words, like "I love you to the moon and back". I still didn't know if it was possible to kill yourself. I thought it was weird that mom wanted to be dead because when you die you go to heaven, and I always thought it was the scariest thing in the world to go to heaven. I couldn't stand the idea of being somewhere forever. I'd try to think about what it would be like, to be in the same place forever and my brain would start to sink like quicksand or a whirlpool in the ocean. Like I was being swallowed. Sometimes it'd even give me a headache. Maybe mom was so sick of worrying about when she was gonna die. All I had to do was get her to stop worrying about it somehow. I could probably do it, it would just take a lot of work. I wanted to ask Chloe and Moe if their moms ever said anything like that, but for some reason mom just acted different. Plus, I wasn't supposed to talk to anyone about the things mom said anymore, even to my two best friends forever. Dad made that very clear after I told off Steffi Banschler for saying her dad helps people cause he's a doctor. I already knew mom was telling the truth when she told me how evil those needle poking, nosy scums were. For some reason we'd see a lot of them and every single one talked to mom and I, real slow and childish, the way people talk to babies and dogs. But to dad they used a grown

up voice, and talked with real different smart language. I always wanted to tell the doctors that mom actually knew more big words than dad, probably more than they did. Dad swore they helped her though, and said she had to listen to them. It was another thing they thought different about, and fought about lots. When all the different doctors stopped playing like a movie in my head, it was empty again and the eight words started to repeat in mom's breaking voice. I tried to get it to stop by counting to eight, and then starting back again at zero. My eyes were getting heavy, and before I could stop it, the tears were rolling down my face. I took the pillow out from behind my head and wrapped my arms around it.

In school the next morning, Mrs. Copel said I would have to bring in the work I showed for my long division before I got any credit. I nodded and said I would bring it in tomorrow. It was Thursday, grandma wouldn't be over, so dad picked me up and we stopped at McDonald's. I ate my snack wrap in the car, and we pulled over to a trash can to throw it out. Mom was feeling sick, so dad dropped me off to stay with her before he went grocery shopping. I toasted two slices of bread and poured a cup of water to bring to her room. I left the door cracked open, the combination of light and my tiny footsteps waking her up. Her long, brown hair was all knotted. I couldn't understand how she slept so much but looked so tired. Her skin was oily, but smooth and wasn't gross to touch like teenagers faces.

"Hi mom" I said, smiling putting my fingers on her forehead

"Lammy" she shook her head, getting teary eyed "the man next door is going to attack tonight. I can feel it" she stood up, shut her door, and started pushing boxes against it.

"Mommy no one's coming." I got this from dad. I used to feel too old to say mommy out loud, but it made a huge difference sometimes. This time she didn't even hear me, and kept dealing with the boxes, moving real fast and stacking them high. Her room was full of stuff she gathered for protection.



“Stay away! Stay away!” She was screaming at the top of her lungs. I knew what kind of mood she was in, and knew I better act invisible. I moved to the corner of the room furthest from the door and squatted next to the long, skinny closet. My heart was beating real fast. I thought one of the boxes might go flying, the way she was scrambling to stack ‘em. I felt freezing cold and hugged my whole body. After a long while dad pushed open the door, and mom realized right away that he’d taken out the lock again, which set her into a whole new level of screaming. While I was running out of the room, I caught a glimpse of white thin sponge things covering both her arms.

Dad followed me out the room, and I asked him about them.

“You saw the next-door neighbors have that cute, fat gray cat?” He asked

I nodded, but he wasn’t looking at me

“little guy bit the hell out of your mom. That’s why she’s so scared of them. Don’t worry though. I got it under control. Why don’t you do your homework?”

I gave him a big hug and went to my room. I couldn’t do homework with all the yelling. It was mostly mom’s yelling that I heard, but I couldn’t understand all of it.

“I can’t know something bad is about to happen without someone asking if I took my medicine?” Mom screamed, and a loud bang followed, broken glass or something. I wondered why we did never believe her when she said someone was trying to hurt us. Maybe one day someone would, and I swear she wouldn’t even say “told you so,” she’d just be ready to protect us. She was always ready.

When night rolled around, the same thing happened. Except this time, my bed felt too big for me. It was growing and I was shrinking. The eight words were shrinking me. What if people really could kill themselves? I thought about coming home and mom being dead, dad crying the way he was that day except louder. Grandma shaking even harder, crying too. I needed to figure out how to make mom not worry anymore. Maybe we could

move to some place with no cops, or doctors, or neighbors. I had to ask my dad where a place like that was, but I was sure it existed. The world was so big- every kind of place had to exist somewhere.

It started to happen every night. Two whole weeks past and I couldn't fall asleep cause I kept hearing mom's voice saying the same exact thing. "I really feel like killing myself right now." Some nights I got new thoughts, like how if you really could kill yourself, you could also decide how your funeral went and what color your casket was and who got to keep all your favorite stuff. I wondered what being dead was like. Chloe said once, heaven was whatever you wanted it to be, so hers was going to be unlimited candy. Moe said she'd make hers a million baby puppies. It was the first time I felt weird telling them what I was thinking. I hoped my heaven wouldn't last forever.

I woke up on my own even though it was a Wednesday. It was 11:07 am. I should be in lunch right now, I thought. I went into the bathroom and heard dad's voice. He was home from work too. I was going to tell him the thing mom said and how it was giving me nightmares before I even fell asleep.

I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I had big buck teeth but mom didn't want a dentist shoving their dirty fingers in my mouth. Plus, she said braces gave you canker sores all over the mouth.

"A whole new person dad" he said. When I realized that meant he was talking to grandpa, I held still. Dad always made me take the phone and say hi to grandpa but I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone old, all it would do was make me think of dying again. I went into the shower, I hadn't taken one since Sunday, and my hair looked wet.

Nothing in the shower had a smell. Not the shampoo, conditioner, or even the soap. I squirted dad's body wash into my palm with a touch of water to get it like a bubble bath. I put it on my face like a beard, then peeked through the glass door into the bathroom mirror. I laughed and put my beard on the wall. After I made another one, and put it on the wall, next to the last. I did this till all the bubble beards were stacked in a line. I used to play

games like this when I was real little. I felt like my bathtub was magical. These were the showers where I'd turn the water the highest it could go and once the steam covered the glass sliding door I would write my biggest secrets with my finger just so I could practice writing them to somebody, then I would erase them. Real fast. Like lightening. Except I was never really sure that they were gone even if I didn't see them, I stared at the spot praying it wouldn't dry that way and be shown to anyone. I turned the shower hot again, almost burning my skin. Then I turned it all the way cold until I saw goosebumps on my thighs. I got out and stood on top of the dirty clothes on the floor. I wrapped the blue towel around my body and started to brush my hair. The door opened

“Mom!” I jumped. She had a pair of purple Crayola scissors in her hands. The knots on the back of her head looked worse. She sat on the toilet and her pee smelled like rotting spaghetti. That happened to me when my pee was real yellow and hurt coming out.

“Lammy we're getting makeovers”

“okay. You have makeup?”

“Not makeup, haircuts”

“I don't want a haircut”

“Lammy we have too”

“why?”

“Because we have to change our look and get out of here. It's not just the neighbor, he has a whole team he hired, they have something, some sort of- device they use it's like a mixture of x-rays and binoculars and they're using it to watch us. We can't stay in this house”

“No, mom. No one's watching us.”

If I screamed for dad, she'd think I was being a traitor. I wanted to ask how she knew about the device but whenever I wanted to know stuff like that dad called it “encouraging unhealthy behavior” which was a stupid fancy doctor saying.

“Mommy. Please. Please don't cut my hair”

“Lammy, we're going to look beautiful”

She stared into the mirror and starting chopping her hair off. I gripped the towel and walked towards the bathroom door, I leaped for the knob and heard the click. Too close to my ear to be mom's hair. Another click, louder. I turned to look at her, sending the Crayola scissor into the back of my neck. I only felt a little blood come down and it barley stung. My eyes stung too. I felt like a baby, making noises cause of my crying. To make it worse she stopped after and just stared at me. Her eyes were almost empty. She started crying too and it felt like the ending of a dumb drama movie. She took a piece of toilet paper, ran it under the faucet and wiped the tiny cut. I looked in the mirror, the right side of my hair was kind of, to my shoulder, some of it to my chin. Real uneven. It made me cry even harder. I was spitting. The left side was the same as before, almost at my belly button.

"I'm so sorry baby. I'm so sorry." She was saying. I felt bad, knowing she thought the cut was probably gonna turn into something real bad that spread to my entire body. She always thought stuff like that about little scratches.

"These things wouldn't happen if you just trusted me" I said, real adult.

This must've reminded mom, who somehow let herself forget for a second about the neighbors. Her demon eyes came out and I bolted. They were wide open, about to roll back at any second.

"Mom's upset" I screamed towards the kitchen and then closed the door to my room. I pushed my nightstand in front of my door. You would think mom would want a lock on my door, but she got it taken off the day we moved in to this house. Lying on my bed, I couldn't stop crying. I was going to have to get up and go to school tomorrow and I would look like such a freak. Or maybe no one would wake me up again and I was going to have to stay home and get more of my hair chopped off. I was stuck. Then I cried even harder because I felt silly for crying over my hair when mom was crying over things like people watching us. I picked up the clackers and tried to focus on nothing but my rhythm. I stayed like that for a while, crying and clacking the balls together. I heard my mom screaming, my dad trying to calm her

down. By the time I was done my hand was spotty with bruises, each one looked like an outline on a map.

The thoughts came that night, but a little bit different. Why would mom say something to me that was gonna keep me awake every night? She must've known it would scare me to think about her being dead. Why couldn't she tell grandma instead of me? Dying was something old people knew and talked about. I wished I could say this to her, but it would just make her upset. I wished I could say it to dad but he was just busy taking care of her. It wasn't going to leave my head. So I just kept thinking of the door locks, and the boxes and the way her room was always dark. Mom spent her entire life fighting off death. She wouldn't do it to herself. She wouldn't.

Laura Johanna Waltje

## **Memories Are Made Out of Rotting Teeth**

I often fear men.  
I fear men that follow me.  
I fear those that walk me home.  
I fear your millipede fingers holding mine.  
Your hand around my throat.  
You make my gasps of pleasure rise an octave.  
I fear men that fear their own desire.  
I fear kind men and what they want for kindness.  
I fear your breath  
it smells like rot and acetone,  
its soft cold on my skin  
hardening my nipples.  
I have lost so many.  
Losses that don't go away.  
Murdered boy, mistaken boy,  
martyred boy, married boy.  
My bitter boy, violent boy,  
nurtured boy, my hardened boy –  
In spite of guilt, I am obsessed  
by my desire – in mourning,  
I become excited.  
My lonely boy, ugly boy,  
my bad boy, without you –  
I need to be without you.  
I've been dreaming of my teeth  
falling out, of rot.  
Jealous boy, you remind me of molasses,  
of honey running down  
the back of my throat  
of larva hatching, of maggots, of syrup  
of sweetness, of cycles where

I fear the men who will spoil before me.

Laura Johanna Waltje

## **Compulsions Escalate Gravity**

There is a reason I don't own an x-acto knife or safety razor blades or keep any sleeping pills. Sometime I feel so tired. Not sick of living but tired of being. In this listless liminal state, I might accidentally begin taking pills one-by-one and then by the handful until the bottle sits empty next to the bed.

There is a pull to the edge of a cliff that has little to do with desires to die, but an inching curiosity that pulls me forward until there is no ground beneath my feet. As a child, I'd clutch my stuffed bunny, convinced that a loosened grip would tumble him over the edge of a bridge and into the lazing river below. Now I grip railings convinced I'll accidentally vault myself over and dive.

Mikayla Morell

**To Girls Everywhere,  
I am with you**

*For Emily Doe, the 332 victims, Dr. Ford, and Kesha*

I.

I thought a lot about the cardigan  
beige, limp on shoulders. You peeled it off and wrung it out.  
*Undergrad*  
*boys have braces* I told my sister. Pale knuckles  
meddle with my skirt. I thought a lot about that, too: the violet  
velvet over my  
ass. Easy access. She made fun of me for wearing a cardigan to a  
frat. Underwear swept under tin  
trash cans. You don't know me but you've been inside of me.

And a jury who would rather be spoon feeding  
their infant son decides whether you unlaced my green high tops  
and snapped my lace  
bra. But you can swim five hundred meters of freestyle  
in four minutes twenty-five seconds and twenty two milliseconds  
and don't forget  
to show them the medals to prove it.

Pine needles make a nest in my hair the nurses tell me it's just  
the flora and fauna. They hold rulers to my bruises and fill a paper  
bag with the  
needles. They prod and prick needles to my muscle. I have never  
been penetrated after three words. Flora and fauna.

II.

We are taught to trust doctors.



You close your eyes as your fingers work out  
the “kinks of our spines.” At 15 we believe you when you say  
‘massage’ and knock  
on the door playing ‘Trick or Treat’ with a teal tea towel from the  
2012 Olympics  
signed  
by the team. The moment we speak about something other than our  
Olympic  
medals, we’re silenced. You veil your dangling stethoscope over  
our naked bodies.  
The bodies that did not belong to us.

We wish we could remember the feel of nitrile  
against our calloused skin but you never wore them. We do  
remember  
your cold hands, that every doctor has and the snacks you gave us  
after our  
‘treatment’ like lemon lollipops after a shot.  
The three hundred and thirty two of us were touched by you for the  
last time.

### III.

I insisted on two front doors.  
Two escapes. I had none. I had one  
beer. I am here today not because I want to be, because a one piece  
bathing suit couldn’t shield me from your laugh  
in the echo behind our president, in the walls of 1982  
in the warning from reporters to the sons and fathers.  
Boys will be boys will be men cuffing daughters  
and mothers. Did you think about them—  
your daughters?

I drown in the sound of you pinballing down the stairs. I bet they  
honor you  
with the Brandeis Medal. We award rapists with ‘victim’ title

and positions in the highest court. I accept the death threats  
and the memories of your penis against my thigh  
for you to serve the country I tried to protect.

IV.

If I am alive why

do I not blame you. Blame you for the dizzy after thought of a  
drink  
tampered with your testosterone. Blame you for the weak-minded  
dinner served  
on a record that's chained to my pink hair. Because of you  
I will rid myself of the bullshit that comes with being a human  
being.

I carry my Grandfather's World War II medal as a talisman and try  
to forget  
the metallic taste of sober pills, pickled poison, barefoot  
Pacific Coast Highway never forgetting evaporating into atoms  
unable to be cut.

I pray that you don't visit my half-ghost at the rest stop between  
beating  
and fading. That you find the color you stole and keep a bit  
for yourself and that melody saves you  
like it saved me.

Katarina Begonja

### **Persephone's Answer**

No one asked me why I stayed.  
If they thought it was deception,  
they'll find that I was not betrayed.

I ate the seeds and all the while prayed  
for someone to hear my quiet confession.  
Still, no one asked me why I stayed.

I am more than a springtime maid;  
it was time to burn that misconception,  
for they'll find that I was not betrayed.

My need for autonomy could not otherwise be conveyed.  
This was my choice. I am not a victim of oppression.  
But, no one asked me why I stayed.

My mother wanted me to live a charade.  
If they could just alter their perception,  
they'll find that I was not betrayed.

The Underworld is not all gloomy and decayed.  
Guiding souls, I found purpose and direction.  
No one asked me why I stayed.  
Hear me: I was not betrayed.

Margarita Serafimova

The interrupted  
bridge.  
Chronos' bite.

Maayan Avery

**Requiem**

i wear a dress of silk:  
a figure on my figure-

an oracle in my womb chants

*see,*

*see the cavern i've made you,  
relics of a wildfire;  
do you mourn your unborn son, rosary of flames?*

my breasts, sallow wax:  
i hug my waist where bones shapeshift--  
what is woman, what is carrier, but a reliquary beneath phoenix  
beds?

---

i wear a dress of cobweb;  
my skin: orphan fog.

body: we harvest embers.

i empty my insides; candle pulse  
my dress sings the memory of dust.

the oracle says,

*say a prayer*

## September

Renee Beck

1

There was a woman who was afflicted by a disease from which there was no known cure. Because of her affliction she bled for twelve years without ceasing. Hoping to find relief from her suffering, and to reestablish communion with the town from which she was exiled due to her illness, she came to the place where she knew the crowds were gathered to see the man that they called Jesus.

\*

Confession is either healthy, explanatory, therapeutic words strung together in unified cohesion: collective understanding, expulsion of infection that leads to healing. Or it isn't. It can also be urgent. Amplified explosive that only serves to further wound. "I didn't ask you why you did it." My words are spat toward the older daughter, frustrated. She is standing in the middle of our office behind her little sister who spins slowly in the swivel desk chair and has a towel strung across her lap. The standing one has scissors in her hand. A chunk of the tiny sister's hair is splattered on the floor at their feet. They both snap their heads to the doorway where I have sabotaged their hairdresser fantasy with my mom interpretation of the scissors being dangerous. "Scissors are not toys." I say, take them from her hand. The instruction this moment is "not to." Immediately the instruction becomes "to." Go and wash your hands, I say. They walk slowly, heads down in shared sister strife. The one old enough to reason doesn't understand. Why she did what she did is important to her. She would like to be a hair cutter when she grows up mommy, she says. Or a doctor. Or maybe the president. What am I teaching her about the importance of women's words when I tell her that why she did what she did doesn't matter if she was not obedient? But as her mother, I just

want her to listen to me. I know better. I want her to trust me while I teach her the intellect of questioning all that is around her.

I don't want to listen to her tell me why she cut her sister's hair. I only want her to be better than I am.

\*

The woman struggled to get through the people, knowing that if she could only be in Jesus' presence that she would be healed. So she pushed through the crowds pressing around Him from all sides. She had no intention of speaking to him knowing only that if she were able to touch his robes that she would be healed.

\*

Before I understood better, I believed that truth was linear. Sixteen-year-old me wrote truth through a letter of confession to my mother dripping with words too heavy to hold on my tongue, but I didn't write all truth only some. A coward's lightsaber, wooden lead burrito acting as the solder between the fetus in my womb and my mother's disappointment. I wrote, "I'm sorry, mom," and I was. I cried and smudged the impact, left no trace of real understanding. I threw the pencil aside. Scribbled at the top of the letter with a pen. Circles. Blue ink. I'm sorry, mom, I continued writing. Party. Swallowed pink drinks. Drink. Only one. I'm sorry. I lied to you about where I was. You don't know who I am. Not really. I'm sorry. I'd wanted so badly to be inducted into the shrine of adult decisions and drawn so alluringly to the enigmas of responsibility that I behaved irresponsibly to prove to myself that I was responsible enough but I wasn't.

I didn't write any of those things. I wrote: I'm sorry. I'm pregnant.

\*

When Jesus passed by where she was waiting, she reached out, and grasped hold of his robe. Immediately her bleeding stopped and she was healed from her disease.

“Who has touched me?” He asked the disciples that were with him.

But they did not know, replying that many people were around him, anyone might have touched him. Knowing it had been the woman and that she had been healed he asked her why she had touched his robes. She publicly confessed to the people there that for twelve years she had bled without ceasing, but was now healed from her affliction.

He told his disciples when they questioned him that he knew he had been touched by someone who took power through him.

\*

As children, my brother was younger than me but wiser, he would have known to be more sensitive if he had been the oldest. He would have recognized that our mom was only as strong as the expectations that her matriarchal ancestors had bequeathed her and he would have protected her more from me. She would have favored him not because he deserved it but because he had arrived first and already possessed most of it.

“It took me a long time to warm up to him,” she confessed to me about my brother as mothers do in ‘I’ve considered killing myself also’ solidarity, “especially after your father drug you screaming from the hospital when he was born. I wanted to leave him there and come chasing after you.”

My brother never challenged her like I did. He never pulled into the driveway as a teen past curfew to the sole light of the street light in the middle of the teardrop drive, the bulbs in the barn and house night-air cool, while she is asleep on the couch, rising slowly only when my footsteps wake her in the foggy midnight hours. He deserves to be her favorite.



I am unaware of the way a mother's worry lines become etched on a woman's face.

2

While in the same place someone came from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying to him "your daughter is dead. Do not trouble the teacher." But when Jesus heard it, He answered him, saying, "Do not be afraid; only believe, and she will be made well."

\*

I am called "mama" by two snack desperate mouths with hands that want to touch me all the time: these two living fruit I've borne, they've grown from small cherries to one grand champion sized pumpkin and one slightly oversized watermelon: my babies. They have my blue-eyed insubordination. "You have a great responsibility," I tell my oldest. I hold her chin gently in the palm of my hand gently caressing slow passes of her cheek with my thumb, gaze into her intense eyes. "Your beauty makes your responsibility greater." The little watermelon parrots: "responsaboobie," and the pumpkin and I share in the laughter of two older humans who recognize her innocence. How do I make them understand. I want to love them so fiercely that they reject disobedience. "Mommy," she says. My universe is available for their inquiry, they can pluck answers like stars from me until I am bereft of all light and they are incandescent if it will embed into them the consciousness of vigilance I will dismember my implosions one confession at a time hand them small pieces if there is a chance they can be spared the necessity of learning the hard way. "sometimes, I just get so mad," her slight lisp "sh-ing" her sometimes, "I just want to do things by myself but you tell me not to." If I'd been where my mom thought I was, if I didn't go to the places where she would have disapproved, if I had only

listened, but there was nothing she could have said that would have made me obey.

I am aware of the way a mother's worry lines become etched on a woman's face.

\*

When Jesus arrived at the Rabbi's home mourners had gathered to be with the family. He told the people there waiting for him that the girl was not dead, that she was only sleeping. They laughed at him, mocking him, knowing that she was not sleeping, and that she was dead.

\*

She caught me writing my shame sentences. Heavy word drops flooded the distance between us. "I'm pregnant," I blurted, gasping in snotty, wet face. I expected the glass wall between us to shatter; the house of expectations built from playing cards dealt to crumble. I expected rage. Anger. Shouts. Earthquake and tsunami shifting tectonic plates: a birth certificate would be signed before a high school diploma. Breathe. Blood smell. Iron. I bite the insides of my mouth clamping down to regain control, ground myself on this moonlit porch in the past dark velvet night, in the hardened hollow of insulated snowfall velcroed to the porch's railing outside, sunken into the windowsills, coating the cement path through the garden where mom's hyacinth nested dormant to hibernate until spring thawed. My words are deadened in the frost, the echo's: protected from reverberation by the snow, there would be no whisked away syllables on the crystalized breeze, they were trapped here, in the silence between us where her contemplative gaze has not moved from watching me flounder in too deep water.

"Who knows?"

"He does." The father I meant.

“You’ll tell him you had a miscarriage.”

I will not.

“No one can ever know.”

You’re too young. Girls your age miscarry. Your body can’t hold the baby full term. If you decide to keep this baby you can’t live here. I didn’t know him, this man who had done this to me. My father didn’t know either, she said, but she had married him anyway. Guilt. I wouldn’t have to do that, she said but if I kept it I would have to leave, and go live with him, she said, and what would the people at church think?

Resistance is futile.

\*

Jesus instructed all the people who had gathered there to wait outside the room where the girl who was not dead only sleeping was lain; he took only her parents and three disciples in with him and sat down on the bed beside the dead girl. Jesus took her by the hand. He called to her, “little girl, rise.” Her spirit was returned to her, and she arose immediately.

\*

When my brother and I were small there were only a few rules in our house. Only a few things our mom kept for herself: things in the house that we weren’t allowed to play with. One was a sewing basket that was our great grandmother’s. My brother played with it often. She keeps it hidden on the front porch now, underneath a brown coffee table so that her granddaughters don’t break it before they are old enough to protect it. Another sacred item in our house

was a small, crystal, blue bird she brought home from Jamaica as a memento from her honeymoon. One day, before my brother was born or maybe when he was still a baby, I took it from its perch atop the baby grand where she spent hours practicing to accompany the hymn singing at church, and ran around the house flying with it. I ran to the laundry room where she was folding clothes. She saw me holding it between my hands. I made eye contact with her. And dropped it to the floor. It shattered.

She cried silently while she picked up the larger pieces and tried to arrange them back together, recognizing it could not be fixed, she scooped them into the trash.

3

Jesus instructed that someone find food for the little girl to eat. And her parents were amazed. He charged them to tell no one of the miracle that had been performed.

\*

Empty cigarette packs litter the passenger floor of my car and I suck in a final breath before killing the engine to trudge in and serve people food that I don't eat, smile for money to pay rent for an empty apartment that I use to buy whiskey instead. Wake. Sleep. Repeat. Every month I bleed a reminder, my uterus rots, withers. I wake. Sleep. Repeat. Death crept inside me in the guise of a clinician's lavender gloved hands. Wake. Sleep. Repeat. Bleed. I took life and bled for weeks. The bleeding stopped eventually but the stains will never wash from my hands. This year she would have turned five.

\*

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

\*

“When she does something that you do, and it causes her to be disobedient, it makes me angry, but it makes me even more angry because I know she learned it from you.” I gauge the comprehension level of our daughters. Their father speaks accountability -she doesn’t like when her sister is punished so we lean on that. “Scissors are not toys,” he reiterates for me. The dinner table has stilled while a father teaches a daughter. She nods. Chews slowly. The parrot nods. Chews slowly. This year their sister would have turned twelve.

\*

There was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, “If I touch even his garments, I will be made well.” And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she was healed of her disease.

\*

My mother was present, just outside the room, when my oldest daughter was born. She pressed her ear to the door and waited for the cry that signaled all was well. She was not in the room for the birth of her second granddaughter either, but was ushered in immediately afterward with my brother and his wife. Smiling. Proud.

I wrap presents for only two children on Christmas eve. Cook dinner for four. I mourn in silence in September, though I count the years every year.

In the abortion clinic my mother waits in a plastic, green chair waiting room. A man throws away bloody, lavender gloves. I am brought to her once I regain consciousness and the ability to stand. I am given a thick pad. “You may bleed heavily for a few weeks,” the nurse I’d cried to in the procedure room tells me. Her face, too, has been etched by worry. She sadly holds extra pads out toward me.

“Part of the deal with this is you can never tell anyone” mom says as we drive away.

Gray, salt littered snow forces itself between the cracks of the sidewalks on both sides of her ford ranger as we speed past. The sunshine masks the outcry of chemical assault to the concrete while chunks of it burn slowly away, fall silently alongside the melting snow, and down into the storm drains.

Brian Matta

**Straphanger**

Forced light shines on  
the sagging rails as  
the train pulls  
into the station  
where pedestrians  
no longer jump  
over Tuesday's turnstyle  
into Wednesday's abyss  
but stand in line  
patiently to pay the fair  
for Thursday  
where a better barbarism  
awaits

Brian Matta

## **Sequestered**

The sun drags itself  
back and forth  
along the blue horizon  
pacing in a daze since  
the people voted to  
suspend the night  
indefinitely deciding sleep  
was inefficient  
the world shrivels at its cornices  
and everything begins to have  
a brown patina like a vulgarity  
that wouldn't be washed away  
and the flowers bend back  
a collective plea  
for the veneer of night



Kimiko Hahn  
From the *Toying* sequence

**[*The Visible Man*]**

Like *The Visible Man*, I can be *assembled*. I am *educational and fun* more often than not. Like *The Visible Man*, all my *organs can be removed ... revealing wonders of the human body. From skin to skeleton*. I can be *an introduction to anatomy*, albeit female. Like *The Visible Man*, I am visible although at dinner parties not so much. Especially if more than two other people are present and neither realizes I don't know how to interject. Another activity *The Visible Man* can't do either.

Kimiko Hahn  
From the *Toying* sequence

**[*Play-Doh*]**

Like *Play-Doh*, I am colorful and malleable. Generally non-toxic, non-staining, and reusable. Salty, yes. Like *Play-Doh*, I am yellow. Unlike *Play-Doh*, I do not harden in the sun although I *can* harden, in a hard-bitten kind of way.

Kimiko Hahn  
From the *Toying* sequence

**[*Mr. Potato Head*]**

Like *Mr. Potato Head*, I am not a potato! Like Mr. Potato Head, I have a hat! And a pet like his Spud-ette! Like him, I was born in the Fifties! Like his creator, my creator wandered in a garden to create figures. Unlike the original Mr. Potato Head, I was never in fact a potato ... or squash or turnip ... and, too, unlike him, I can open my mouth and say in response to bias, *fuckoffasshole!*

Marie Scarles

## **Silence Study**

(Iceland, circa 1930)

In my grandmother's attic, a small landscape with cow and girl and child slit by a white frame. The calf's head is bent into a bucket. The three stand beside a house built of stone, wood, volcanic rock. The mountain's flank fills three-quarters of the frame. A white fence stutters through it.

In this image, as in my father's stock, the woman is secondary—necessary to the frame, its ostensible occasion—she mosses over, silent.

When I walk through the city, I adopt a pose of numbness, of having-seen-it-all, a vacancy I inherit. It's as if to say, I see nothing of interest in this scene, nor should you. This defense is so effective: it mutes like a fog off the coast.

Cold the light across her face, cold the maker's gaze, stiff and sedentary. Horrible, the half-thought, the partial story. Empty eyes and a tongue that stumbles over the few verbs I know. The mouth's slow locutions: words that grumble: geothermal steam roils inside the earth.

I am lucky, *Amma-min*. I am lucky not to be hit. I never hid from my parents' hands, never feared exposure on the snowbound trail of girlhood. Unlike you, I will never live in a half-rotted house, eat my own horse when starving, drown a bag filled with cats.

Bruce McRae

### **Flowers of The Field**

They named the flowers purple wreath and prickly Moses.  
They called the flowers sneezeweed, three birds flying, Spanish  
shawl.

Like Old Testament gods, the people placed names upon  
plants and flowers encountered in land and time.

Red cape tulip. Snowberry. Mothers of thousands.

They said rose of heaven and yellow adder's tongue.

By any other name they planted estates of delight,  
pollen wafting, seed fluff adrift, the bee decidedly ungrateful.

\*

There are flowers also in hell, wrote Williams.

Temple bells. Sweet sultan. Stars of the veldt in the devil's garden.

The dancing doll orchid. Spider lily. The Egyptian star cluster.

Colours punctuating dark green, summer infused with the sexually  
brazen.

Sun drops. Shell flowers. The Himalayan blue poppy.

Flowers to be milked. To delight the eye. There to be eaten.

Matthew Rotando

## **I Probably Missed It Too**

I have to pee right now so we have to make this quick. Let's try and come around the other side of death. I mean, since there is birth in this world (which is fucking bananas) then there is also music. The one and then the other and a whole bunch of other stuff in between. Walk up a mountain and find something like the golden last light of day, and try these words: "Hey, arriving night, I know I am a part of you, just as you're a part of me, and the air and the stars and all the rest of the shit I don't even know about is all out there and in here, awash and spinning. I know the spirits of everything are haunting everyone, even the sand and the ditches and the mustard in the fridge. You can't push this out. Everything made is made with the care requisite to prop it up in the precarious abandon of the crashing world. For a time every thing and every being has its own grace, and then clunks away." Right. I'm done. There's the poem. You might have missed it. I have to go pee now.

Julia Tolo

**on love**

my love is a dented car in Malibu  
a bad driver with steady hands  
he hides his failures in those hands  
he thinks I can't see the way he picks  
at old scabs, the way he crumbles dry skin  
between long fingers the way he scatters his  
particles out the open window

Julia Tolo

**too much of anything**

1.

I told the story because  
I was the oldest, or perhaps  
because I was the one who  
wanted the most  
                                  to be heard

2.

my cousin Pål made bows and arrows with branches from  
the dying pine tree in front of the barn  
his younger siblings Ole and Andrea running along the side  
of the road, picking stones sharp enough  
to kill whatever we were hunting

there was a time when we were allowed to perform  
our violent rituals in the garden

later we were displaced, relocated to the drying fields just  
beyond, with the swoosh of the speeding  
small town teenagers in our ears  
with the adults' warnings  
in the ways we moved around each other

3.

funny how danger manifests:  
never the fast cars; the men in the forest hunting girls out  
for a late-night swim; the rusty chainsaw in the old barn

4.

some days there were no clouds  
endless light in that open landscape  
no night to put a stop to things



only the strawberries knew there would be  
an end, they leaned towards the earth and  
listened

5.  
the hero is never kept alive for long  
no matter the level of oxygen in his blood  
no matter what famous person he out-skied

6.  
all my life I wanted to hear  
that I was right, that I had understood things correctly  
that the way I told it was okay

7.  
he keeps collapsing at the side of the road  
no matter how I rearrange the sentences on the page  
he doesn't want to do anything else

perhaps for a little while  
he lies there breathing, skis crossed underneath him

and then it's over  
the cold  
too cold

the snow

the evening white and glowing  
nobody coming down that road for 20 minutes

that's too long for any body  
even his

8.

his mother always talked a lot but these days  
we only speak of the moment before the splice

the best things to say are those concerning his personality  
how many animal sounds he knew as a child  
the mountains he carried his bike across

not the strangeness of his body gone and hers still here

9.

was there too much snow  
at his funeral?

you wouldn't bring poppies to the mother  
of a child who overdosed on opioids

too clear and see-through that  
air too many white and frozen things in the graveyard

his sister's hands his father's windshield too many stiff toes  
in polished shoes

## Memorial

Anjuli Fiedler

It's her husband's *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of his death. She sits in her apartment, which was their apartment, but which she has been the sole inhabitant of for most of the years they lived there, waiting for sunset. She sits quietly, her hands folded in the lap of her new dress, stockinged legs crossed at the ankles, on the green velvet couch, one of the few pieces of furniture they were able to bring with them in the move from their modest, yellow, suburban house, where they had lived for decades, to their meager apartment in Martins Run, the Jewish community he hadn't wanted to move to. In a few weeks, it would be her birthday, and how cruel that this once-happy month could never be something to look forward to again. She had always said she wanted to go before him, much to the horror of her children and grandchildren. She was *supposed* to go before him – the three siblings who had predeceased her had all died at 88, and she had felt so strongly that it was preordained that she would die at that age, too, and she had begun mental preparations for the inevitable at 80. And yet here she was, still, about to be 94, all by herself. Not really, of course, she thinks, looking around at the framed pictures sitting or hanging on every surface. Three children, seven grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren: not too bad, their legacy. And they had all done so well. Her husband had successfully instilled the same dogged work ethic in each of them, and she swelled with pride every time she thought about their achievements, which was often. This pride and gratitude helped smooth the jagged edges of grief that constantly sliced away at every soft organ inside of her. Some days, it was all she could do to lie stiffly in bed, listening to the faint whir of the hummingbirds' wings at the feeders outside of her bedroom window and watching the rainbows from the crystals on the inside of the window dance on the white walls and carpet.

She looks at the gold table clock sitting on his old desk, still littered with his papers and ham radio. They would start

serving dinner downstairs soon, but she had already decided not to go. She had some leftover chicken from her daughter's visit yesterday, which she could heat up if she felt hungry later. She feels too heavy with grief to move, and simultaneously too empty to form conversation with her usual tablemates. Edna, with the grandson who kept getting into trouble with the law. Marla, who was recovering from a broken hip, and wasn't very adept with her walker. Saul, who just lost his wife, and cried at every meal. Her little apartment was her haven, his shrine.

Sometimes, when one-half of a couple died, the remaining half would seek a roommate, to lessen the loneliness. Not her. She needed the silence, the space, to conjure faces and voices, there, in that realm between life and death, sorrow and hope. She talked to him nightly. She would tell him about her day, about new people who had just moved into the community, about the rabbi's latest sermon, a granddaughter's wedding, the birth of another great-grandchild. "Sidney," she had murmured into the space a few nights ago. "They started offering a new woodworking class here. You would have loved it." She told him about the president, and she could hear him snort in annoyed disbelief. He assured her he was fine, he was being taken care of, and that he was in a better place. "I miss you," she'd say. "I love you." And, as when he was alive, he said nothing in response, but she felt his comforting presence all the same.

She had never stopped talking to him, not even after he had to be moved to the Pines a few years after they had moved here. It had been a rapid decline – for years, he was stuck in the repeating phase, where he would incessantly repeat the same questions or phrases minutes after uttering them. The large photographs of the immediate family that hung on the walls of the kitchen, where he used to sit and read the financial section of the newspaper, still had the little captions with the names of each family member that she had taped to the bottom of each frame. He was good with names for a while, and could associate some of them with a few details – Vicky: doctor, daughter. Janice: doctor, daughter. Robert: doctor, son. Anjuli: lawyer, California. And then, seemingly overnight,

that went as well. Every name went except for hers. He never forgot hers, she sighs deeply. He knew his memory was fading, and he became sullen and withdrawn. He wouldn't speak because he knew something wasn't right with him. He would just point. Sometimes he would say terrible things to the aides who had helped him for years, attempting to physically attack them if they tried to touch him. It was awful, those last few years. But she visited him every day, even when they said she couldn't or shouldn't. She would sit next to him, rest her hand on his, and calmly tell him all the news. She would kiss him goodnight when it was time for bed, before she made her way back upstairs to The Willows, her section of the sprawling community, where her neighbors, like herself, were physically and mentally competent. And she would lie in the darkness, praying fervently for health and peace.

She was charged with carrying on his memory, everything about him, and she would never forget, not as long as she lived. The golden clock ticks on, and she looks out the window, catching the last rays of sun. It's time. She rises and goes over to the lace-covered kitchen table, on which she has placed the same two crystal candleholders she has used for every Sabbath. Inside of them are two tall, stark white candles, and next to them is the little frosted glass *yahrzeit* candleholder with the opalescent candle poured inside of it. She pats the top of her head, and, once assured that the folded head-covering is still pinned to her hair, she lights the three candles, circling her arms three times around the flames to welcome their presence to her, then brings her fingers to her eyes and begins: *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba*. She knows the words to The Mourner's Kaddish by heart, she has said them for years—for her parents, her brothers and sister, her friends, and, most recently, her husband. It's dark now, save for those shining lights. After her prayers, she returns to her seat on the sofa, steps away, where she can watch the flames as they stretch and then grow smaller and disappear.

Gale Acuff

## Clock

I like to think the dead go live with God,  
if it's *thought*—it may not be smart enough,  
or be just a feeling, which may be like  
smoke to a thought's more solid flame. I don't  
know. When Father died, I thought: Mother's left.  
And so she was. For a few years. Then she  
died and I was alone. Alone on Earth.

But a baby's buried, too, in a way  
—buried in a womb, which is like a tomb,  
to make a stretch. And a tomb I liken  
to a womb, so the infant of a corpse  
will be born again into a new realm.

Perhaps it's Heaven. I don't at all know.  
So they have some kind of life over there  
which isn't life, really, not as we

know it. But what do I know? 40 years  
ago I took everything for granted  
—especially clichés—but now that I'm  
53 and farther from the past and  
growing, or is it dying, or is it

both, I'm beginning to be sorry that I  
never knew what I had then. And trying  
to cheer myself by thinking I wasn't  
supposed to--I had to be blank because  
I never could have enjoyed a thing if  
I'd told myself, over and over, that

40 years ahead I'd be regretting  
not appreciating what I once had.  
But perhaps there is no past--only *now*,

and the future that becomes it, and time  
marked off by ticks and measured by suns is  
illusion. When I miss my parents most,  
I see them healthier and happier  
than they were when alive. They're living

in a little house in the middle of  
a green field. There are trees and flowers and  
a river. They smile a lot. They sit down  
to supper and eat their fill and never

have to do dishes nor even prepare  
meals. They take long walks and have picnics and  
hold hands and kiss and when they kill the lights  
and go to bed the lights dim but never

die. They serve no purpose, is their purpose.  
And when they sleep they dream of the day  
I'll die and join them. How will I get there?  
I don't dream that dream but trust they dream it,

then I wake up in my own bed and see  
them looking down at me and my first words  
are There you are—I knew we'd meet again.  
*Come and have something to eat*, Mother says.  
*Sure*, says Father. *You must be hungry*. How

did I get here, I ask. *Does it matter*,

Mother asks. Yes, I say. I think so. *You never left*, Father says. *You overslept. You've been dreaming.* I look at the clock and it's 40 years ago again. Holy

cow. I sit up and study their faces. I'm late for school, I say. *It's Saturday*, says Mother. *Walk with us in the garden.*



Gale Acuff

## King of Kings

Not that he ever did but my father  
doesn't know me, if by knowledge I mean  
recognition. I don't know what I mean  
so at least I can never forget it.

At least he likes me, whoever I am,  
besides the son who bears his name. *A fine  
gentleman*, he calls me. I caregive him,  
the rest of the family living their lives

without Alzheimer's, or Father. Am I  
so easy to forget? It's not his fault,  
I tell myself. Whatever else I am  
I'm not progeny to him. I don't know  
*what* I am without his validation  
—independent, I suppose. Mature. Grown.

Each day I introduce myself again.  
I'm Gale, Jr., I say. Your son. *Well, now*,  
he says. *How in the world are you? I'm Gale  
Acuff*, he says. *What's your name?* Gale, Jr.,  
I say. *Pleased to meet you, Mr. Junior*,  
he says. *Make yourself at home*. I live here,  
I say. *What a coincidence*, he says  
—*I live here, too. My name is Gale Acuff*.  
Again we shake hands. *And what's your name, Sir?*

Once I answered, My name's Adolf Hitler.  
*Well*, he says, *Well, well. They're looking for you,  
you know*, he says. *And one day they'll find you*  
—*I'm sorry to have to call the police*.

He turns on his heel—he's 80 years old  
—and marches up the walkway to the porch.  
He stops to stomp on a cockroach. Then he  
turns and sees me again for the first time.  
*Well, well, he says. How can I help you?*

Now, past midnight, I try to fall asleep.  
I'll be up at dawn to cook our breakfast.  
He won't know me then, either, and when I  
walk into the kitchen he'll rise, extend  
his hand, and welcome me. *I'm Gale Acuff,*

he says. "King of Kings," I say. "Look on my  
Works, ye Mighty, and despair." *What was that,*  
he says. *I don't follow you.* Never mind,  
I say. You're my father. I add, I'm your  
son. *I'm pleased to meet you,* he says. *Sit down.*

## A Sweet and Spicy Sojourn

Diana Temkin

Walking out into the streets of Varanasi I scramble through swarms of people, quick-pedaling rickshaws, and sluggish, sauntering cows. The narrow lane parallel to the guesthouse where I stay is beset with a thick layer of humidity and heat, forcing me to stroll with as much stagnation as the bulky cows I weave past. Rickety wooden stalls selling produce, sellers hawking assorted snacks made with dried chickpeas and spices, and sugar cane water carts vie for space. Items of religious significance- small mounds of colorful powders, flower garlands and prayer beads are sold in exchange for a few rupees. A variety of objects for worship to honor Lakshmi, Shiva, and Durga, amongst the Hindu pantheon of gods, are purchased by the devout. As I walk on, I hear temple bells ringing.

Garlands are available to place around the necks of sacred cows, givers of milk and thus life-affirmers. Allowing my feet to breathe, I always wear sandals. I'm afraid when I walk past free-roaming cows, especially on a pedestrian-bridge, their hard hooves will land right on my precious toes. So far, I've been lucky no cow has mangled my feet, as I desperately need them for my journey. Instead of coming into perilous contact with cows I've had monkeys grab snacks from my hands. As a result, I've learned to be stealthy with my belongings. I remember in Rishikesh being accosted by a few, and they're not the least bit subtle as demonstrated by their loud shrieks and excitable movements.

I stop in front of a sweets shop selling assortments of milky, squared-shaped confections, munchkin donut-resembling balls called gulab jamun and other small delicacies. When I ask for my favorite, rasmalai, a cheese-curd dessert immersed in a sweet milky syrup, the thin man behind the counter shakes his head and looks to an abundant tray of pretzel-shaped dessert soaked in simple syrup. "Jalebi?" he asks while pointing to the deep-fried, orange colored sweets. I shake my head not wanting to get a

stomach ache and he moves on to another customer. I'm remiss to walk away, the aromatic scent of cardamom and rose water beckons me to stay.

Manifesting a bull-horn without actually having one, as I walk off I hear a middle-aged man behind a shack with a shrill voice yell out, "chhhhaaaaiiiiiiii". I stop to grab some masala chai, hoping black tea and assorted spices will give me a swift kick to start off my sight-seeing day. After the chai wallah pours my hot tea into an earthenware jar, I pay and sit down on a stool. A pensive old man wearing a dhoti firmly wrapped around his waist is seated near me. Still and weathered, he sips meditatively. I look at him and he looks away with a grimace; evidently my curiosity has interrupted his repose. Legs crossed, he looks like he's been sitting there his whole life.

A jolly, round woman sitting next to a boy of about ten years-old smiles at me. I smile back. Gesturing towards my cup and nodding, as if to ask, do I like it? I say "achha hai", which causes her to chuckle. She speaks to the chai wallah while looking at me.

"Where are you from?", the chai wallah asks. "England, France, Italy?"

"No, I'm from America"

He seems to be translating to the woman and then looks over at me, "I thought maybe England. My wife's cousin lives in England". In an effort to emphasize its importance, he spends longer saying the word England versus any other word.

"Oh, have you been?"

"No, one day. One day I want to live in England and make so much money. Not rupees.", he laughs. "My wife's cousin has two restaurants in London. I want a big restaurant and a lot of customers, like you."

"Having lots of money sounds great. I've never been to England. One day I'm sure." I say between sips of sweet chai.

"You are from America. President George Bush, junior.", he puts his hand to his forehead and shakes his head. "No good, uh?"

“No, not good.” I leave it at that and I’m fortunate he tends to another customer. Although I’m not part of Bush Jr’s cabinet, I’m constantly made to account for the president’s decisions as if I have a say in the matter. Not so much by the locals, but mainly by European travelers who eye me with suspicion and derision till I assure them I’m not in favor of the Iraq invasion. It’s very likely Bush will invade based on controversial talks to that effect.

The woman is still looking at me and says something to the chai wallah who then asks me, “sons, daughters?”

“Huh. What?”

“Children, you have?”

“Nope, no children. No husband. Just me. Anyway, I’m only twenty-two. I can already tell she’s married because of the red powder smudged on her hairline. Is that her child?”

“Sindoor, the red powder is called sindoor”, he explains and then speaks to the woman.

After he translates for me, she speaks to him, and he says, “She has two boys and one girl. He’s one of her sons”. I look over at him, he’s a quiet boy or bored. “She married at twenty-one. She’s very blessed.”

“Oh, congratulations” I say, wondering about my choice of words. Finding a way to relate to her, I add, “My mother also has three kids, but two girls and one boy. I’m in the middle.”

When the chai wallah translates, she bobbles her head approvingly, as Indians tend to do. Waving a banana at me I shake my head but she thrusts it even closer at me. I accept it, as I’m hungry. I say, “thank you” and she nods. A genuinely nice person, she’s like ghee that warms the heart. Smiling and drinking, she won’t stop staring at me. It’s hard to say if she sees me as an oddity, exotic even, or if she feels sorry for me in my solitary journey.

Walking off I hear the chai wallah say to me, “come tomorrow. I have so much chai for you”.

“Ok, I’ll try. Bye”

As I continue walking, beggars crouching on the ground covered in dust cup their hands towards me, some have stubs

instead of fingers. This time around I don't stop, fearing I'll be followed. The blistering heat exacerbates the various smells, from car exhaust to deep-fried samosas and crowds of people sweating. Men chew betel nut and spit red saliva splotches onto the pavement. Cars clunk, while others speed by. Men walk hand in hand. When I first saw this custom in Nepal I was under the impression the Asian sub-continent had an overabundance of gay men. But I was told it's customary for men to hold hands and the intimate gesture isn't romantic.

Walking past a clothing store, a clerk with folded arms is standing in the doorway. I hear my song and stop to listen while bopping my head: "Pardesi pardesi jaana nahin. Pardesi pardesi jaana nahin. Mujhe chhod ke. mujhe chhod ke"

"You like Hindi music. Come in, I play again for you. We have so many saris and kurtas. Cheap price".

"No thank you". I say as I walk off. I sing to myself: *pardessi pardessi janna neheeeee. pardessi pardessi janna neheeeee*. Since that's the only line I remember I sing it repeatedly. I wish I were a Bollywood actress, I'd dance impromptu in the street and everyone would join me in revelry.

Realizing I still hadn't had a meal I stop into a restaurant. For some reason I don't quite understand, in India restaurants are called hotels. I go to eat thali as it's mostly all I eat while in India. At 20 rupees, about fifty cents US, I order a plate of rice, assorted vegetable curries and bread. The restaurant is pretty bare-bones, no special decorations or colors, just wooden tables and plastic chairs serving their utilitarian purpose. I go to the sink to wash my hands as is commonplace throughout the country, since I'll be eating with my hands like the locals.

Sitting down to eat, I leaf through my travel book, honing on a map of Varanasi. Men in button down shirts and slacks sit alone reading newspapers. A group of young women giggle amongst themselves. Across from me are a family: a man, grandparents, a woman and a couple of kids. A toddler wearing a jet-black bob and kohl-rimmed eyes to ward off evil spirits sits on her mother's lap. When she isn't trying to grab her braid, she's

grasping one of her mother's glass bangles stacked on her wrist. All the while, her mother is attempting to feed her rice while beaming at her with a mixture of devotion, attentiveness and care. I could only wish to have had a mother like her, maybe I would have an easier time at life. That I can remember, I've never seen a child cry while in this country. Recalling when my neighbor had a baby who often cried, my mother advised keeping her in her crib so as not to indulge her with too much attention. I'm touched by the love afforded on children in India, especially because a lot of what I see was amiss in my upbringing.

A mother and daughter are sitting beside me talking about university, but it sounds like they live elsewhere. Whereas in the USA, outfits are drab with Americans often wearing muted colors and denim, in India women wear as brightly-colored clothing as possible often showcasing patterns or golden borders. Seeing a kaleidoscope of hues on a regular basis instantly enhances my mood. The mother is wearing a pink sari while her daughter is dressed in a blue salwar kameez. I'm trying to mimic the locals as much as possible to avoid fitting into the stereotype of a pompous and arrogant American. I also wear a salwar kameez, marooned-color with white designs. Loose pajama-fitting pants and matching long, thin tops are comfortable and modest. But I still hold on to my individualistic tendencies. Unlike other women who wear their dupatta with folds dangling in front of their chest with the ends facing back, I wear the scarf-like garment with the ends facing forward. Sometimes I do away with it altogether. It's most comfortable for me even if I'm forgoing convention.

I'm trying not to eavesdrop but I can't help it. Feeling lonely, I recently parted with Niv, an Israeli I had a fling with in Rishikesh. Heading to Jaipur while I was heading to Agra, he asked me to join him but the connection was fleeting. I need to do as I please on this trip, I treasure my autonomy. But here I was alone now regretting my decision.

The smallish-shaped woman looks over at me, "hello, I'm Sandhya and this is my daughter Anupama. What's your name?" she asks sounding Indian but also with a tinge of British. Her salt

and pepper hair is slicked back into a braid, not a stray hair in sight.

“Hello, I’m Katy. Are you both from here, Sandhya?” I ask.

“No, we’re from Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. In India, younger women call older women Auntie, out of respect. But you don’t have to, it’s difficult for foreigners to learn our customs”, she says dourly.

“I don’t even call my real aunts aunt. I just call them by their first name. Honorifics aren’t important in my family, I guess.”

“Ah, I see. Anupama is studying in University. She was living in a dorm for girls before a motorist ran over her foot. She’s now partially handicapped. I help my daughter. We’ve rented an apartment and return home every few weeks.”

“I’m studying Agricultural Science at Banaras Hindu University, BHU for short. I plan to become a professor. Improved agricultural production will help eradicate poverty in India, over time, by using the most efficient methods.”

She sounds like she’s delivering a PSA in a commercial or on one on of those PBS telethons. Even so, she’s living her life for a good cause while I, on the other hand, idle away my time going from restaurant to clothing store to temple and reverse.

“And what are you studying?”, sitting perfectly erect, she inquires sounding prim and proper.

“I’m not studying right now. I quit school.” I explain.

“What were you studying?”, They’re not poor, that’s for sure. Probably middle class to upper-middle class. The conversation has a middle-class to upper-middle class uppity air that’s already peppered with judgement.

“A bunch of different courses, history, political science, painting, design, drawing. I thought I would go to art school till I saw other student’s artwork and realized I suck,” I say with a smirk knowing my waywardness perplexes them. They just stare at me. “Anyway”, I continue, “since I was undecided on my major and wanting to do something exciting, I took this trip. Plus, Indian culture fascinates me. I lived in an Ashram in California for close



to a year". I was about to mention how my depression factors into my decision to travel as well but having just met them, decided against it.

The holy Ganges is the highlight of a trip to Varanasi. The Ganges river traverses throughout northern India before emptying into Bangladesh. Varanasi, or Benares as the locals call the city, is its most sacred point. Dying here is auspicious assuring moksha in the afterlife. When Hindus die, their bodies are burned on a pyre and their remains are dusted onto to the Ganges. I'm curious if I'll see a body being burned. I'm both spooked and fascinated by the prospect of seeing the macabre ritual in person. "I haven't been to the Ganges yet. Will I see bodies being burned during cremations?"

"The bodies are covered in fabric and wooden logs. They take a long time to burn." the mother explained, with a sigh. "Do you think Indians are backwards people?"

"No, no, not at all." I reply rapidly. "Why would you say that?"

"Some foreigners think so of Indians. Where are you from?"

"The USA", I answer uncomfortably.

"Are you from Florida?" asks the daughter. "I saw a documentary about Disney World recently. The amusement park looks so nice"

"Ha! No, I'm from New York City-

"Ah, where the airplanes crashed into the tall buildings?", Anupama asks.

"Yes, but before coming here I was living in San Francisco". 9-11 is the last thing I want to talk about. "It's Funny you mention Florida though, when my father moved there, not where Disney is located, but three hours south I-"

"With your mother?" Sandhya asked.

"Um, no, they separated and so-"

"In India, families never separate. Even if a husband hits his wife, she stays with him. It's not right but that's the way it is" the mother offers stoically.

“That’s sad. Well, I didn’t have a say in my parent’s separation, in that case-”

“Where are your mother and father?”

“Home, probably praying for my safe return”, I quip.

“You must be my daughter’s age. My daughter would never travel alone”.

“Yes, I know. You don’t know how often people who don’t speak a word of English, ask, “mother? father?”, seeing a woman in her early 20’s unchaperoned. Especially when I’m on trains and buses”

“In India, girls travel with their brother, father or mother. Who’s going to protect you?”

“Well, I’ve managed okay so far. I don’t take unnecessary risks by avoiding traveling alone at night. I dress modestly as you can see. I frequent touristy areas or densely populated places, at the very least”-

“How foolish” she admonishes.

As direct as Indians are, I was still taken aback by her frankness. Usually locals ask about my parents, but once I answer they proceed to talk about their family and customs. As much as I want to defend myself I still see relate to her caution. On my border crossing from Nepal to India I was the only woman on the bus out of about 30 people. It was like an episode of the Twilight Zone in a society where women all but disappeared. I began to wonder what I got myself into. And another time, on a crowded train ride in third class, surrounded by a group of men, one looked at me angrily while speaking to me in his language. Sometimes, because of my dark hair while dressed as a local, I’m sometimes confused for a Kashmiri; light-skinned Indians from the northernmost part of India. The man eventually left me alone, but I wonder if I would’ve been able to converse with him, what may have transpired. Despite all this, coming from a country with such a high prevalence of gun violence, I often feel safer here than in the states.

I put on a brave front, not only to convince her I can tackle my adventure but more importantly to convince myself. If I

succumb to pessimistic thinking, I may as well pack my backs and head home now. “I’ll be fine. Actually, I am fine. Well. I’m finished eating. I should get going” I say quickly as I get up to leave. “It was nice meeting you both”, I lied.

“Did you like your thali?”, Anupama asked.

“Yes, but I’m used to eating it. I even eat it in the U.S.” I say as I get up.

“It wasn’t very spicy for you? Some foreigners have a hard time with spices in their food. We became friends with a Norwegian woman, Ane, who was in Benares for a year to learn the sitar. She only went to one restaurant where she was sure her food wouldn’t be spicy.”

“Sometimes the food is too spicy in this country. But I’ve gotten used to it, being here three months. I think it’s possible to get used to anything, really. Over time, at least. Well, I’m off.”

“Wait. We’ll come with you. To show you the ghats and temples.” Sandhya urged.

“It’s quite alright”, starting to sound slightly British myself, for some odd reason. “I have to meet up with my friend, she’s from, um, Germany and I think, er, her mom is with her or something”.

“You don’t know if her mom is with her?”

“Um, I met her on the bus ride here and I think I remember she mentioned plans to meet up with her mom. I believe so. Well, gotta go, bye”

“Be safe dear. Be safe” mom cautioned.

Walking out into the streets, I join the various sights, scents and sounds that make up Varanasi. As I jostle for space amongst what seems like most of humanity, in a few blocks I will have arrived at my destination- the mighty Ganges river.

Tom Snarsky

**Gardenback**

Things pass from me  
To you. I am as naked &  
Without down as you were  
When you came into the  
World as a baby toucan,  
Frugivorous & vulnerable,  
Hoping for guavas & as yet  
Unfamiliar with love. You  
Have just the right set  
Of feelings in your eyes,  
A correct melancholy  
Muddled with mint &  
Still breathing on the good  
Side of the road. Nothing  
Anymore can be simple  
Between these, our  
Economic bodies—but  
The figs will still be here,  
Safe, when night falls.

Tom Snarsky

## **Putt-Putt Goes to the Moon**

Weather, the dark, fire, being separated  
from the sun for days, weeping, stitching  
a calendar together from scraps, not  
eating (or even remembering how), full  
days of silence, rubbing your back against  
the washboard abs of time, seeking unity  
and finding frogs, lemon in the water but  
no ice, I promise it's safer there, the spine  
here is harrowingly close to broken, it's  
afternoon and Side A has been over for  
hours, if you get up to flip it I'll dream of a  
grass made of mirrors, yes right a grass,  
we're nearly out of fuel and peat doesn't  
make itself, it just sits there, virtual and  
mean, waiting for the proper catastrophe  
to meld, our common heart now trivially  
empty, our lunchboxes all full of sand  
in the shape of tiny crickets, the sound the  
same and everything, the only difference  
being if you fill a stadium with crickets  
it will be loud but if you fill it with sand it'll  
be eerily quiet, settling, awaiting orders—

Corrine Binnings

## **I Looked for You**

I stopped by the stream that chattered softly  
under an awning of slender trees whose branches

rose like green towers against the sky, blocking  
the sun and creating a glut of moist air

between their trunks. I looked for you  
in your usual place, on the rock you claimed

as yours, your fishing spot.  
The ferns that escaped the damp earth

around your rock were green with life;  
they have not been trampled by your

bare feet in years; hanging their spinney bodies  
over the bank, they are wild and free,

mimicking the flicks and kicks your feet  
would make as you dangled them from

your rock-perch, crayfish bait, you called them;  
carefree toes breaking the water's surface,

ankles disappearing beneath its cold velvet  
and reappearing with a trail of droplets

that gave themselves back to the river  
from whence they came.

You were not there that day. So, I sat on your rock,  
allowing my feet to fall like stones

breaking the liquid as they came to rest  
on the river bed. I watched my feet, cut off

and disjointed just below the knee, yet attached  
like an artificial limb, mine but not quite;

there but not there

Nyeree Boyadjian

## **If We Never Spoke Again**

Writing even if it's bad writing. If you forget it. If you're sledgehammered. If you wanna get super smashed bro and play super smash bros. If you want your poems to give you the satisfaction you get when you read Reeves. If I want my sister to sit on park benches with me sober. If I know you don't like me anymore. If I still ask you to hangout every time its two am. If you held me with your hollow hands. If they were cut up by guitar strings. If you stir soup in my chest and then sip instead of slurp it. If I can't hate you in my head. If there is no such thing as closure, or God, or meaning to life. If I quit smoking cigarettes. If I sleep before midnight. If you remember when the universe revived the dead bird for me, twice ten years apart. If you lay in my bed enough to leave your bodies imprint in the mattress. If the checkered tables cold. If I teach you how to crush Adderall in the summer. If I put my sheets on my roommates mattress so we can fuck in a bed I never wanted to die in. If you can smell the antiseptic. If we got stoned on a rock and watched things that stayed still. If you bought the right condoms cause I hate how latex feels. If you answer my texts when they're Juno references you don't get. If I saw, if I saw you turn into Peter Pan. If I dyed my hair green to match your outfit. If you kissed me in your hot boxed bathroom on a Thursday. If it knotted the nerves in my stomach for four months. If it rotted the nerves in my stomach. If I wasted my Vyvance homework session writing you into my journal. If I fell asleep thinking about the seven days in a row I woke up in the room you shared with three people you hated. If I saw one of them at a party tonight. If it made me text you sentences that didn't make sense about swordfish. If I sat on my bed with vodka and monster Rehab and wrote this.



Francine Witte

**End of the day**

and the sunlight slumps over  
the roof, and sleep starts to gather  
in your legs, your eyes, and the rooms  
fill with vanishing light, and pockets  
of the day become part of you, and you  
are just another body now, reaching  
for night dreams to tell you who  
were, who you are, or who  
will become, and if you ever  
do get an answer, you might  
believe it was there the entire  
time, right in front of you, waiting,  
just waiting for you to stand still.

## **Contributor Notes** (in order of appearance)

Nick Yingling's work has previously appeared in Fourteen Hills, Rock & Sling, The Merrimack Review, Written Here: The Community of Writers Poetry Review, and Time of Singing. He studied poetry at UC Davis and lives in LA.

Eve Beisinger (née Gubat), born Filipina, is an aspiring poet and worked as a magazine writer, editor, and proofreader. Her poems saw print in Ateneo de Manila University's Heights issues, Philippine Graphic, Philippines Free Press, and in the following anthologies: One Hundred Love Poems, In their Own Voice, Paper Monster Press, Quiet Shorts, {m}aganda, and Under the Storm. Living now in Germany with her husband and their cats, she permits (out of curiosity) and at the same time distrusts the subtle and personal "Eroberung" of a new "Ort" whose "Sprache" blends into her English- and Tagalog-shaped character.

Kate Ruebenson is a Portland, Oregon-based poet and teacher. She graduated with her MFA in Poetry from Brooklyn College in June 2016. Her work has previously appeared in Blakelight Magazine, Roanoke Review, Yellow Chair Review, Typehouse Magazine, Words, The Blue Hour, C4 Magazine, and Hanging Loose Press. Her poem "Crow Goes Hungry" was nominated for a Pushcart last year

Robert Julius is a queer writer and poet from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Currently, he lives in Columbus, Ohio with his husband and cat. You can follow him on Twitter @schumaker93

Michelle McMillan-Holifield is assistant editor for Edify Fiction. Her work has been included in or is forthcoming in Boxcar Poetry Review, Jabberwock Review, Sky Island Journal, Stirring, The Collagist, Toasted Cheese, Whale Road Review and

Windhover, among others. She hopes you one day find her poetry tacked to a tree somewhere in the Alaskan Wild.

John Weir is the author of two novels, *What I Did Wrong* and *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket*.

Daniel Putney is a poet and journalist based in northern Nevada. He holds a bachelor's degree in English writing from the University of Nevada, Reno, and is a student at the Mississippi University for Women's low-residency MFA program. His poems have appeared in *Brushfire Literature & Arts*, *Page & Spine*, *Feminist Spaces*, and Z Publishing House's *An Anthology of Emerging Poets*. You can find his journalistic writing at ETHNews, where he works as a reporter covering cryptocurrency and blockchain technology news. He is active on Twitter @01000100\_Putney and LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/dputney/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/dputney/).

Glen Armstrong holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and teaches writing at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. He edits a poetry journal called *Cruel Garters* and has three recent chapbooks: *Set List* (Bitchin Kitsch,) *In Stone* and *The Most Awkward Silence of All* (both Cruel Garters Press). His work has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Conduit* and *Cloudbank*.

Remi Recchia is a Ph.D. candidate in English-Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University. His work has appeared in *Barzakh Magazine*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Front Porch*, *Gravel*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *Haverthorn Press*, among others. He holds an MFA in Poetry from Bowling Green State University. You may follow him on Twitter at @steambbcrywolf.

Sarah A. Etlinger is a Pushcart-nominated poet and author of *Never One for Promises* (Kelsay Books, Nov.2018) as well as

an English professor who resides in Milwaukee, WI, with her family and a cocker spaniel mix. Her work can be found in *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *The Amethyst Review*, *Brine*, and many others. Interests include cooking, traveling, and learning to play the piano.

Gabriella Souza is an MFA candidate at Antioch University in Los Angeles, and she lives and work as a writer and editor in Baltimore. She began her writing career as a journalist and has won local and national awards for her work that has appeared in publications including *USA Today*, *The Virginian-Pilot*, and *Baltimore* magazine. Journalism provided her initial inquiry into character, which continues in her fiction work. She is motivated to explore emotions and experiences that are universal yet unique, using hints of fabulism to illustrate the intensity of the character's feelings.

Toren Wallace completed his M.F.A. in Creative Writing with an emphasis on poetry at California State University, Long Beach where he published the thesis, *Less Lonely: Intersections of the Unintentionally Objective*. His work has appeared in: *The Portland Review*, *West Trade Review*, *Poetic Diversity* (Los Angeles), and *Columbia Journal*, amongst others.

Dani Dymond is a 25-year-old graduate of Southern Connecticut State University (B.A., 2016) and California State University, Long Beach (M.F.A., 2018) whose work as a poet and prose writer has appeared in *Young Ravens Literary Review*, *Buck Off Magazine*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *LAROLA*, *all the sins*, and *Ireland's Banshee* literary mag. She lives in Southern California and writes most often about the women in her family, as well as mental health and intersectional feminism. A chapbook of her poems is forthcoming from *Bitterzoet Magazine*.

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Jennifer Ruth Jackson is an award-winning poet and fiction writer whose work has appeared in Red Earth Review, Banshee, and more. She runs a blog for disabled and/or neurodivergent writers called The Handy, Uncapped Pen from an apartment she shares with her husband. Follow her on Twitter @jenruthjackson

SaraEve is a performance poet and epilepsy advocate from northeast New Jersey. A 2015 Best of the Net nominee, she has performed for both local and national events, including the Epilepsy Foundation of Greater Los Angeles 2015 Care and Cure Benefit to End Epilepsy in Children and as a reader for Great Weather for MEDIA at the 2016 NYC Poetry Festival on Governors Island. She is the author of *You Must Be This Tall to Ride* (Swimming With Elephants Publishing) and *View from the Top of the Ferris Wheel* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House). She loves Instagram: @SaraEve41

Allison M. Charette translates literature from French into English. She has received an NEA Fellowship in Literary Translation and a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant, been selected for the Translation Lab residency at Art OMI, and been nominated for the Best of the Net. Her translation of *Beyond the Rice Fields*, the first novel to be translated from Madagascar, was published by Restless Books in 2017. She founded the Emerging Literary Translators' Network in America (ELTNA.org), a networking and support group for early-career translators. Allison's other translations have appeared in the New York Times, Words Without Borders, The Other Stories, Two Lines, Epiphany, SLICE Literary Magazine, the SAND Journal, and others. Find her online at [charettetranslations.com](http://charettetranslations.com).

Frederick Lowe is a poet, translator and essayist residing in rural western New Jersey and in rural eastern Maine, May – September. He publishes widely and has twice been a Pushcart nominee. His specialty is to collaborate with graphic artists in the production of folios, artists books, and broadsides. The latest, MOON, will be available November 1.

Ariel Francisco is the author of *A Sinking Ship is Still a Ship* (Burrow Press, 2020) and *All My Heroes Are Broke* (C&R Press, 2017). A poet and translator born in the Bronx to Dominican and Guatemalan parents and raised in Miami, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Academy of American Poets*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn.

Jacques Viau Renaud (7/28/41—6/15/65) was born in Haiti and raised in the Dominican Republic following his father's exile in 1948. During the Dominican Revolution of 1965, he joined the rebel forces in support of ousted president Juan Bosch, fighting against the US backed dictatorship. He was killed in battle at age 23. His collected poems (*Poesia Completa*) was published in its original Spanish by Ediciones del Cielonaranja in 2006.

Marc Stallion was born in Chicago, Illinois. At the age of 13, he performed original spoken word and found a passion for this genre. In 2014, he entered the B.F.A Acting program at AMDA-LA. Where he had the opportunity to directed and star in several of his own plays. In 2017 Stallion started his first semester in Antioch's, Culver City MFA in creative writing. He is now approaching his final semesters. Stallion is currently working on his next collection, featuring his unique set of expectations and experiences as a young African American male in America and elsewhere.

Nyeree Boyadjian is an Armenian, LGBTQ+ writer whose content often depicts life with mental illness. She is a second-year

creative writing student at The University of the Arts and has had two poems, *We Don't Wean Off*, and *Catch 22* published in the Spring, 2018 edition of the *Red Cedar Review*. Nyeree was born in Queens, New York but currently lives in Philadelphia with her cat, Dakota.

For the past few years Laura Johanna Waltje has been untangling private and public culpability and complicity. She is a writer, sound designer, textile artist, and educator. As is the cofounder and managing editor of *Second Draft Press*, she publishes experimental writing and reviews of work by the queer, poc, and qpoc artists that deserve your attention. Her poetry has appeared in *Airport Road*, *Rosewater Magazine*, and *The Gazelle*. Her fiction has been collected in the anthologies *Knock on Sky* and *Glass Bottom Boat*. For more of her shenanigans visit [laurawaltje.com](http://laurawaltje.com)

Mikayla Morell has been writing since she was nine years old. That is, if you count the one page “novels” about Princess Lee that she hand wrote on wide ruled paper in the back of my Spanish journal. She does wonder what Princess Lee is up to now. She grew up in a small town in South Jersey but her family is originally from the suburbs of Philly so she decided to come back to her roots and attend college at the University of the Arts. She is currently a junior.

Katarina Begonja is an aspiring book editor currently pursuing a degree in English. She is an avid reader with a deep love for mythology, young adult fiction, and history. A New Yorker of Croatian descent, she dreams of traveling to the many places she has read about.

Margarita Serafimova was shortlisted for the Montreal International Poetry Prize 2017 and Summer Literary Seminars 2018 Poetry Contest, and long-listed for the Erbacce Press Poetry

Prize 2018 and the Red Wheelbarrow Prize 2018. Margarita has three collections in Bulgarian. Her work appears in Agenda Poetry, London Grip New Poetry, Trafika Europe, European Literature Network, The Journal, A-Minor, Waxwing, Nixes Mate Review, StepAway, Ink, Sweat and Tears, HeadStuff, Minor Literatures, The Writing Disorder, The Birds We Piled Loosely, Orbis, Chronogram, Noble/ Gas Quarterly, Origins Journal, miller's pond, Obra/ Artifact, TAYO, Shot Glass Journal, Opiate, Poetic Diversity, Novelty Magazine, Pure Slush, Harbinger Asylum, Punch, Tuck, Ginosko, etc. Visit: <https://www.facebook.com/MargaritaISerafimova>

Maayan Avery hails from Los Angeles, California and lives in Israel, where she welcomes new muses. Maayan has been featured in ISACOUSTIC, After the Pause, Eunoia Review and Lunch Ticket. She enjoys chai tea and daydreaming about treehouses.

Renee Beck has a B.S. in English language arts, M.Ed. in curriculum and instruction, and a creative writing MFA all from Ashland university.

Brian Matta has an MFA from CUNY Queens College. His poems can be found in Newtown Literary Journal, No Dear Magazine, and Earth and Sky. He also has a chapbook, Stuck, Stutter, Persist with Cringe-Worthy Poetry Collective.

Kimiko Hahn is author of nine collections of poetry. Her latest chapbook is ERASING "HONOR." She teaches in the MFA Program at Queens College, CUNY.

Marie Scarles is a writer, editor, and educator based in Philadelphia, PA. She's currently an MFA candidate in poetry and nonfiction at Rutgers University–Camden. Tweet with her @mscarles.



Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician currently residing on Salt Spring Island BC, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with well over a thousand poems published internationally in magazines such as Poetry, Rattle and the North American Review. His books are 'The So-Called Sonnets (Silenced Press), 'An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy' (Cawing Crow Press) and 'Like As If' (Pskis Porch), Hearsay (The Poet's Haven).

Matthew Rotando's poems have appeared in various journals, including Matador, Green Linden, Shampoo, canwehaveourballback, and Tishman Review. His first and second poetry books (The Comeback's Exoskeleton, 2008, and Hail, 2019) are published by Upset Press, Brooklyn. He is a Fulbright Fellow and holds degrees from Duke University (B.A.), Brooklyn College (M.F.A.), and the University of Arizona (M.A., Ph.D.). He is a professor of English Literature and Creative Writing at SUNY Nassau Community College. He bicycles regularly with Dickinson, Borges, and Neruda.

Julia Tolo is a poet and translator from Oslo, Norway. She is the author of the chapbooks holes of silver (2018) from Ghost City Press and August, and the snow has just melted (2017) from Bottlecap Press. Her translation of Norwegian poet Paal-Helge Haugen's novel Anne is forthcoming from Hanging Loose Press in spring 2019.

Anjuli Fiedler is a writer, lawyer, dancer, and musician based in San Francisco, CA. She was most recently published in the summer 2018 issue of Poetry Quarterly.

Gale Acuff has had poetry published in *Ascent*, *McNeese Review*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Poem*, *Weber*, *Maryland Poetry Review*, *Florida Review*, *Slant*, *Poem*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Arkansas Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Orbis*, and many other journals. He has authored three books of poetry, all from

BrickHouse Press: *Buffalo Nickel*, *The Weight of the World*, and *The Story of My Lives*. He has taught university English in the US, China, and the Palestinian West Bank.

Diana Temkin is a native New Yorker. An undergrad majoring in English at Queens College, she also works for the Department of Education as a Teacher Assistant. She misses India and the various other Asian countries she visited long ago. One day she hopes to return.

Tom Snarsky teaches mathematics at Malden High School in Malden, Massachusetts, USA.

A Jamaican by birth, Corrine Binnings is a second year MFA Creative Writing (Poetry) student at Florida Atlantic University, who also teaches College Writing 1 and 2. She has published both Poetry and Creative Nonfiction in the Dark River Review journal, Cameron University Gold Mine magazine, and in Z Publishing's Emerging Poets series.

Francine Witte is the author of four poetry chapbooks and two flash fiction chapbooks. Her full-length poetry collection, *Café Crazy*, has recently been published by Kelsay Books. She is reviewer, blogger, and photographer. She is a former English teacher. She lives in NYC.