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Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

Well this is certainly not how we thought this would go. It's not how we would have ever wished this to go. Welcome back to Love & Squalor, we're excited to share this issue with you. It's hard for me to find the right words for you, which feels hypocritical considering we strung over 100 pages of words together.

This issue is full of love, gardens, and grief. This is for Maddie. This is for her friends, her family, the people who never got to meet her but still know her talent (as a writer, an artist, a musician, a friend, and more). This is for Maddie, who had submitted to Love & Squalor as long as I've been a part of it. This is to honor her and her work, and to always remember her.

Dear reader, I have to be honest with you: I've never written an editor's note alone. If you read closely, you can see that this journal is stitched with love (and very little squalor). You might even find my whole heart or a couple hours of lost sleep.

This entire issue was put together through Zoom. Thank you to the editors of Love & Squalor who showed up every Monday at 8pm. Thank you for always rejoining the Zoom link after 40 minutes because I never bothered with Zoom Pro.

Thank you for your dedication to this journal, you make my heart warm.

Thank you to our contributors, we would not have this journal without you.

In the words of Maddie Mertsch, "enter the multiverse."

With love & squalor,

Ash

Poet's End

Anna Schechter

[trigger warning: death of a loved one, hospitals, illness]

“Do not go gentle into that good night,” Dylan Thomas wrote.

I wish I could ask him to clarify: Does it count as

Rage, raging against the dying of the light

If they give you Ativan?

If you didn't ask for it? If they slipped it in your arm as you thrashed? If you had a plan in place:

No ambulance no hospital no Ativan?

But no one listened?

Does it count

If she lived as you wrote?

Dylan, tell me, did she fail to do as you wished? She wanted her end to be a poet's.

Isn't wanting enough?

Learning how to write again she began a poem: “Mother was a lesbian” and

Penciled into quaking being the Wisconsin woods of her youth.

And an orchid.

And the beige hostility of a single room, an entrapment.

In a spiral bound notebook, the 99¢ kind.

Why couldn't we have gotten her a pen?

Something leather-bound?

They rejected every manuscript.

Would they take them now?

If they knew what we know? That hers was a disease less than one in a million?

That her visions must've been Dostoevskian, Byronic? (Epilepsy is as close as I can get to comparison.) That fitful conditions of the mind make for the best writers and,

Calcium came to coat hers

Ten years faster than she said it would?

Hers was a best of her generation; she would've had Ginsberg howling had she been allowed to be

Audible.

Husband gone for another, wife in apron, love of words, strict with self, a regular Sylvia Plath.

Her layers were lived in, as Kunitz instructed, and she never littered.

She lived as she read. Dream Work,

The Grapes of Wrath. She was a Depression child, frugal with everything:
Floss picks, orange peels, even steps and breaths.
Rilke's only novel was delivered to my house (a small mistake at checkout) and coveted by me
as containing

Answers.

My greed kept it from her shelf.

It was I who failed her. She who gave everything.

Who built Noah's Ark with blocks,

Who showed me *Overboard and Weekend at Bernie's*,

Who rode a camel,

Who rode out the Sichuan earthquake.

I ask myself if Rilke could've taught her an end.

If an end can be taught. Teach me, someone, please.

The Abyss

Matti Apse

I close my book at 1 a.m.
Leave the unclipped aluminum lamp
lit. There is no gust of wind

strong enough to make me close
a bedroom window, no possible sentence
frightening enough to summon my hand. It's no secret

we brush our legs together
under the table. If only you spoke those words
would you wrest me from my present daydreams

even as you sit just across from me,
a coffee in the corner of the table,
a tiny steel pot in the other corner.

When I turn off the bathtub faucet
in this strange bathroom I've used before
I drop my thighs down to the cold grey mat

covering the porcelain. Cross-legged,
I bump my knees against the edges of the bowl
then turn the shower on, letting droplets

sputter, fractured, stippling
my shoulder, remembering
my back. I conjure

visions of your hands spilling
over me, your hands offering
water, your hands becoming
my hands.

capital (we are unwilling descendants of adam smith)

tova g.

to be published in *the eunoia review* in june 2021

the inside of my head is a walgreens. my memories: commodity. my fears: out for display behind backlit glass cases. underpaid college students, half stoned, half daydreaming, are stationed behind white counters.

inside my head it's late august. yellow *back to school* signs in comic sans drip from fluorescents. children of 8 & 10 & 12 wander the aisles, sent there for pencils, distracted by moments stacked like notebooks. who brought them here i can't tell.

inside my head there's an end of summer sale. old report cards— 3 for \$4.99. my dad's recipe for perfect scrambled eggs— half off. the steady feeling of inevitable abandonment— two for the price of one.

i don't know why or whether i do or do not wish to sell myself. i don't know if i'm the consumer, consumed, or consummator, or if there's truly a difference, or if it even matters. i don't know who collects my brain cells like lottery tickets, gnawing at them with moldy pennies lurching towards a jackpot in vain. i do know that there's a back room through a side door, & after miles of concrete & unremarkable graffiti there's a trash can on fire. i've never seen its contents through the flames, but i do know it smells like december, sour wine, & burnt bread.

(so i guess christ isn't coming back.)

Hart Crane

William Shullenberger

Amid your gorgeous panoply of fleets
tricked out with sails whose tongues the wind would know,
you dared, through tempest-shuttled driftings, to
insinuate the breaking of the sea.

White coral lovers, mute in aqua sheets,
could cool your fever with their hands of snow,
could smooth the maps of terror from your brow,
if you could bear the sentence of the sea.

And gods could not endure your reckless song,
who plied its pirouette to dip and spin
through winking vortices, seas' mortal grin—
you fractured brilliant among bracken flung.
Yet echoes of your voice survive to climb
the insatiate silences of seas and time.

Grandma's secret garden, neglected

Sofia Quinn

perished. The black-eyed susans only sheathe the rubber raccoon
Grandma put in the garden, in memories where I was
Mary Lennox tripping on stepping stones.
In winter when Grandma wouldn't let us pick wick beneath the moon,
dirt patches we buried the ping-pong balls in weren't
a deathbed for roof shingles,

and the wick became the candlestick I rose to the fickle forsythia,
whose arms perpetually repelled time and stretched upward,
predicting the fence's tumble onto forsythia's neighbors,
the colony of zinnias founded there,
bending the forsythia's spine.

Time's tick, tick, bomb! Was the place we grieved
the garden that raised ten grandchildren
on cucumbahs, tomatahs, pass the sadness please,
carry them to the kitchen,
where we clean piss off the floor,
instead of lichen.

Grandma was always there,
until she wasn't here.
Her mind could be anywhere, somewhere,
overdrive in everywhere.

march again

m cole

john was first gay person i ever met,
and the first i knew to die.
unless my uncle was gay,
and maybe he was.

i felt guilty that i had to double check the spelling of his last name when i found out.

dinner was chewier than it normally is.
flank steak instead of ribeye
i don't know what the names of steaks mean
my dad always bought whatever was cheapest
and burnt it black in the oven with no seasoning
because, *that's how i like it.*

you can't just ask someone, "how did they die"
you have to meticulously look through everything posted about them and piece
it together on your own
unless you're family.

when you are,
it's dreams about babies dissolving,
people folding into suitcases
and not knowing if you're awake or asleep.

i don't want to go to a baby funeral.
i don't want to see a miniature casket.
i don't want to hear how the baby will never play baseball or write an award winning essay.

all of the snow is melted except for the lumps of dirty ice
that were shoveled too high.
it looks like it's raining
the ice is just melting off the parking structure.

i can feel the space between my teeth
when i suck air into my mouth

even though i had braces twice before high school.

i've been drinking smoothies every day
and adding more grease to my food,

i'm scared of cats
the same way i'm scared of
lizards or snakes,
but not the same way i'm scared of hospitals.

wait,
where did everyone go?

Charlie/First Snow/Brooklyn/2020

Jane Scheiber

God damn...

God damn?

God damn.

It's been two years

since last winter

And so I have forgotten

the totality of my momma,

How her snow-tongue remembers

Tree knees and park bends.

My Californian boyfriend

Sweeps away the first hour from

Car hoods,

bar windows, the front of my coat. And we pass through the graffitied portal
home.

Wyckoff is silent.

The avenues yawn beneath the white facade until

it is most comfortable to recant footsteps

and street performers.

My neighbors attend confessions

in anticipation of the 25th and in their apology to trash rats.

I do not know

when I first met

December,

But this is a reunion;

We press our cheeks together like glass.

one night she broke my gumline

o. captain

I will be the death of you, she tells me, the first words
since we kissed and her canines broke skin, the line
of my gums yielding with the whole of me. Her eyes
are hungry-shining and there is nothing I can do

but follow her, sinuous and sinking. My lover,
the mycologist, was not my lover yesterday, was not before
this moment, hands buried in my ribcage, tongue a vice,
thigh just where I could turn my head and bite and tear.

She unspools my capillaries like a seamstress, bloody-
weaver-woman. Takes her favorite mold, inoculates
my skin, watches it fester, spread, envelop. Claims me
her new home. I shudder, butterfly-pinned,

my body ready-rotting, my lover, the mycologist,
bent over me and gnawing at my clavicle, urging
mycelia into my ligaments. In the morning, I hold her
to my ruptured body, let her eat what she will.

The mushrooms marry us, the fungal priest p(residing)
in our tendons and our iron-slurry organs. Her kiss
is aching, pulling blood from me, she says, my wife,
my fascination. I am florid, fungi fruiting

from my hyphae-heavy flesh, silk caps parting my skin,
and my lover, the mycologist, rakes her teeth down,
devouring. I writhe, upturning like a new grave's
earth, kiss my way to the sweetest source of rot.

My lover, the mycologist, teeth at my neck, implores
me not to leave her. Promises to thread me through
with mushroom-stuff, to kill me gentle-sweet, to hold me,
tells me, no one else would give me this.

For You

Oliver Adams

how i long for your gentle touch
i wish to be a strawberry
on the vine
gently plucked by your soft hands and
oh, to stain your fingertips
red
as your teeth sink into my flesh

Home Sick

Melanie Greenberg

It is difficult for me to think of the process of negation or the concept of emptiness as a whole without death as the final destination. Death is the simplest form of negation, the most direct dissolving of the self. Adolescent sickness is a halfway mark, a suspension of form. You lie still somewhere. You watch the eerie daylight, how it seeps in and through you. It does not consider your form, as you are without one. You eat soft and unmemorable things. You are luminous and empty. In the hospital bed, the speaker from Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" lies with her hands upturned:

How free it is, you have no idea how free—
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing (30-33).

In "River of Milk", Kaveh Akbar's speaker tell us:

bear with me it wasn't long ago I was brainless
lazily pulling fireflies into my teeth chewing them

into pure light so much of me then was nothing
I could have fit into a sugar cube my body burned

like a barnful of feathers nothing was on fire
but fire was on everything (1-6).

Sickness cocoons us from being. Is it easier to abandon the body when it is not working the way we are used to? The most peaceful week of my life was the recovery from getting my wisdom teeth out. I was 17. Unlike most memories from that time, I can recall very little of how

my body looked. I saw things with a quiet evenness. The walls wavered elusively, like passing clouds. The calm I felt was not exactly attached to me. I caught glimpses of this feeling catching the bus home from downtown, the safe lurch of being moved by something. All the poems I wrote during this time were about dissolving. This half suspension allowed me access to a new artistic landscape. The process of making images with words was a kind of transformation, a way to recognize the material world as illusion. In a poem things are no longer concrete, *the* holds the same life-force as *tree*. The right composition of word images lets you recreate this state of non-being.

Poems I wrote like this didn't feel strong in the way I was used to. There wasn't always a distinct feeling there to propel me through, but reading them made me feel safe. I called one poem, "Without Body I am Ultraviolet Light Clasped Inside an Oyster Shell". Combing through it now, the plotless points are what stay with me, the places where words stack and and try to dissolve the self. In these places I am:

always wet haired fragrant
quiet arctic a pure entity my limbs collected
glaciers fingertips stinging with wintergreen
salve saltwater pearls kissing each gum steam
flushed preserved honeycomb
radiant and careful

I am:

a thing kept carefully.

I move:

without the consequence of eyes.

I became what Longchenpa wrote: "without true existence, intangible, uncertain, evanescent,

Insubstantial, indefinable” (12).

The first step towards recognizing illusion is to dissolve or dislodge. When doing this with words feels counterintuitive, I open Facetune and select the reshape tool. I drag at my left cheekbone until it stretches and sags. Another swipe and it is amorphous with exposed pixels. I keep going until it resembles a fleshy canon, a strangely smooth desert, the Columbia River Gorge in pinkish sepia. It is an easy negation, turning myself to a blur. It is too soft of a process to be called annihilation. Mariko Mori calls technology “the unending search for both an eternal loss and an eternal present”. In 1996, she made a body capsule out of transparent plexiglass and lay inside it in front of various global monuments. The project, *Beginning of the End* was an attempt to find harmony between the spirit and material. Her body and the capsule seem inseparable; all textures of the monuments and buildings slip from their previous associations. In 2019, Mori and her capsule are dislodged and transported to a still mountain lake in a digital collage by Janeth Davalos. The capsule makes ripples, but leaves behind no reflection. The body of Mori, cocooned in plexiglass is dissolving. The peak of the mountain and wispy sheen of clouds make themselves known as a false backdrop. With all being suspended, it is idyllic.



YOU ARE HERE

Mary Morris

You are here
the map says
as if we knew or cared
where here is.
For we could be anywhere.
The fire exits don't matter
Nor do the signs pointing down vestibules
To the floor where you are supposed to be,
The hotel where you think you are staying,
the winding streets that take you to
the monument you are intended to see.
For here is nowhere
that really matters
Because like the rainbow's end
or the philosopher's river
As soon as you reach it
here becomes there
and something you have still
to name or place or see
eludes you once again
or, worse, carries you along
to where you have yet to be.

New England

Jane Scheiber

Cold fingers trickling down my inner arm like the wind. Hiss
of radiators and burning my hand on the pipe.
Stingy, crusty nose. Snot.
Snow pants rubbing together, squeaky blue snow.
Wind and blood knocked out of my lungs
as I gaze up at the swing
splitting blue skies,
And my brother's knee sliced open with the edge of his new skis.

Peed in my Mudd Jeans at the hospital. Twice.

1. Calvin's stitches, 2006.

2. Mom's third round of chemotherapy, 2018.

The red-brown leaves look like the stains in my underwear.

Stonewalls erupt from the land;

My spine peeks through my skin when I bend over for my pediatrician.

Shifting the gears of my first car

And God's palms veiling the silos.

for the middle aged woman in my boston adjacent suburb:

Brig

for the middle aged women in my boston adjacent suburb:

you are so perplexing to me: why do you do

that thing where you mention something in that

hushed voice? it wants to be quiet, but are you aware

that it is so loud? why do you look at me Like That? Do

you wanna fuck me? or are you trying to figure out which

part of me you hate the most-- which part of me will corrupt

your daughter... why do you move through the world in a way

that displays your insecurities in your loud and performative voices

and you sit in the coffee shop and talk about where your sons are going

to college and whether or not their hockey season will be canceled and you

volunteer on the board of youth services and bring in cookies to the PTA and you

go to St. Agnes on the weekend and pray to a God that you don't believe, truly

believe

in, but you baptized your kids because it was the 'right thing to do' and when they

ask you

why you make them go to Sunday school you tell them they just have to so they

do and

one day they're going to have children and baptize them in a church they don't

really

believe in and tell them that they should just go to sunday school and that god

loves them and your kids are going to be in a frat basement one day and

slip a girl something, you'll never know, and you'll tell them that god

loves everyone and do you know that before I knew that I was gay

I knew that I was Wrong because of the way your perfect boys

Looked at me. You perplex me... is this another thing that

you'll whisper in your friends ear? because vulnerability

is gossip for you, and you don't ever want to let anyone

know... you're at st agnes again, praying to a god

You don't believe in. what do you think

About praying for me? I've been

Doing quite terribly since the

Last time your perfect boy

Looked me and screamed

dyke

The Sounds of Secrets

Jamie Lenehan

My mother filled me in on the congregation gossip as she drove us back from church, the driveway cracking in the July heat. It was the point in the summer when you could see the rays of heat radiating in the distance, dancing in the stillness, making anything too far ahead fuzzy and clouded. It could have been a hallucination, a trick of the light and the weather, but she saw them too. My aunt and my cousin were sitting on our porch.

Mom was quick to let the two of them in, full of small talk and pleasantries, but I could recognize her smile as another layer of caked-on makeup. I acted as hospitably as she'd trained me: pouring lemonade and continuing to ask about the trip and the weather no matter how uninterested any of us were in the details.

“Can I take your bag Melanie?” The little girl had yet to move from the hallway to the living room, and she looked like she might collapse under the weight of the reusable grocery bag she was clutching, full of clothes she had no doubt packed herself. She let it fall from her fingers into my outstretched hand without a word, not even the obligatory mouthed thank you. I pictured her at last Thanksgiving, when she'd refused to eat until she'd given an illustrious description of the history of the holiday, and at Christmas, when her method of self-entertainment during Mass was whispering an itemized wish list for Santa in my ear. Something had shifted in her since then, a chair had been tucked under the door handle, preventing it from being opened from the outside.

The sisters sat down at the table, and I would have joined them simply for the drama of it all, but my mother puckered her brows and nodded in the direction of the garden, an expression that I knew meant *take Melanie outside before the screaming starts*.

“Hey,” I said, tapping Mel lightly on the shoulder, pretending not to see the bruise. “Do you want to come see some baby bunnies I found?” The creature nodded, her dirty blonde hair whispering around her shoulders.

The screen door slapped behind us, pollen mushrooming off the door frame, and her eyes went wide at the sight of the backyard. The sun was diffusing shadows through the trees, and the grasshoppers paraded through the parched grass. The individual blades spiked softly through my toes, and it was comforting to know that it was the same plant, the same grass, that connected where we stood to the fields that lay before us. I don’t think Melanie knew the science of how the strands wrapped and knotted until they were infinitely enmeshed, but I think she felt it. She still hadn’t said anything.

I had no trouble filling the stillness between the muted crunching of calloused feet on the dry ground. “Mom keeps buying insecticide from Dunrovin’s, but I’m not sure why. It doesn’t work. See the holes in the romaine heads?” She knew I was waiting for a reaction, even a slight recognition of our current coexistence, but she stayed quiet. I continued my rambling.

Mother said I spoke to hear the sound of my own voice, but that was only partly true; I spoke to fill silence. Quiet made me uneasy, filling me with the unnatural stillness of the ten minutes before a thunderstorm. There is always something that could be said, and silence meant choosing not to say anything. It meant there were things that couldn’t- or shouldn’t- be shared.

“Thankfully it hasn’t been too hot this summer,” I motioned to the long-ago useless air conditioner rusting around the back of the house “After ten years it finally bitched out. I mean, uh, stopped working.” I glanced to see if she would register the profanity, if she would protest at either

my usage of the adult word or my insistence that she shouldn't hear it. She just nodded again, more stoic than any man I'd ever met, despite her waifish figure. I wished she would say something; I was running out of circles to talk in.

"Shhh," I motioned her forward, pointing to the shed's loose baseboard "We have to be calm so we don't scare them off. Promise you'll be quiet?" I'm not sure why I felt the need to ask, but she nodded an astounding yes, the closest thing to emoting I'd seen her do. I feathered through the burrow, my grip finally fastening around a ball of fleece just small enough to fit in my palm.

"Do you want to hold him?" My voice was soft, matching the dusk falling around us, and she held out her stubby fingers. The change was almost instant, from the second she swept softly between his ears. She melted into fragility, her round cheeks beginning to pucker and waiver as her eyes became glassy. Her sobs mixed with the chirps of mating cicadas, a harmony of cries for affection. I'm not sure how long we stood there, the heat-dissipating slightly as stars flickered to life in the twilight.

"We should get going, I'm sure dinner is almost ready." I looked at the silhouette of my mother alone in the window, pounding insults at her sister and brother-in-law into the pie-crust dough. I replaced the rabbit, returning him to the comfort of his home and family.

"Can we come back tomorrow?" Her whisper was raspy, almost lost in the humidity. I nodded, reaching for her hand as I guided her back to the house.

Duck

Fran Kenney

[TW: anxiety, blood, child injury, dermatillomania]

“Todd?” I holler, “Should we put the new duck where the old one used to be, or above it?”

My husband trots into the bathroom. “What?”

“Look at this.” I press a sandpaper duck cutout against the gaping gray patch of stripped paint echoing the old yellow decal that, up until recently, led the march of plastic stickers along the evening border of bathwater.

“Oh definitely above, it looks weird in the same spot,” Todd says. Joey wasn’t pleased with it last night, either; it was like somebody had run over the dog. He whimpered and sniffled as I lifted him out of the tub, gazing at the fallen duck soldier as it drifted to the bottom.

“It’s only a piece of plastic,” his sister Hayden soothed him, “I bet Mama’s got another one just waiting to be glued on.”

“But it’s not the same,” Joey blubbered.

“How is it not the same?”

Joey looked at Hayden, again, as if the dog had been plowed to death before their very eyes and she’d suggested that they go get a new one.

“Yeah, no, above looks better; plus, we maybe shouldn’t teach our kids to bathe right next to the color of mold,” Todd says.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Then it would seem like there was some void I was ignoring instead of filling.”

“Well that got deep fast.”

“No, really. It’d be like I didn’t even try to resurrect the old duck. And Joey doesn’t know that little guy is in the kitchen trash. He really thought the duck was alive, with all the downsides of being alive.”

“So put the new guy a notch up and say that it’s Duckie Heaven and that the old guy has made passage into Duckie immortality...or something. I don’t know why you’re reading into this so much, babe, this is a four-year-old we’re talking about. Joey won’t really care by now.”

I sweep chips of paint out of the bottom of the tub. “No, he will.”

“Do you, babe.” Todd rumples my hair and returns to the garage, leaving me exactly where I’ve been, kneeling before the tub and the perfect row of ducks that I pasted in place weeks ago.

Joey picked at the duck in the first place until it fell off. It was something of a project: he started to trace and then drag and then claw his fingertips over the rough surfaces of the ducks from day one, and I guess I knew what he was getting at then.

Every night he’d do it. Then, once he was clean, he’d get relocated to the bathmat and notice, as I’ve become accustomed to noticing on everyone, how soft and elongated his cuticles had become from the water. He’d curiously tug at the tiny fronds of skin escaping him, and if I so much as turned the radio down I’d look back and his little fingers would be beading bright red, and I’d just say, “Goddammit Joey, you have to stop that.”

Every day he’d do it, every day I’d get more vehement in insisting that he stop, and every next day he’d get more and more frustrated with the state of the ducks, sometimes sloshing water at Hayden in insistence that she not pick at them. Ultimately, it was mostly him that killed the yellow bird; still, I figured it was a good alternative habit, like when I put on nail polish only to chip it off.

It turns out that neither of those things work so well; I see my glossed fingernails, flaky and sparsely eye-popping as if they’re rotting, and I feel clunky and stupid and like everyone who I want to respect me knows I’m worried. And my kid mourns the loss of a two-dimensional cutout, a comfort within a cleansing moment, as soon as it peels away and takes a vital chunk of canvas with it.

Nobody needs to tell me I have an anxious kid; I’ve been considering the probability for quite some time. Since I had my first baby and found myself tearing tags and later small chunks of skin from the soles of my feet, all while knowing that I’d have to stuff them into heels and then they’d hurt even more. Since Todd would chuckle at Joey’s tidiness, saying “This kid will make parenting easy.” Since about two months ago when Joey came down to dinner, hands extended to us kitchen-dwellers with

his thumbs all chewed and shredded and hot pink--and asked, pretty politely and just confused, what he should do.

I smoothe the duck cutout onto its shadow, careful not to allow any air bubbles as it seals itself over the crater of missing paint. It doesn't feel like sandpaper to me; I have pretty wicked calluses on my fingers, the battlefield of my college years. People do notice, when I sign papers and shake hands, and they grimace the slightest bit as they observe that I was never in Duckie Heaven and probably never will be. I'd like to think Joey will make it somehow, but there's really no cheating the unattainable.

Still, I can offer him calluses: starting with a duck-like being with intent eyes on the wall of the tub, and while it's not too pretty, it's impressively there, no air bubbles whatsoever. And this way, that one duck is still in the lead.

River Song

Ashley Cheak

There is no rush to enter myself

-I do so every morning.

The sunlight knows my name
as my heart gently
pulsates; I melt into my bed.

If

I were to write about something
in front of us, perhaps a personal secret,
I feel that
it would become a paradox.

In

language I enter myself, too; if
I could even write, why would it be
difficult to imagine that the plant near me
listens in a way that can only
be translated to her?

If

I spoke a truth,
could you hear the frequency?
Am I allowed to speak that the things most absurd
might be the truest truth? That perhaps algae,
blades of grass that touch my body,
desired to be green before humans
understood the word chlorophyll? Maybe
hummingbirds can hear this in their tiny
hovering hearts.

wandering souls

Rachel Saruski

We laid on the lawn outside my dorm at 2 am.
Wet grass seeping through my too-short-shorts I had rolled out of bed in.
Something told us we wouldn't be back after that night.
I wish I knew what it was.

Maybe it was the obscurity and duskiness of the sky with only the faintness of light coming from the stars. But the stars looked more as if they were holes poked through a piece of construction paper with a flashlight shoved behind it. I don't even remember if the moon had decided to show itself to us then. It was just our slowly fading smiles against something so inexplicably inevitable. Too far away from anything any of us had ever known for us to truly be able to understand. But soon enough we would, and things would never be the same, or so we thought. I wish we could've held the future accountable for its actions.

This is the story of people who hover over their bodies like drifting souls, wondering which form of a tale they will shift into next. Collecting the pieces of themselves they have misplaced and stitching them back together with the shards of stories people have of them in their memories, and what they identify as their true selves. Now an unwanted piece of history invades our earlobes with the power of its downpour. Maybe we were in this game of tug of war that wouldn't end until one of us broke the rope.

But my nails have started to grow back. White mounds of dead skin cells arching over hardened blood upon the ripe calloused skin of my fingers. But we are still stuck. Because now this home is merely just a house where its dwellers clash handguns against the skin of their teeth. Thinking that they're solving the world's problems but instead, they're creating more.

Not the same shine in the water today. Its previous look of crushed diamonds and scattered shimmer are nowhere to be found. Before I would wait for time to end and now I find myself begging for more of it. I wonder when time will come back. Maybe I'll always be waiting.

I'm still waiting.

I. Painted Flowers

Mollie Gordon

(excerpted from *Moments in Nature Chronicled by a Convalescing Brooklynite*)

There have been two gardens (thus far) in my life. One is in Brooklyn only five minutes away from where I am now (in quarantine with my parents); it is my godmother Linda's garden. Linda is an expressionist painter and a gifted gardener. I often wonder if those talents are linked somehow, if she learned to grow flowers by painting them first. I can neither paint nor garden, but sometimes in the summers I used to come over and tend to Linda's garden while she, Ethan (my godfather), and Cora (my godsister) vacationed in Florida. This task terrified me; I worried that Linda would return home to find the only living flowers in her house to be those in her paintings.

Linda paints primarily still life pictures -- of the boardwalks at Coney Island, or her flowers (usually orchids), or her dead son. The last summer I tended the garden, Linda was growing only one orchid and it was kept apart from the rest of her plants, sequestered in a small clay pot in her dead son's room. When Linda paints orchids she paints them leaning towards each other as if engaged in private conversation. They are distinctly feminine, with titles like "gossiping old maids" or "conferring ballerinas," but Linda's living orchid lives alone, a ghost in a ghostly room. About a week ago I investigated the symbolism of orchids (as I thought about her) -- they stand for both femininity/fertility and death. A haunting combination.

In Linda's instructions she always asked that I watered the orchid first. I appreciated her specificity, I myself did not know where to begin. How do you garden when the garden isn't yours? For both Derek Jarman and Mary Sarton, gardening was a desirable solitude, a personal Eden. They went to their gardens for peace from the pangs of heartbreak, the pressures of artmaking, their insidious demons. But when I walked the few blocks to Linda's apartment (which she'd been renting temporarily for twenty years now), I never felt fully at ease. I spent several minutes just wrestling with the front door, then I would fill the watering can in the sink, the water reverberating against the peeling tin like the ringing of chimes. Then to the shadowy orchid, then to the cactus she kept for herself in her bedroom. The indigenous people that Linda rents her apartment from believed that cacti represented the unconditionality of a mother's love (I think she is proof of this) and I am careful with the cactus.

After, I would leave the door unlocked and go outside to water the exterior plants, where Cora's butchered Barbie dolls usurped the places of the more traditional garden gnome. To reach these elusive flowers (asters and irises, protected and exhibited by a fence like Juliet by her balcony) I had to maneuver the watering can through a gap in the fence and shake it aimlessly. The result looked like the

sprinklers Linda's son and I used to run through together in sweat-soaked bathing suits at Van Voorhees park down by the highway.

When I felt that I'd approximated the rain, I would go back inside and dump any remaining water in the sink. Then I would lock up and walk home. I never turned the lights off because I never turned them on. I felt a little like a burglar, and based on how long it took me to get the door to open and close, Linda's neighbors probably thought I was. Or maybe they just didn't worry about it, knowing Linda. Her doors are open to everyone.

Hey, Linda? Don't tell Aunt Julie this but your garden is my favorite. That other garden (Aunt Julie's) is located in Washington D.C., and Julie is incredibly possessive of it. She does not share her gardening duties with anyone, therefore my job was not to water the plants but to chase the rabbits away. Julie and the rabbits had been at war ever since they had eaten through half of her cucumber plants, ruining a perfectly planned summer salad. Julie appointed me her general, renowned as I was for tearing up gardens rather than growing them, an upset to my feminine ancestors.

It does not escape me that only the women in my life have been particularly inclined to garden. I don't know what this says about us. Is it because we as women have been conditioned to nurture, to tend, to preserve? Or is that ever since Eve got us kicked out of the garden we've been fighting to get it back? Whatever the case, I do not (nor I never have) fit that mold of womanhood. I used to dig up grubs in the yard behind my preschool, and my mud-drenched dresses earned me infamy as a not very good little lady.

But maybe Linda just doesn't see me that way (I can't be sure). What I know is that she trusts me to water her orchid just enough, to help her bake sugar cookies that vanish as soon as they emerge from the oven, to keep an eye out for bats as we walk by the pier at sunset, to hand out the goodie bags at her son's birthday parties and (now) to watch over her daughter. While Linda labors in the kitchen to produce the perfect butternut squash casserole, I lead Cora through endless games of hide-and-go-seek. The little girl is as wild as I was, but Linda doesn't seem to mind. She is too busy cooking with the fruits of her garden, striving to squeeze as much life out of those plants as she can.

Linda invited Ellis over the first time she met them. We stopped outside of her door on a tour of my neighborhood, the exertion making me lean forward on my crutches like the drooping head of her orchid. At the first ring of the bell the door swung wide open and she said, "Come in, come in!" face flushed with excitement at a chance to play the host. Ten minutes in and she'd already invited Ellis to dinner, featuring her homemade mushroom moussaka. Her shoulders sagged a little when I admitted that we already had plans for the evening, but we agreed on a rain check. I am still waiting for the day (post-pandemic) when I can make good on that promise, when I can usher my beloved into the warmth of your garden and your home.

Campground Showers, Montana

Katie Troutman

you need the soap. yell for me to meet you half
way. 1-2-3 we both open our stall doors meet in
the middle i see you,
see your body being a body. squishy
tummy my first home. you don't like that it
hangs low, that your boobs drift like
pendulums and your upper arms swing
like bat wings and your thighs jiggle like jell-o
when you walk. i see life source, nourisher with late
nights and advice and letting me dry my hands
on your pants when there were no paper
towels in public restrooms and counting my vertebrae
when i couldn't stop crying and swapping ice cream
cones when i liked yours better and gripping my hand
in the hospital waiting room and quizzing me
with flashcards and wiping up my snot with
your sleeve and holding me, holding me, holding
me.

Van Gogh

William Shullenberger

Late summer, the serene
fatality of landscape
takes the look of a peasant face tortured
by too much kindness.

The one who is called to the harvest
by the ever-ripening sun
stoops to his task like a seed
that is lost in the earth for a season.

Loose waves of radiant wheat
overflow every shadow,
and the hush of the scythe sound
stills mountains and stone wall
to the lilac and myrtle
hues that the earth takes
when it lurches to a halt
like a cart overloaded with grain.

This must be what it means to be
in possession of all your senses,
blessing and saying farewell
with every stroke you take,
as crows begin to uncoil
their grim apostrophes,
and oxbow pathways tense
with wind and rumors of rain
lose their way to the vanishing point
where a gathering storm's bruised eye
broods on the last stand of wheat
as it stiffens and brightens in panic.

the whole ride home from the butterfly house

Anna Schechter

she makes small wind where she pulses
on my arm.
i'm a flower with magenta petals.
the whole ride home, i kiss
my eyelashes to my arm hair.
and can't quite replicate the hesitant
brush of spindle legs.
in the back seat, i hold my hand
up to the blue glass and i
squint through the stretched skin
between my thumb and first finger.
i'm orangey see-through with tiny veins.
my hand is a hatching chick under the incubator
light. i'm almost as iris as the mosaic
wings. i'm sun warm.
i want to pollinate.
from the front seat, my grandma sings.
from the front seat, my mom feeds me animal crackers.
i lick them to make
sugar water.

The Session

Greer McAllister

You will be walking down your block when, for the first time, you notice your solid body. You'll feel your legs go awkward in their one-two step. They will feel both too large and too skinny. Your red coat will suddenly not fit the way you thought it did. You will feel exposed and wrap the coat around yourself tightly.

It will be an overcast day. You try to remember the things you need to pick up from the grocery store. You'll move all your long hair to one side because it has been sitting sweaty on your neck.

Now, you will see a man coming towards you. He will be wearing heavy work boots caked in black mud. He is holding a hard hat in one hand. In the other, he has a plastic cup that he will spit tobacco juice into as he reaches the block that you stand on. You'll begin to feel nervous at this point. You tell yourself that he is harmless, that you shouldn't jump to conclusions. You will smile at him.

At this moment, a flock of no more than five birds will sputter out from the tall pine trees and fly over your head. One bird will fall hard at your feet, dead. You will scream from surprise, the realization of death. You'll try not to take it as a sign.

He will not say much to you when he approaches. As you stand there in your new body, staring at the dead bird, he will walk over and lightly kick it away from your feet.

He will say, "There ya go."

You don't know what to say. You will stare at him, noticing his sinewy body, and wonder how it differs from yours.

"Take care," he says, holding up a small wave. As he walks off, you will look at the dead bird crumpled in the grass. It is very small, a pale yellow color. You will watch as its feet twitch and curl up into stillness, wishing you could have helped.

When you forget where you're going, you turn back towards your apartment building. It will be a warm day for early spring and you try to remember what spring was like when you were a girl. You try to remember what your father smelled like. You will try to remember the construction worker's face.

At the front door of your building, there will be a child crying as his mother drags him away. His little hand is reaching for a stuffed bear dropped on the cement. His mother will not notice this, so you pick it up and hand it to the child. He will not smile at you or stop crying.

You will not notice how beautiful the mother is.

You begin to feel something stirring in your gut, a cold familiar feeling that you can never place. You will hear a knock at a door that sounds far off in the distance. You hear someone shoosh away whoever is knocking.

When you reach your apartment, you will fumble with your keys as you pull them out of your purse, dropping them to the floor of the hallway. You reach to pick them up but they are already in someone else's hand. The man from the street is in front of you, handing over the keys.

“Here you go.”

You thank him.

“I seem to be helping you a lot today.”

You let out a girlish laugh.

He turns away and you think he will walk towards the elevator, but instead, he stops at the door of the apartment next to yours, unlocks it, and goes inside.

This is strange because you have never seen him here before and you don't remember Mrs. Polofski moving out. You assume that he must have just moved in. Perhaps you should give him a welcome gift.

Inside, you throw your ill-fitting red coat over a chair and walk into the bathroom. You will remove all your clothes because you want to see your new-found body. In the old chipped mirror, some parts of it look like other people's bodies and some don't. These are the parts you will worry about. You will wonder what the standard is for bodies these days.

You will not think about the body of the young mother that you saw earlier.

You will find a white eyelet dress that fits a bit better, go into the kitchen, and put something together for the man next door. You find some chocolates that your co-worker had given you the other

day and a cheap bottle of red wine. You will wonder if chocolate and wine are too suggestive, but it's all you have. You write a note: *welcome to the building*, and wrap it all up.

When you knock at his door, he will give you a sly smile and look happy to see you. He will look you up and down. When you hand him the gift, he will pull out the wine bottle, hold it up, and say, "Want to come inside?"

You will nod in agreement because your father taught you that it is impolite to refuse an invitation. His apartment is a little shabbier than yours and looks as if he has lived there for a long time. The sofa is worn in, dust falls from the ceiling fan, and even though it is cluttered, there is not a cardboard box in sight. This will confuse you, but before you can ask how long he's lived there, he will hand you a well-poured glass of wine.

He will have an almost grey beard and dark brown hair that he wears pulled back in a bun at the nape of his neck. You like the way that he looks, but you can't make out his face no matter how hard you try. You wonder if he even has a face.

He will ask you about your family and where you are from. You won't have much to say. In fact, you tell him that you have forgotten a lot of your childhood.

"That's very odd," he will say.

You feel embarrassed and will pour yourself another glass of wine.

He will comment on your beautiful long hair and tell you that you have a nice body. You will thank him, but tell him that you've really just discovered it. Once more, you hear someone knock at the door and someone else shushes harshly. The man doesn't seem to hear this.

Soon, you are making love in his moonlit bedroom. You don't remember it being so late. You stare at his muddy work boots in the corner. He moans. You decide he is an average lover. Your eyes gaze over to a Playboy poster on his right wall. They land on the woman's mostly naked body, on her still face, on her suspended pout. You wish you could weave your fingers in with hers and take her far away from here. You wish you could kiss her on her shoulder, her breast, in some soft, loving place—

You will not think about the woman on the poster.

You will look back at the man's handsome face.

You try as hard as you can, but still can't make it out. Try to focus.

Afterward, he will get you a glass of water. You will pull your dress back on and he will tenderly make fun of you for it not fitting. Despite his suggestion, you will not stay the night. You write down your phone number, gather your things, and walk back to your own apartment. But when you reach to unlock the door, your key will not fit in the lock. This will confuse you. You look around to make sure you went up to the right door. Of course, you did, this is your home, but still, your key will not fit.

Maybe the man can help you with the lock. You think that he must be handy with things like that. You knock on his door, but he doesn't answer.

You look down at your keys, that chilly feeling waves through you again. You will reach across and place your key inside his door. It will unlock.

You will see the man without a face sitting on the sofa. He looks up from something he's reading.

He will say, "Hey babe, how was work?"

This will confuse you, but you are very, very happy.

The hypnotist is leaning over me as I awake. She asks me how I feel. I tell her I feel fine.

I sit up. Blood rushes to my skull. She tells me to take my time.

The hypnotist is a mousy woman of indeterminate age. She has dusty brown hair that reminds me of a field mouse nest. She wears many beaded necklaces and large wire-frame glasses. I can't tell if they're a fashion choice or a necessity. She leans back in her chair and takes a deep breath, happy with the session.

The walls of the room are hidden by cheap tapestries and pictures of the hypnotist's husband and children. An air conditioner unit is mounted in the window, blowing cold, musty air at me.

Someone who must be her child knocks at the door. She shushes him sharply, his footsteps falling away.

She gets up and lays her hand on my chest, right over my heart.

“Well, that should help you with your,” she clears her throat, “your urges. Call me if you want to book another appointment, especially if things get worse.”

She gives me a quick rub on my back with her other hand, as a mother would do.

I thank her and start to walk home.

I begin to feel strange in my stomach. My body goes stiff and heavy. A man is walking towards me, a woman is walking along the other side of the street. I notice how beautiful she is.

I turn my head to the man. He coughs and spits on the ground, folding his hands in his pockets.

The woman shoots me a look only we can know.

A flock of birds flies overhead. I wrap my coat tighter around my waist and brace myself for his approach.

“You will smile at him,” I hear the hypnotist’s voice say. “You will be very, very happy.”

one night we shattered the jars

o. captain

We will be terribly in love, she tells me, teeth at my neck.
Above our heads are the jars—she feeds her pretty children
bones and flesh, and in the morning our hands will be dirty
to the elbows with intestines, burying the bloated body

of her cat, too big for jarring. My lover, the mycologist,
kisses me in the garden, gore on our fingers, tangling,
strangling-vinely. She pulls me away from the upturned
earth, promises to bury me there when she kills me.

We are terribly in love, and it consumes me. I choke
on the hyphae. Her attention a parasite, soothing me
to flushed compliance. She says to me, my wife,
my second body. The selfhood of me languors,

flayed, seduced, sucked at like a honeycomb. My lover,
the mycologist, murmurs that I will be eaten well.
With the moon hidden, I see the fruiting bodies line
her back, spine-anchored, growing right from bone.

One night we eat poison. It feels like sex, the way it pins
my nerves down. She watches it happen, traces my blood
vessels, popping, expanding, gushing, coating the bed,
and she kisses the last breath from my lungs. She does

not die, the caps go down easy on her, slinking through
her larynx, burrowing like bloodworms into bone.
The mycologist is more mycelium than meat. I bite down
on her shoulder in my post-mortem, coital shudders.

The upturned earth is warm and writhing, and it is not rot
that crawls into my mouth, my eyes, my ears. I sigh, and sink,
heart soggy, spongy, wet. My lover, the mycologist,

she tells me, come home when you are ready.

Coat

Benjamin Willems

Here is a coat. It is not a particularly warm coat. You've had it in your closet for as long as you can remember, and possibly much longer than that. Whatever the case, you haven't realized how much you need it until just now, when you can feel the bitter cold even though you didn't even open the windows last night to smoke your menthol cigarettes. There's a tear in one of the arms right by the chest. You put it on anyway, zip it up, and step outside. Then you're so cold you go right back in.

Here is a blizzard. The great snow apocalypse of '15, to use the name the local news won't stop shoving down your throat. The grocery store is out of bread. The power lines up the street are tossing and turning in the wind. The flakes come down in sheets. You sit in your bed drinking hard cider, wrapped up in your old sweatshirt from college and binging on the latest cartoon, feeling guilty every second it's on. Shall we go outside? You ask yourself this before eyeing the coat in your closet. You bought it just a week ago. They were having a sale at L. L. Bean. You zip it up, go outside, and slip on the ice. There's a stick that wasn't there before. It tears a hole, and you're so cold, you can't pull yourself off the ground. You are buried in snow.

Here is a yard sale. Allston Christmas, a season too late. Along with the usual ratty couches and TV sets with cracks in them, there are whole boxes of mittens and scarves, with a single coat in the mix. Whoever had it first has clearly worn it for years, between basement shows and lectures on accounting, subway rides and Chipotle runs. You're on your way to the gym in unseasonably warm weather when you see it. You zip it up. It carries you through the whole rest of the season, through unexpected hail storms, icy nights, and blustery spring days. Then the time comes to trash it. It almost fits like it belonged to you, in some alternate timeline, where you wanted a job that made you money and you didn't trade that job for the life of the mind. But that whole winter, you are that person again, and they are you.

A man hates himself. If he were self-aware enough to know what his name meant, he'd probably just kill himself. But if only he had a coat, everything would go fine, and life under the evil tsar's bureaucratic nightmare wouldn't suck so much. So he steals that pretty coat in the shop window. Turns out, he beat everyone else to it. They kill him, steal the coat, and leave his dog fart stench at the bottom of a ditch. But they have deprived him of his most basic need, even after death. The right to stay warm, no matter how bad life gets, and no matter how much the tsar wants his people to die. So the man becomes a zombie, killing all the fuckers who did him wrong. This is one of the greatest stories ever told.

The coat spends half the year sitting at the bottom of your closet. You don't even think about it when you're hugging your old friends on spring break in Key West, or driving down the Cape with the windows open. If you met the person who made the coat, what would you say to them? Probably nothing. They're just the person who made the thing. Would it change if the coat maker printed a message on the coat? That they've got a love they're still not over, a life they had to put on hold just to get by, an unresolved trauma that refuses to fade away? You'd feel different, for sure. Maybe tell them how much of yourself you see in them. And so, when the first frost comes, you pull the coat from the bottom of your dusty crate, cough a little, then strap it on without a second thought. Finally, you've found one that won't break or tear. It doesn't even matter that the sky is dark and about to open up. You just head downtown, thinking all's right with the world.

Once

Matti Apse

What will I write about? Once upon a time I meditated. Once upon a time I knew my name: Dog fur is incorrigible. What cruel truths can be swallowed this week? What does glass man say to a piece of limestone? There's nothing I'd like to do more than stroke my body? Skin's a gift. Imagine if we didn't have skin. Bugs don't have skin. I pity them. Rolling my wrists in the dirt. Taking a picture up my shirt. Fingers in the air. I flick pieces of myself in the wind.

Everything I eat or touch becomes attached. Glimmer in the window. Cherry in my frown. A shadow's crawling up your wall, murder's the name you give to upstart folks like Rockefeller. We don't take kindly to people wearing out your name. Washboard abs. Washing machine heart. Birthday cake with cigarette candles. New York City is a joke nobody eats veggies at school I wanna go to work I wanna quit my job. My writing's obtuse but that's okay. Freedom's a name we give to our power. Freedom's the love I'm taking you glower. Dream of something shitty. Eat your tongue. What was that detail on your wrist? I've taken a gander at many tree stumps. And I'd like to see more tree blooming. I want petal snow. I want to sniff glue. Write nothing. A grasshopper takes a vacation somewhere. Pomegranates erupt and you're without a care. Almond seeds carry poison. The dirt is a bed of hair. Worms can keep your company. A rock is a worm's worst friend. Sparkle sparkle sparkle Glitter's worse than sand. Sand is worse than soil. Tell me a riddle. Show me the plan. Deactivate the missile. Give me the gun. Wax the wood, spoil the meal. Stain the heart and cop a feel. Tremors take your fingers by force,

hearts and curl and black ties morse. SOS my radar down crashed a car all over town. The rhyme is queer the ending's faked a fantasy fiction memory brain lake. Chelsea didn't really know me and borrow criminal ecstasy excon filigree tomorrow. Believe the manager, he's got a clue. Shove your foot into a fire hydrant if you know what's good for you. Stream of unconsciousness oscillates between cliché and nonsense. Doesn't *all* language? *Oh* what an insightful generalization. *I* want to be like one of those cool academics who is so god damn *reflexive* and citational it burns your pants off. Trash trash trash trash trash trash help me when I'm crashing body what's the point in trying to fight being crazy and my writing's pretty fearless when I get in my own way but I couldn't tell you something if I did know it right away. Knowledge is forgiveness. Mom and Dad disagree but I agree with both of them.

I Didn't Feel A Thing

Hazel Frew

She calls me after she leaves his bed and talks to me like a friend until she can get on the train and into my shower and kiss me with her hair all wrapped up in a towel. I make a pot of coffee while I wait. I make 4 pots and then pour them down the drain because she will say it is too late for coffee. I listen to her music while she bathes. It is full of synth and discordant rhythms, with animal sounds that I can't quite make out over the pounding of the shower. I have good water pressure.

She comes out in underwear and his shirt and leaves her pants on my floor. She feeds me a shot of whiskey. Her mouth has red wine stains and tastes like his weed. We watch her favorite show. She plays with my hair. It's the kind with a laugh track. I pay less attention to the characters and more to the ways her eyes crinkle when she thinks something is funny.

She asks me about my day, so I tell her. She reads me a poem that she wrote on her phone on the subway ride over. I boil water for pasta. She tells me a story he told her. It was about how he saw two girls kissing in the street when he was a little boy and burst into tears because he thought that girls weren't allowed to be kissed unless they were sleeping. I don't pretend to laugh at the story but I roll my eyes. She shifts from foot to foot. I put the pasta in the water.

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you," she says and trails off into her next shot.

"What is it?" I say.

"Well, I wasn't lying when I said he knows about you. But I think maybe he sees you more as my friend."

"It's okay," I say. "I understand."

She comes up behind me and kisses my neck. I melt back and smile for real. I save a cup of pasta water and put it aside before draining the noodles. I toss her portion with sauce and serve mine with butter and cheese like I used to eat as a little girl.

"He wants me to choose," she says. "What should I do?"

"I understand," I say.

“I’m so glad,” she says.

We make love in the kitchen because my roommates aren’t home. She goes to her backpack and pulls out a sword. It comes out long, like when Marry Poppins pulled a lamp out of her purse. The sword glints in the fluorescent light of my kitchen. I keep meaning to replace the bulbs for something softer. The sword’s handle is encrusted with rubies and emeralds.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell her.

“Thanks for understanding,” she says.

I don’t feel the sword as it goes through my chest, but if I did, I think it would feel something like a knife cutting through butter. Easy.

I come back as a ghost. She must have left long ago, but her hair tie is still on the counter. I find my ghost phone and go on Instagram. My ghost phone remembers that it is a year from last valentine’s day. That was the day we snuck a bottle of wine into the movies and laughed too loud at the wrong parts. I check her page and there is a photo collage of him — pictures where his hand maps her waist, their kitten, a hotel room with flowers and candles. The caption claims today as their anniversary.

I tap my finger twice against the screen, but I don’t know if the like will go through. From this place I’m in it doesn’t feel like I’m touching anything at all.

La Moglie/The Wife

Written by Azzurra De Paola

Translated by Clare Walsh

<http://www.altrianimali.it/2017/07/18/moglie-azzurra-de-paola/>

The wife had long black hair on her shoulders, which weren't really shoulders as much as they were horizontal arms.

When the husband returned home from work, he always found the wife thrown on the couch like a sack of potatoes. And, for how much it irritated him, he never found the right words to tell her. He feared hurting her or, worse, offending her. He imagined starting the conversation with: I don't want to hurt or offend you. But then he realized that it would hurt or offend her and he gave up. After all, who can tolerate every single thing that their wife does?

One evening like every other evening, he slipped the keys into the lock, ten minutes late. He knew he was late, he had taken the wrong train. How it was possible that he could get on the wrong train after twenty years in the same office, the same platform, the same train, not even he could explain. He was prepared for any type of argument. From the calm one in front of their meals, to the furious one that would have forced him to sleep on the couch. When he turned the keys he expected everything. He didn't have a particular preference. He preferred not to yell during dinner but he didn't mind sleeping on the couch. He was a fan of an unspeakable magazine that made his wife pale: Montagne. Pickaxes, climbing shoes, hooks, very high and unconfined landscapes above the heads of humanity that every day, silently, waited for someone to discover them. For someone to drill into them. For someone to bring a bit of trash to those heights. And, who knows why, his wife hated that magazine and even hated the mountains. Not that the mountains had done anything to her but she couldn't really suffer them and there was a tacit ban on reading the magazine.

That evening like every other evening, the husband turned his keys in the lock, already defeated by the arguments that would be unleashed shortly after. When he entered, the wife was not in her

usual spot on the couch. The initial confusion was followed by a pleasant stupor. He imagined that she was in the kitchen preparing something nice or on the bed ready to satisfy his desires. He slowly took a couple steps forward with an eager smile on his lips, toward the room with the door ajar. He imagined that she had left it open to let him spy inside. And he spied. He spied, closing in. He felt the desire in his body grown like a type of heat that emanates from inside. A self-combustion. And the closer he got to that sliver of open door, the more the fires and suns burst in his body, a boiling of lava and incandescent fire.

At his third or fourth step, the husband noticed that the wife (until now he had been lewdly imagining her on the white linen bed sheets) had fallen onto the floor. Her black hair was scattered on the floor like little dead worms. Her dress, that kind of little dress made of green burlap, was completely flattened and empty. There was no desire underneath. No voluptuousness. No nipples. Her immobile arms like a little Christ on the cross, incapable of pulling herself up. And the legs. That's right, no legs. Only that giant hole where you put your hand and then find the armholes to put your fingers through. He bent over her and dropped to his knees. He looked at her. He looked at her black eyes, those buttons so intense and full of reproach. She was frowning. She seemed to want to say: why are you waiting to pick me up, you useless human surplus? Which was exactly what he would have wanted to say to the wife, except that he still was not picking her up. He sat there watching her with his elbows on his knees and tried to spy under her skirt. He tried to wet that empty hole a bit. That lair. But the more he watched her maniacally, the blacker her eyes became, seeming like a coming thunderstorm. And so, partly out of fear and partly out of resignation, he slipped his left hand into the sack of green burlap and his thumb and pointer finger into the respective armholes. As soon as the two fingers reached the extremity, the little felt hands hit him on the head. With his voice in falsetto, from the mouth of the husband, the wife unloaded so many humiliations on him that he decided that he would sleep on the couch.

She told him that he was an idiot.

That only an idiot would have gotten on the wrong train. She told him he wasn't capable of doing anything.

That he was only asked to arrive home on time.

She cursed the day that they had met.

That day she would have preferred to be used as a sack of seeds for pigeons. The husband remained sitting, head down, for the entire time, without reacting. Not that he was indifferent to his wife's words, but he was trying to apply his psychological studies to the situation. He attributed his wife's repressed anger to the fact that she had spent the entire day shut in the house, incapable of moving. He pardoned her for the fact that, to speak, she needed his voice. And that, sometimes, it is difficult to explain oneself when the words must come from another. It isn't ever the same thing. For as much as it resembles the imagined concept, another person will always describe it a bit differently. More fanciful, less fanciful, too brightly, morbidly. Maybe constipated. And the wife was everything except constipated. She was a night of vomiting after a heavy binge, she was the handful of sand that accumulated in a bathing suit after every wave, she was the constant chewing of the nauseating peanut butter spread on banana cheesecake. And that was just how he felt, the husband. Kneaded. So tired and worn out by the humiliations and offenses that he took his wife, hung like a scarecrow, into the kitchen. The cat was on the table. The wife also objected to this. She screamed at the cat to get down and watched it with disappointment. The husband put her on the table while she continued to grumble about dander and hygiene and feline diseases. He opened all the drawers, looking for the box of cookies. He found it in the top cupboard, where his wife had hidden it to spite him. But, when he returned to the table and opened it, he found out that it was he who had spited his wife. He had found and eaten all of the cookies and replaced them with needles and thread. To use in emergencies. Like that one. He took his wife and placed her on his lap. He caressed her black hair. He promised to buy her some conditioner. And, very slowly, he sewed her mouth with the wool thread. He watched the thread flow from side to side, over and under the little lips, drawn on with brushstrokes. He asked himself why his wife even had had a mouth.

Who had ever given it to her?

But he sewed her, making sure to leave no space. Top to bottom, from bottom to top, from outside in and then from inside out, until he had finished. It took him almost an hour, either because the wife continued to talk or because he didn't want to risk tearing the burlap.

Only that, when he had finished, it wasn't as he expected.

The wife was an old, overused marionette, with nylon threads tucked into her head and knotted so that they would look like hair. She had two coat buttons, black and glossy, that maybe belonged to some important lady who had fallen into poverty after the war. The dress was nothing more than green watercolors, painted in brushstrokes all over the body. The hands were two cotton wool balls covered in felt. And the mouth, the mouth was a red design, sewn with needle and thread to keep it shut. But it was at this point that the husband realized that that mouth, that could not kiss him, taste dinner, or breathe air, also could not insult him. The wife remained silent, thrown on the kitchen table. She watched him with two blank buttons. She was a piece of fabric, a toy for children. The husband, desperately, shook her by the shoulders. He yelled at her to speak. He pleaded to her that she would insult him. He got on his knees next to the table and prayed that she would not stay quiet. But when he saw that the wife had stopped speaking to him, the husband opened the oven, where he had been waiting to put the potatoes, and inserted his head until his brain was fully cooked.

THE SWALLOWS OF GRANADA

Mary Morris

Our hotel room sits
behind the cathedral
where someone rings the bells
by hand and you lie naked,
asleep on the bed,
sweltering in the heat.

From our window in the morning light
the swallows rise and fall.
It is thirty years since I walked
these cobble streets
Yet I recall a donkey
with his firewood load,
White-washed buildings
and the Andalusian sun
A boy I wrote poems to
under the Alhambra arches.

It was winter then, and cold
in Granada that year;
Not hot like it is now
and the town was empty.
I could see my breath.
I cannot remember where I stayed
or whom I was with
or even why I had come
But I recall other hands
and a taste of death,
oysters and white wine,
things I sampled when I was young.
Lorca was my poet
As he is now.

In Madrid a few days ago
we stayed in the house of another poet
who burns his manuscripts.
I save everything I tell him.

Diaries, letters, memories.
He says he wants to leave nothing behind.
He wants no one to know him,
but I hold on to all.
Now in bed with you
asleep in this heat,
our daughter in the cot beside us,
I watch the swallows,
their constant cry,
the light on the cathedral,
the terra cotta tiles.

Here in the poet's city
I do not think of Lorca.
I do not think of death.
I think of the flight of swallows
as they soar above rooftops
and catch the wind.

The Sunroom

Naomi Rottman

Our neighbors are nosy. The older ones spy on us with binoculars and the middle aged ones steal our newspapers and some of them let their dogs pee on our fruit trees. They are so afraid, but Silvia would never hurt them.

We ignore her as long as possible. It's easy to do. At night, we leave her in the sunroom and she sits, staring at the sky until the sun comes up. Some days she is drooling when we find her, others she is gnawing on her clothes. Normal baby things.

We built the sunroom in the back of the house and filled it with plants. It is soundproof, unlike the actual outdoors, and there is ample sunlight. We were going to soundproof the entire house, but that proved too difficult, and we resorted to living in silence instead. Sometimes the floorboards creak, a welcome reminder that our ears still function. Small noises are fine.

Silvia sits in the middle of a rug in our sunroom. Her fat fingers are always in her mouth and her belly sticks out when she toddles about. I do not interact with her until I have to. I feel that this child should be left well enough alone. She can learn to be at peace with her own company. I sit on the coral couch and observe her for a few minutes above the pages of my book.

A windchime of stained glass and sharply blown butterflies is dangling from the ceiling above her soft head. The air outside is crisp today and Kole opened a panel window earlier, just enough to let the wind breathe with us and the chimes make peaceful tinkles. I trust that the strings from which the butterflies hang won't snap. If one did, Silvia might be dead in an instant. The glass would drop straight down and cut through her head and topple her over and soak the handwoven Chilean rug with blood. And still, the baby chooses to sit underneath it. I don't understand her decisions.

Kole comes in with bare feet to do yoga. There are crumbs on the floor and remnants of swept away dirt from the plants and cacti, but they never seem to mind. They stretch out like a cat and Sylvia's eyes follow their sprawled shape. As a direct result of our silence, Silvia does not babble. I sometimes wonder how she narrates her thoughts if she has been taught no words, or if she will ever speak. Her cries are soundless now, though it took months to teach her that. Her eyes begin to tear and then her pink mouth hangs open. It is wet and gummy.

Someone knocks on the front door. Kole glances up from their downward dog, their aloe green eyes meeting mine. Silvia does not hear the knock. I put my finger to my lips and furrow my brows. *Sbbb*. I get up slowly, place my book on the sofa, and walk out of the sunroom.

Our house is our sanctuary. We traveled before we had Silvia and collected furnishings from everywhere, intricate dishes and jade lamps and small gods that were supposed to bless our home. I look through the peephole. There are two men. I open the door just a crack, so they know we are not to be disturbed. They leave a small blue book on the doorstep and back away slowly. I bring the book with me into the sunroom, and I lay it in front of Silvia, so that she may peruse it at her leisure, and she stops fussing for a moment to pick it up and put it in her moist little mouth. The pages must taste like sacrament. Kole stands up, walks to the baby, pulls the book from her grasp, and lightly taps her on top of her head with it as punishment. Silvia frowns. Maybe she would like to play with the cactus instead.

As soon as I settle down on the couch, Kole curls up beside me. I put my arm around them. Their shoulders are broader than they used to be. They've gotten so strong during this time. I don't question how or why. Nothing to complain about. They're warm.

There's another knock. Silvia looks up. I shake my head a little. I don't think I'll answer this time. Bad feeling.

I woke up with a bad feeling the morning the babysitter found my kitten dead. I called him Sylvester. The tinkling of his bell had gotten to Silvia. I got an urgent text and headed home to chaos. Kole was already there shouting at the baby. When I walked into the nursery and saw his fur had been pulled off of his tummy and his organs had spilled from his bones, I screamed. Silvia had his right paw, ripped clean off his body, falling from her little blood soaked mouth. The babysitter, covered in scratches, was yelling for all the neighbors to hear *She ate the cat, their fucking baby killed their cat, she's a demon!* Thanks a lot, Jennifer. With all the ruckus, Silvia began to wail and didn't stop until her ears began slowly ripping off the side of her head. Her ears healed by the time she was four months old. We learned to be quiet after that.

There is another knock, a muffled male voice, followed by the twist of the door handle. It had slipped my mind to fasten the latch. Someone has entered our home.

We wait. We hear their muffled discussion but don't make out much besides, *they are here* and *be quiet* and *she is important do not shoot her*. They're not talking about me. I can hear Kole's heart pounding. They've worked so hard to protect us here. To keep us out of sight and earshot. We've hidden her in this sunroom for as long as possible. We told people that there never was a baby, how could there be a baby, there never was a cat, there never was anything at all, just us, because how can you tell people you are harboring a monster of a child? How can you live in silence when there is so much to say?

There is a soldier's face pressed up against the glass. He starts to shout. He screams bloody murder at our baby, our baby that he can scare with his vocal cords, our baby that is supposed to be a secret, our self destructing baby that was never supposed to exist.

Silvia sits with her eyes wide and her legs bouncing anxiously. She can hear him. She squeezes her tiny fists together. Her nails extend from her fingers and dig deep into her palms. She draws blood from her small hands and stretches the limits of her fragile skin, which tears at the seams from her wrists and bunches up against her mushy baby bones. The soldier outside hits the glass panels with all his might.

The walls begin to buckle and crack, the sunroom starts falling to pieces like delicate dominos filled with light, and for the first time in a very long time, I pick Silvia up into my arms. She buries her face in my chest and what remains of her bloodied little raw fists grab at the fabric of my shirt. The poor thing must like being held.

There must be dozens of men in the foyer. I can hear the husk in their voices, the cocking of their guns, and our Venetian glass crushing underneath their boots. Kole ties their hair up into a bun, pulls me in by the waist to kiss me softly, and then motions for me to retreat with Silvia upstairs. Kole steps into the view of the soldiers, who have their guns propped on their padded shoulders. I go up the first two steps, and then I pause. I can't tear my ears away.

They clear their throat. I would be nervous, but they aren't. Calm, cool, collected. Just like we practiced.

They wet their lips with their tongue. "How about a sandwich, boys?"

The leader adjusts his aim. "Bring out the baby and we won't harm you or your wife."

“Baby? You boys must have the wrong house. Who told you we had a baby?” Kole laughs. “I’m sure you’ve heard, I don’t have the parts for that.” They wink.

The men hesitate uncomfortably. “Listen-”

“Rye bread sound good?” Kole pulls the loaf off the shelf and starts cutting thick slices with a serrated knife. “I’ve got turkey, ham, bacon...hummus?” They smile at a smaller soldier standing near the back of the group. “You like hummus, my man?”

Kole is so effortlessly charming that I forget I have something to protect. They can take care of themselves. Up the stairs we go.

I hold Silvia for as long as I can. Her flesh heals within minutes. She smiles up at me. We look at the birds flying past the window and giggle at the way they sit on top of the telephone wires. She points at the clouds moving and nuzzles her warm, rosy cheeks into my chest. My baby. The top of her head smells sweet. Now that we are caught, I might as well relax and be a proper mommy for a few minutes.

The nursery walls are the color of a creamsicle. I show her the crib her grandfather built from cedar wood, and we marvel at the way Kole had painted her name on the doorframe. I sound out the letters quietly against her ear, *SILVIA*. We return to the window and we sit together, her in my lap, in the silence we are so used to, ignoring the sound of the men yelling on the floor below us. There are quick footsteps, racing up towards us.

Kole appears in our doorway, out of breath with urgent wrinkles forming on their skin. “Do it-”

“I can’t.” I feel tears on my eyelashes and I hold Sylvia’s warm body closer to mine. “Please.” They run to me. “We don’t have time.” They give the baby a long kiss on the forehead before holding my face for a brief moment. “I can’t have anything happen to you, please.” They turn to head back to the doorway.

My voice cracks, “Can’t you-”

Kole looks at me one more time before running out of the room and back into the hallway. “She’ll suffer more with them.” *More than we’ll miss her.*

Kole doesn’t have enough time to stop the men from coming into the nursery. Their boots and

their voices are loud and it is bothering Sylvia. That can't matter now. I look at my baby. I unlatch the window.

Then she is outside in the fresh air for the first time since the kitten incident. I look into her trusting eyes- when on earth did they turn green -just like her parent's. Just like that damned cat's. Then I can no longer feel her soft tummy between my fingers.

She is dropping. She opens her mouth and spreads her fingers and she is wailing. She sounds glorious. The arms of the soldiers grab me and tear my limbs from the edge of the window. My baby and I are crying together. Her lungs are ripping from her cage like a bird being shot in midair. A crack and a splatter. And then she is dead.

And now silence is a choice.

Still

Esther Eidenberg-Noppe

my eyes opened this morning to a cracked window / once installed by someone no longer
here / books stacked on the dresser held temporarily silent between pages / poets
once here now not but likely also never were / metal jewelry bent by hands no longer mine /
love poems folded into envelopes tucked inside bottom drawers / (hands no longer mine) /
epiphanies collecting dust / a small tree
sitting in a flower pot / a square of paper towel folded underneath / its leaves hanging by invisible
strings turned yellow and brittle / last night I laughed with a girl whose parents I did not
know / from a town I do not know / but I know her / I know them / I know this breath / the hands
that once birthed the vines planted in rows along the archway / that installed the lightbulbs / the wind
that
rolled the pinecones to new homes of future trees / the sun
that brought us all outside on the day we would not have been content with darkness / the
burn left longer than the day itself / the scent of my mother on a sweater I stole
and took across the country /
the memory of my father in a home depot he never set foot in /
the perfume of my sister in a Yonkers Urban Outfitters /
the memory of a flower in the mind of a plastic flower designer /
the memory of blooming in the Michaels plastic flower aisle / even when we are dead we are
alive /
the stone I kicked on a walk somewhere new / never back to where it was / things are not
what they were / we are here / even when we are not we will be /

Materials For Self Exile To Sylvia Plath's Grave

Melanie Greenberg

My Room

Navy blue oversized crewneck

Amulet necklace

60mg thc in chewy pineapple squares

Train Station

bottled mango smoothie

The outside bench and hot concrete

trains i wasn't waiting for and their animal jolt

Across England

Rushing green endless and me

carried by it blurred translucent

and unknowable

The soft blur of sunlight tears

The rising love The vanishing

I was across the country in 4 hours

Hebden Bridge

This form weary and still new

like an infant I'm not sure what

to feed her

The laptop glow from Picnic at Hanging Rock

A third pineapple square

Miles (191 of them)

Heptonstall

A quickly cooling latte

I take her up moss laden cobblestones past

A bird carcass

Slanted graves

I am not substantial enough to be a relic so I buy

A small blue glass heart on a ribbon

I pass

The yawning brick of the church (in two circles)

Patchy grass parting

One massive still evergreen

At the foot of her grave I

Sit with the wilting flower arrangements and earth

submerged pens

On the stone I place

the blue glass heart ribbon held in place by a pebble

A streak of blood from my bottom lip

My cheek again and again

In the earth beside it I bury

the wrapper from a fifth

pineapple square and A fingernail

crescent until it is my grave too

In Little Women (2019), when Jo March says, through a sob, “Women!”

Hannah Emilius

She’s pretty.

Storybook, knitted sweater pretty.

Pretty like a rough crystal.

And before her I’m timid, then frightened,

So I follow the curve of her leg to stay afloat.

I try not to think about her. I do not want to seem rude.

I pace instead like a madman near the trees,

Whereat times I am frightened I’m a bumbling lumberjack in flannel and hair,

Compliment, flirt, and catcall dwell together on the edge of an axe blade.

Sometimes I worry I’ll invoke one and mean the other.

And sometimes I’ll smile at one and wish it was another.

And sometimes I’ll sit with my legs wide like a river.

Girl (plural) and Guilt exist in tandem.

As is the doctrine of the dictionary.

But she’s pretty, so pretty,

And a crush is nothing but sugar water and a hummingbird wing,

And a smile that sparks my desert heart

I catch her eye and inhale a last breath—mint chapstick.

Cotton shampoo.

WHEN A FISH RUNS INTO A WALL

Auden Hubbard

I visualise barriers
and pause to mourn.
I know of a cat who lived
in a wall. I try to understand
autobiography but wonder if we
can make ourselves two dimensional
enough to fit on a single sheet of paper.
I daydream what would happen if my slanted
ceiling inched lower. I lose all matter, all manner
of paper clips and beads in the tiny cracks in the wood
planks that make up my floor. Mirrors are supposed to make
a room feel bigger but I still haven't figured out how to fit through mine.

Like in a movie, turn glass to a portal. I touch glass instead of wallpaper.

I paid for one mirror and they crammed three into a box so tight I could hardly
get my reflections out. That cat trips when he jumps. He runs away
if he thinks you're going to pick him up. I dreamt I was trapped
under burning boards. The whole house was on fire,
and I was trying to crawl out on my stomach.
I woke up stuck under my blanket
and fantasized about the escape
ladder in the hallway.

growing in our garden

Ash Freeman

I listen to “Ruby Tuesday” by The Rolling Stones and all the covers of it that I can find seventeen times on a Monday. It reminds me that I want to plant a garden for you, I tell you this. Some things I’m thinking of planting: mint, I like chewing on it when I can’t brush my teeth. Snap peas, I pull the string out when the pod is in my mouth and it spins like a pinwheel. Also, you like the crunch. Garlic, we can’t get enough of it. We tried one of those Pinterest recipes where you put straight garlic and oil on a baguette (this is where the mint comes in handy) but we forgot to add the salt. We’ll grow oranges for our seder plates. Scallions, but those will grow in our kitchen in old salt shakers.

Did I tell you our kitchen will be green? We’ll have an exposed brick wall and I’ll draw little chalk hearts even though I hate the residue on my fingers and spend two minutes at the sink trying to get the feeling off. Hot water works best. Actually, I’ll draw hearts everywhere. On the foggy shower door, on dinner plates with ketchup or overcooked spaghetti, out of flowers we find on our walks.

I’ve never grown a garden before, but you’re always propagating plants. I’ve started doing that, too, in this sun-less New York apartment. I still favor the plastic plant I bought last month, it requires about as much attention as I give myself. But I promise, I love caring for the mint I’m trying to grow. I give it new water everyday (maybe I’m not supposed to do that) and rub my finger against its thin stem and whisper *grow grow grow*. Would you like me more if I were Jack and you were my magic beanstalk? I’d kiss your leaves, press my human sized hands against your roots and whisper, *When you change with every new day, still I’m gonna miss you.*

I dance around my kitchen without you and the cabinets turn into a beige blur. “Ruby Tuesday” plays and I only listen to the first line (*She would never say where she came from*) and the chorus. I don’t think I’ll like this song by tomorrow.

Traditional American Fare

Jane Scheiber

The apartment isn't mine, but tonight I came home to
you at the stove that wobbles on two legs,
spaghetti asleep in its salt bath,
and meatballs in their tomatoed tanning bed.

Traditional American fare.

The meal that exists everywhere; you can even find it
at China Super Buffet, backlit by empty blue aquariums. I guess it
isn't even American; it's Italian, unlike either of us.

We, too, are eternally backlit at dinnertime,
courtesy of the lamp you put next to the sink.

Who ever put lamps in a kitchen?

(People who can't touch the ceiling, that's who.)

I mentioned pasta and beyond meat last week
and here it is in front of me,
hot and garlicked in its perfect bowl.

I abandon my pants soaked in March 1st mist.

Just like breakfast, I take my meal in my white briefs, Host
to brown and red, coffee and sauce.

I have forgotten my breasts and my manners

And lacquer my mouth with grease.

Later, you will shed me of my stains

And wash me in the sink.

red wine

Rachel Saruski

I saw a shattered bottle of wine on the sidewalk
And in the shards, I saw your reflection.
Pedestrians stepped cautiously,
But I ran through the fields of broken glass
Elongated by your memory
Each puncturing a strange but lasting wound in my foot.
How do you take off red nail polish
Without seeing the remnants of the color that was left behind?

the mambo king

Sofia Aguilar

We called him the Mambo King but everyone called him Chichí, Tía says, pronouncing this last syllable quick, like a rock skipping over water or the last two Tan-Tan! notes of a mariachi song.

My fork stops its path halfway through my plate.

Oh? I ask.

Over the wet dishes, Tía adds, He died today.

*

In French, “Chichí” is so beautiful it burns. In Igbo, it means God and in Spanish, it’s slang for everything from a young girl to her nanny to the most hidden parts of her body. Chichí, one of those names that has more meanings than it deserves.

*

That night, you text me to break the silence, the one that’s been manifesting beneath our skin since July. It’s been months but still, I remember the sound of your voice like I heard it only yesterday.

i’ve been thinking about you.

i miss you.

i almost messaged you a bunch of different times.

A part of me longs to reply, *Why couldn’t it have stayed almost? Why have the boundaries between us always been blurred?*

In reality, I say, *hey! how have you been?* because I grew up a girl and never learned how to say no.

*

Death always comes too soon. He arrives unexpected, a knock hours after locking the doors and shutting the blinds closed with a snap. But Death, I think, is like a Mexican, like all endings of things—He never arrives on time but out of the blue.

*

Why do they call it “out of the blue”? Or “a bolt from the blue”? Why does it mean the same thing as “out of a clear sky”?

*

If he’s your cousin, is he my great cousin or my second cousin?

Tía mixes a laugh into her coffee with a spoon.

He’s your first cousin once removed, she replies.

I remember once thinking that this meant exile or banishment. A cigarette burn on the family tree, like someone had taken its end, still glowing, and extinguished it over the name of whoever had

done something wrong so that they vanished from a person into ash.

It's strange, though, Tía continues. I can't remember the last time we spoke.

Neither of us notices that we used *is* instead of *was*.

*

I try not to talk to you about love. We dance around the word, saying it without saying it at all.

can i call you?

how'd you sleep?

so proud of you.

Every time I hit send, I wonder, too late, if this is something a friend would say. I want to remind you where the lines between us lie. Whatever this is—the debates ignited by your insomnia, the calls where we've become more familiar with each other's faces than our own and talk only of our futures—has me never knowing where we stand. Caught between used-to-be and not-anymore but maybe-still-could-be? Our own kind of borderland so endless that I wish I could ask Chichí how he crossed his. If only it was as simple as dying, or just walking north. It's not the first time my people have mistaken heaven for home.

*

Who was the first person who thought of coming out of a color? Out of air and salt and whatever else the sky is made of? Since when have surprises, sudden happenings, been equated to thunder without rain?

*

Mambo, cha-cha-chá, and salsa were all invented beneath the royal palms of Cuba. The three dances are often mistaken for each other even though they were made decades apart. Maybe these things never really begin or end but only change into something new.

*

I ask Tía to show me how it's danced. She doesn't ask why, neither of us mentioning his name, but pushes the table to the cabinets and the chairs to the window and cleans the tiles quickly with a mop to make room. Now we smell of Pine-Sol, its lemon and our longing rising from the floor the same way that heat melts up from the horizon in waves.

Mira, she says, showing me the footsteps—left foot out, right, left, kick, twist.

I try to copy her but only end up tripping over my own feet.

Is it the other way around?

Tía suggests that I take my time, listen to the music, but all I hear are the drums and I've never had a good rhythm for anything but folklórico anyway.

It's about being free, she says. Even when it's complicated.

*

How can you care about someone you never really knew? Why does a piece of us belong to them

anyway?

*

We've never even met in real life. I'm afraid that there is so much I don't know, and that what I do has only been made up.

One. Your favorite color's blue, the kind that could almost be mistaken for black.

Two. Chichí had only one pair of Levi's. He never washed them, not even when they grew so dirty that they could stand up on their own.

Three. He married the daughter of the man who helped him cross the border. (Will she keep wearing her wedding ring? What happens when someone turns from a woman into a wife into a widow? Did they ever call her the Mambo Queen?)

Four. You long for me, text me back immediately because you're seeking attention I'm realizing I no longer have the patience to give. Sinking in your teeth deeper when I try to break myself free.

*

What if I only ever just want to be a woman? Not something thrown away or left behind? Why does love always have to mean possession?

*

I loosen my hips with the mambo, let them run wild in every direction but end up losing my balance and steadying myself against a chair. Even after I take off my socks, the floor stays slippery and smelling of bitterness. And still of longing but now I don't know for what.

Tía snaps me back to attention.

Freedom. Complication, she says.

I'm beginning to think that I cannot have one without the other.

*

When I say, *i hope you find someone*, you text back, *i wish it'd been you*.

*

Who birthed blue and its meaning of both sadness and surprise? Who gets credit for us, almost two hundred years later, still speaking the words of the dead? But even if we don't know their name, are they still remembered? Are they in some way still alive?

*

Chichí reminds me that someday, I will be Death's next prize and all that we will be remembered by is what we said and did instead of what we didn't. No one will know that Tía hadn't spoken to Chichí in years and only remembered he existed after he died. You won't understand that we were born out of make-believe, our meaning naught, our history hidden in messages I decide to delete, no more saved than what Tía calls a Gentile. Our descendants will forget that blue was more than a color but the center of an idiom, a bridge between static and shifting, the living and the dead.

*

What would you say if I told you that Death is not only the end of life? That almost anything can die—what we promise, who we love, how we feel inside? Even now, the mambo, you and me, is not a dance or a song but a memory.

*

I remember he used to pinch us. And I'd kick him back in the knees and hide behind my grandmother's skirts, Tía tells me, the first time I've heard her use Chichí and the past tense in the same breath. It's the same thing as saying good-bye or hasta luego, the way we tell all of our stories about the men. Especially when we don't know if we'll see them again.

*

My first question wasn't what happened, or how. Instead, I asked, Why did they call him the Mambo King?

In my head, I imagined that it's because he invented the dance. Or that he had influenced its spread from Cuba to Mexico. Or that it's what he was doing up until he died.

Tía looked away.

His real name was Florián, she said.

Land Locked Sea

Sofia L. Escalante

I'm just one piece of one soul

In a land locked sea.

The crust of the Salton Sea
made of calcified fish bones
mounds of forbidden salt with

spices; arsenic, lead, pesticides, and zinc.

Every August is when the humidity pushes
the rotten odor

outward into the belly of the desert.

The sea does not ask to be interpreted by visitors
Nor did she ask to be expanded
Or dumped and pissed in.

She has many waters in one.

It is a sea in which no fish survive
except for the Mozambique tilapia,
there it thrives.

No tears to be given,

all feelings are forbidden.

Every year they pour more money into the sea
It sinks into the arsenic ridden mud.
All efforts to restore her back to glory
collapsed inward
and the salt mounds build on top of each other.

collecting the past into its salty skin.

It's not safe to fish, swim, or boat in.
the town has few left,

but they are there.

With vandalized vacant vacation homes
and the occasional group of Angelinos holding polaroid cameras with the look of regret on their faces.

It's always better in pictures,

trying not to gag.

As a kid we were told if you swam in the Salton Sea You'd develop cancer, a third arm, a
superpower. It was a cluster of sickness.

It did not come as a shock

when kids started getting

benign tumors

that weren't so benign.

The sea is not at fault, all I can say

when the wind blows, the shoreline
of chemical infused dust goes into our lungs

Every breath escaping,

leaving a salty taste in your mouth.

Facing Blue Places

Sofia Quinn

Blue is the acid-lake eyes of my kin,
Blue is the cobalt headband of the freckle-faced fille
who thought wood chips would scar my stick-armed skin.

Blue is the sky where I plucked clouds
out to turn them teal,
and remembered I was no Luke Skywalker.
No navy blue dragged a fraction of my face into the darkness,
and the harshness of walled waves in the sun's sharpness,
lingered not like a stalker,
but shared its salted fury at the rashness of humanity,

and yet blue was what we coddled my hair in with a
bonnie blue ribbon kept on the vanity,
and somewhere the future screamed for sanity,

I can think a million thoughts when I can't see blue in places I haven't been.

Home grows a pulse (like a cut vein)

Esther Eidenberg-Noppe

“Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.”

- Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*

you said:

You walked five hundred miles through

the desert of yourself,

searching to escape

your hunter. (and I get it)

It seems every year there is more fire,

Death comes knocking at the doorstep

and (you) welcome him in.

leave cookies to find at night.

The company of misery must not

Find your heart beating, vulnerable,

Crucifixion always sounded so dramatic and/

blood (any blood) dripping from

the broken faucet of us, (this,)

can be human, or misery.

Mom cooking cauliflower at the kitchen stove.

The shallow water, drowned in

the sugar of a mother's arms

the warmth, how the dust of home looks like

tea leaves pointing toward (too comfortable)

burning away the super blooms.

Instead, return to the beach,

Seagulls fly in unison, and your goosebumps will

remind yourself:

be you.

Nothing less than a great love of softness-

or

this earth,

will amnesia away, your veins

Let home remind you the value of dust

We may die tomorrow

either way.

smoke in green & red fire

inspired by esther eidenberg-noppe & henry abrams

tova g.

The flesh

knows better than the spirit what the soul

has eyes for.

- Diane di Prima, *Loba*

you said:

i've never smelled smoke
from the kitchen before, mom's eyes
glimmering with extra-terrestrial lost
starlight, her child (before they
spoke or listened) wrapped in warmth &
grief on a cast-iron skillet, hands burnt,
red & tie-dye skirt in tatters.
their brown eyes radiate nursery rhymes &
hours lost between couch cushions &
they smile at their
burning flesh, blood & baby teeth &
fingernails gyrating in a twister which
/that would make toto hurl...
they wave at me through the red mist.
i (almost) recognize their crooked teeth.

(besides when) they set off the fire alarm
blazing green & red & laughing, &
(shadows like traffic lights on acid &)
apologized profusely... that was before they
loved themselves, their mind a satellite like
a dissonant orchestra,
they needed more warmth to make
portable motherly arms, safe like
the tea mom makes for the first snowfall.
home, stained with tea bags &
time (a liar), grimy
(,)lost its color & light. they dug out snakes
from their cunt... they sew their old skin &
their new parka warms them now.
they can leave the nest & pick up their
new keys.

While Staring at the Lambent Moon

Ashley Cheak

Dear Universe,
(and by extension,
Myself),

Almost every day I think about all of
the times I have ever existed, every
version of myself cinematically
occurring at once, all of my experiences
happening incessantly even though I
can never truly
or fully
recall them again.
They simply exist.
They simply are.

Dear (you),

How do I begin to break this down?
At the root, I know we are all energy,
and-

-I suppose I'm more clearly trying to
address the slow breeze coming through
my window during nighttime in the city.
When I look in someone's eyes and can
see that they're not in their body. My
memory of orange dream-suckles from the
ice cream truck dripping onto my hand
during my young Ohio summers, and my
excitement for all of the people I have yet
to meet!

I'm looking at YOU, for you,
whoever you are, wherever and
if-ever you find this poem...

What offering or acknowledgement do I
provide to myself, to you? To the
universe?, As my heart pounds

trying to capture each moment
as clearly and as truthfully as it
happens? Would I just be
embodying words?

How do I begin to epitomize
cautiously listening
to loud late-night railroad tracking
and Marlboro smelling sirens in the distance,
the ones listening for the rawness
of their experiences in their words,
in their rhythms.

My poems written in bedroom attics attempt
to reconcile what is left of my past since I've
evolved--They've become something that
surfaced from deep within, and then
submerged me under currents where I dreamt
of optical illusions of the Midwest caving in
on itself.

Yellow sound waves on asphalt
became the path to my house of memories,
the windows transforming into portals
to every state I have ever felt;
I found vibrations that drove
my soul into deeper levels of myself.

I just saw the lambent moon
above my city while trying to write this!

I think I've been existing somewhere

between the breezes in the trees
and the turning of turbines in the horizon
overshadowing red barns, being hit with
memories
I can no longer recall.

Asteraceae and the Innumerable Self

o. captain

You call me oxeye daisy. I am here,
within your garden, breathing in your breath,
each fragment of my compound head
complete, each disc and ray flower equipped
for growing. You see a whole, if you look from
a distance, white petals and a yellow disc, what
might be hundreds of anthers and filaments - I
am no I, composite as I am. You are no I
either, made up of small, inhuman things that
make your body work. I'm glad for you, I
could not bear the thought of being so alone,
so singular. We whisper, an ecology of
selfhood. Listen. Every piece of you can hear
it.

Midnight

Lola Votruba

It's midnight again. My room seems to have just made itself messy. Just this morning I deconstructed the pile of clothes on the floor and sorted them away, and now the pile is bigger than it was. Cut one head off and two grow in its place. Tomorrow I will wake up just as tired, and the pile will be even bigger somehow. Maybe I'll wear something of it. Maybe something new will be there.

It's midnight again. I've watched a couple minutes of every show Netflix has suggested to me recently. I want something that would make me feel like warm tea in my throat. Like your hand on my hip. I want something that would make me laugh, but softly. Really, what I want is to watch you fall asleep.

It's midnight again. I keep putting time limits on our phone calls as if that will make me go to sleep sooner. As if extending the time I can spend with myself before I let myself fall asleep will somehow make it easier. I breathe better through your chest. Tomorrow I will wake up tired, but maybe it will be different this time. I'll walk to the post office, deliver the package I've been saving for you. There's a letter in it. I wrote it a day before Christmas; it's outdated now. But I know you will love it all the same. If the line is long at the post office, I will try not to get discouraged. I will try to keep in mind that time passing while idle is simply the day as it passes, rather than a waste. I struggle to subdue the urgency with which I feel that I must buy my time back. As if running fast enough will give me my time back.

It's midnight again. Clearly I didn't run fast enough. There are two pairs of scissors on the floor next to me. One of them is only for fabric. They do their job excellently. The other pair is from the kitchen; their blades are duller, all-purpose. Can do almost anything on a mediocre level. I will pull symbolism and significance from this because my sleep-deprived brain finds artistry to be a fine way to cope with reality. I will let this make me insecure about my own shortcomings. I am kitchen scissors, and every day I look for fabric. This is the most poetic thought I have had all day.

It's midnight again. It's interesting, the disconnect I feel between your physical self and the one I get to talk to through a screen. When you first saw me after the summer, the first thing you said to me was, "you *are* real!" There was a certain desperation in that. But I understand. I have a tendency to spread myself over spaces. I don't like to make stacks of my belongings; notebooks get laid next to sheets of paper, next to my three pencil cases, next to my portable charger. I won't look for metaphor in this one, I'm too tired. I'll let you do it this time. I'll let you tell me to go to sleep, but I won't do it.

Mind Eraser

Benjamin Willems

It was happy hour, and I ordered the mind eraser. I didn't know what it was, but I liked the name. They handed me something dark that looked like a whiskey and Coke. Turns out, it was an iced regular spiked with something strong. "This ain't Dunkin'!" I heard somebody shout just as the first sip went down my throat. Only that somebody was me, and I couldn't hear myself think, and my Tinder date who said she only invited me for the tacos had to drive me back home. When I woke up, she was gone, but I didn't mind. A stressful week had gone by in an instant. I wished that could be every week.

The next night, I dream I'm at a frat party. Which is odd, because my college didn't have frats, just a row of brick dorms filled with bearded stoner dudes who think Quentin Tarantino is the height of American cinema. It's the end of orientation week, and super buff towel-clad guys raise their Solo cups as high as they can and repeat, "Do something crazy! Freshmen! Keg-stand!" For a second, I'm the freshman with super strict parents who's really letting loose for the first time in his life. And then, I'm the jungle juice clouding his thinking, turning every single sorority girl into the hottest he's ever seen. Then, the girls are anime mecha pilots with cute kitty sidekicks, and he fucks every single one.

This is how it used to be, every night since that first night. I was somebody having a drink – a thirtysomething divorcé ordering a margarita at the bar just to feel something, a newlywed couple downing mai tais among the red lights of Bangkok, a group of high schoolers chugging beers in a pickup truck outside their first-ever house party. Then, I was the alcohol clouding their thinking. I told the divorcé that he's ready to make some changes in his life, the newlyweds that all this beauty will go away soon, the high schoolers that this night can last forever if you want it to. Now, all I dream of is the alcohol. Telling me all that and more, that I'm lovable, that I've got to love myself before anyone else.

I've learned how to make mind erasers in my kitchen. I'm really good at it. When I wake up, empty highball glasses line the floor, the TV blares old sitcoms I haven't thought about in forever, and the sun shines on the brick wall out my window. I wake up without a single thought in mind, and I'm ready to attack the day. But when I get to work, I can't do a damn thing except copy down handwritten diary entries from Cold War veterans, or something. It's exactly what I'm supposed to be doing, so my boss doesn't mind. But I can't help but wonder if my four years of college and plenty of knowledge about paratactic sentences and shit like that would get me somewhere. Somewhere better than here. Like I had a chance to meet a lover, find my passion, go through alternate selves like my parent's money flying out my hands, and I blew it. Oh well. At least I can make another mind eraser tonight, and be the voice telling me that self-love is all I've got and that's all that really matters in the end.

This coffee is complimentary. It tastes like it, too. So watery I taste the white paper cup that's dissolving in my sweaty hand. "When did you know your life had become unmanageable?" the pastor says. I've been staring at the stained-glass windows above. "When I stole my neighbor's cat and nearly choked her to death, and my neighbor, too." They ask me how it happened, and I tell them I filled a keg up with mind erasers and drank them all. "I don't even remember the rest of the night," I say, "or who I was before. I only remember one thing. Paratactic sentences." They don't talk about unmanageable shit. They want to know what I have to say about, uh, that.

Regurgitation

Matti Apse

sure I'd locked it

she's gonna see a brown splotch instead of my haircut

the way a scar

wonders what's underneath

counting on Kim not to fade in a million years

more than most ideal hostages sketch so many quacking ducks Kim my hairball Kim my luck

a grand old morbidity get a steady fix in
position

(a character from a Virginia Woolf novel)
we collapsed

She sat on my carpet in lotus

We drank from my "good wine"

lakes flatten cheek. a straggling strip

sever the nail-bed. Kim watch my little mutilations

the malnourished pigeons corpulent jellyfish corpses

:: failed avian duties of ruckus-making

heaped on her shoulder a barking laugh

her burps were earth-shaking

delicately as a priest seal the edges with her tongue considered violating whatever a desire to
hurt someone

her loving look slaughter neurons

dangling grief was a lava flow

a black hole

Her pupils darted around

She could find nothing

I was pure glass

"everybody dies these days en masse"

"Shut up"

a mother's child is the demon withering away in her soul passed down to mine

Margaret McGuinness

I've been ruminating decisions of my life since the moment my mother, my mother, my mother
She spread her legs screaming my name in vain and cursing my existence
My geniture, the moment the wreckage and debris of my mind become one
If I had seen this moment I would've winced in pain and begged to be taken back
I've been thinking about how I used to disperse my hands in your case of beauty
A pink heat of crimson burning your cheeks
With a dash of sincereness and a fetching gaze
The smell of jasmine, sandalwood and dead lily pads
A rapture, rapture, rapture
A love and hate I still cannot decipher to this day

I've been rummaging through the windowsill of memories
My religion was ruined

Mother! my heart cannot handle the thoughts
The thoughts that wither away at my existence

Family Reunion – Dad’s Side

Anna Schechter

First things first, bagels and lox spread on the round table.
Everything seeds and bits sprinkle. Lots of hands I don’t know. Rings and veins.
Nervous, I watch breakfast through a dangling sheet of salmon
While my cousin blows snot at my brother. My first encounter with lox.
All pets must be boarded, but babies can come. We go whale watching because it’s Boston. You
have to be friendly even when your aunt sits in puke on the boat.
Parents always told me I’d meet this uncle. Here he is: clumsy, cream-cheesed mouth, And I’m
meant to feel lucky. We share a loss, genetics, but his speech lisps. Mine doesn’t. Regarding this
man through my fish pink screen, I’m ten and know not luck but pressure. Kaddish we should
recite to sanctify his loss and my luck for sibilance that swims without sloshing.
(But none of us have the words.)

one night i rose from the dead

o. captain

Looks like nematodes, she tells me. Beneath her gaze my arm festers, bone-flayed, blood-worms writhing like capillaries come alive. They have been here since I came back from the dead. My lover,

the mycologist, breathes spores into my skin, jealous that my passengers are not her favored guests. The nematodes persist, but mushrooms grow, too, mycelia lancing through osteocytes, pervading marrow.

My arm across my eyes. The nematodes descend, finding soft purchase on my white sclera, staining red with ulnal blood. They bring the mushrooms with them. In the morning, the mycologist is at my wrist, vampiric,

biting, tearing. Nematode and hyphae in her teeth. Gore-grinning at my wormy, threaded eyes, her mouth approaching, gentle pressure as she tears them from the optic nerves. It is not a painful sensation.

She knows, as we pass *Aminata* back and forth between our tongues, I won't again be poisoned, so she pushes at the limit of my undead immortality, gnaws at my still-warm bones, feeds me

to her fungal colonies. She says to me, *my wife, the incubator*. The mycologist mollified, my nematodes get closer to my heart, racing her hyphae, chasing iron-heavy hemocytes back to their source.

My lover, the mycologist, admits defeat, but I will not let her withdraw from my smooth ribs, I keep murmuring, *stay*, as second death approaches. She tells me, *it will be so odd, to see your body still*.

For Unconvinced Optimists.

Esther Eidenberg-Noppe

Nature's untethered spine would be so beautiful,
the work of reminding each other will never end.

We will never fall asleep in love without waking eventually to fire,
But the sunsets will be brilliant.
The views will persevere.

Buried in quarantines and other sinkholes,
The wallpapers will flower, the books will sing out.

The rain will beckon, "catch all of the wretched sobs of this earth,
Leave umbrellas and training wheels to collect dust"
Nobody ever found god with the safety lock on.

I want to squeeze every drop from this life
I want to leave no stone unskipped

I want every wrinkle, and every scar.
If it means I found all goodness I will take the pain with.
There is no beauty without a memory of how it hurt not to live like this.

Deep breaths will take with them smoke from the burning,
but where else for the trees to pour oxygen?
Who else to feed these out-breaths?

I am in love in the forest and we are watching as all of the leaves hold us
In their cupped hands.

NOT TO BE MISSED

Mary Morris

The Park Monceau, the Jardins du Alfred Kahn
The little canal (not easy to find)
that follows the Seine.
Have peach melba at the Place Vendome;
Walk to Montmartre; see the street where I lived.
We carry the memories of others
Away with us like extra baggage
Scribbled on slips of paper, tucked
into the backs of guidebooks.
We cart the best view of Notre Dame,
a romantic spot where vows were exchanged,
the Pont Neuf at night,
that meal when figs were fresh from a tree,
the hotel with the feather mattress
that resembled a cloud.

Diligent as boy scouts
We have trudged;
Tried to retrace others' steps
Only to find the restaurant closed
Or the fois gras not to our liking
The gardens too precious and planned,
the peach melba too sweet.
At the Rodin we preferred to be outside
in the shade of chestnuts
Than inside, surrounded by ghostly heads.

We thought we knew our friends
and they knew us
and they knew we'd want
small gardens smelling of roses,
museums with delicate pastels,
a restaurant where we could linger
over our anisette.

We cannot sleep the night you didn't dream
or fall in love along a little quais,

taste meringues for the first time.
We cannot find the person you were
when you tossed your head back to laugh
before the tour buses arrived at Giverney.

When I think of all we failed to see -
a simple gesture, an angry look,
love whispered down alleyways,
The hours lost trying to reclaim
That perfect sip of Merlot.

Dutiful tourists
we tried not to miss a single thing
and now we have missed this
and so much more.

religion for the nihilist:

Brig

I don't believe in God and I oftentimes
don't even believe in true love (other than when
I'm reading the last chapter of *Ulysses* or particular
verses of poetry or when my mom finishes her dinner
and says she wishes she made dessert and my dad silently
hands her a caramel, like he already knew she would say that)

I believe that Kanye West has provided me with more spiritual guidance than the bible will ever be
capable of and I believe that Allen Ginsberg is a prophet (because how else do you explain the Blake
visions) I believe in touchdown passes that shouldn't be caught, but somehow are, and I believe in
Charles Bukowski and James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift

I believe that I have seen God exactly three times:
once in the radiator when I was four years old,
once when I went to SoulCycle still a little wine drunk (read: heartbroken),
and once when I ate four brownies that I thought were just brownies but they were not just brownies

I believe in sex and its ability to heal, and I don't believe that any higher power would want us to not
have it. I believe that the world is going to end one day, but other than that you can't really trust
anything. I believe in my local dunkin donuts employees, even though they fuck my order up every
time. I believe that I am going to see the Patriots win *at least* six more Super Bowls, and I believe that
they are a fourth quarter team. I believe that the game isn't over till it's over.

I believe in moments like this morning:
I parked my car illegally and left it for an hour, and
when I returned the woman in the yellow vest was
giving out tickets, but she was a few cars away from mine;
I hadn't been ticketed yet and
I believe that is enough.

footnote (oftentimes i don't believe in true love and yet)

I believe in your eyes fluttering open in the morning
when I kiss both of your cheeks and you roll over and

try to look at me but you can't open your eyes yet.

I believe in my face buried in the pillow; you ask
me if you should make coffee and when I roll over and nod
emphatically you smile and kiss my forehead before you
walk away. I reconsider: maybe my heart works like it's supposed to.

I know it beats when we're drinking malibu and pink lemonade
and your face is shimmering; you're laughing and my veins fill with
fire, I reach out to kiss you. Your tongue moves like Sylvia Plath:
I am I am I am. Somehow I am convinced: I believe in the fact that
if we had kissed in high school, it would've tasted like mango juul
pods and i still would've fallen in love
instantly

thank you for melting my stone

22 for a week

m cole

i don't think you brushed your hair a day in your life.

nelson told me daffodils are the first flowers to bloom in spring and are
nicknamed the death flower

it's march in new york

the sun shined for the first time the day after you died.

i've never hated daffodils more.

my twin and i are getting vaccinated

on st patrick's day.

in different time zones.

my friends joked they would cancel each other out.

i cough up chunky grey globs every morning

shrimp tails look like toenails

my professor's dog has teeth that look like they were drawn on by a kindergartener not
everything living is worth seeing.

i sat in the school library all day hoping to see someone who knew you searching
for any semblance that we knew one another

i can't remember the last time i found a four leaf clover.

i keep imagining your

tangled ratty hair,

as free as you were.

i haven't been able to brush mine since i found out.

i never liked the name maddie because it sounds too much like maggie. but for the
first time i'm glad our names sound alike.

i could swallow

seeing you in a dress,

pink cheeks,

and mascara,

but they brushed your hair.

drove a little drunk in your honor last night
and wondered if i meant more to you than i knew.
you are the cool breeze on a sweaty day

i heard a line in a song that sunk deep into my heart, and i knew it was you— “the day i
met you i started dreaming”

every indulgence feels guilty without you.

tulips bulbs are dormant all winter
they can save up their energy
to grow their roots deep into the earth.
not everything dead isn't living.

For Maddie—



photo by m cole

Someone come save me - Art Gods send an angel - you've been blessing me I don't know how I could articulate how much devotion I have for you - teach me how - I will be an artist monk - or nun - I adore love I adore people I adore women but I want the love of a lifetime - I should find someone as devoted to their god as I am to you - I know I must mature more - I must focus - I must be careful with myself since I wanna spread the message of love and compassion and commitment - and since I am so fond of writing - communication - is now the time - sometimes I feel so disconnected with my generation - have we always - would they feel it too - is my art a responsibility to bring us together - please allow me to speak love so lovely - I will find my people - anything that works the first time Einstein was skeptical of - a new character - my heart craves love - it has love - I have you - I don't believe I will go through life alone - I will connect - help me be pure and fun loving and wise - art gods shine your light on me - I will put the mirror backwards to my face and reflect it to the world - when the time comes - for now while I look within to make myself a stronger person - I'm being torn down only to learn how we are made - May my passion for my work bloom - let it be strong let me be good - I'll devote my life to you - to those I love - to being a light

Exquisite Corpse at Hollywood Cemetery

The one with the fresh ink will start;

A boy with a *Sony A6100* for a cape-- digs his nails into the sycamore tree--
and he loves it this much-- but he can't quite make Handshaking Peace
(like the tattoo on his Mother's longer arms) to scale himself up
the trunk to the lowest branch so he could climb till he sees the entire cemetery--
his mother cries," Hey, respect that sycamore stop pulling its bark to the floor--
come on let's take the photos for your class project"—then, he asks, "Mom, are these
the skeletons of trees like the skeletons of the bodies that I came to take pictures of?"
they were gone before I could hear the last words-- I carried on and continued with
My purpose
I pet each stoned cat and dog and I massaged the (stone) shoulders of each guardian angel--
till their tombs opened up!

What's written in stone will now take turns with quotes;

*The Family Cemetery-- not slothful in business-- Erected by Devoted Friends-- They walk beside us every
day-- saying ask Ann A-- Riddle-- she always loved them-- "the dead calls-- and she loved all creatures
great and small-- it's who?"-- "little old great granny!"*

*Moon a Faithful Wife-- Ball and Bouquet-- with you as you sleep-- a book lover-- a creative spirit--
Violinist Altoona at Petersburg VA Symphony Orchestras*

*Old Men Wonder Too!-- Old mills and over-Spills-- water and time to move on-- rare zest-- The gift was
ours to borrow-- Home is the Sailor-- like seeing the horizon as the end of the ocean--Now cracks a noble
heart-- after eating his meager dinner—Goodnight Sweet Prince*

*"Hello Friend"-- a Sunday School Superintendent-- Learn Live Laugh Love-- The richness of the content--
A Life of Unselfish Devotion*

This Poem was written with-- GEO.E Pickett & Margert Saunderson-- Bessie Lorena Moon-- Dr.
Robert Inma Johnson & Elizabeth Pollard Cox Johnson-- Nancy Jane Wagner-- Timothy A Kuhn--
Vashti Hammett-- Mary Gentry White-- John A. Van De Walle-- Duane B. Schrock Jr.-- Christine
Louise Wenot-- William R. Burgh IV-- Ann Mcrae Kennady Capehart-- Cowardin Capehart-- Ulrich

Paul Kalkofen-- Donna Mcrae Capehart-- Albert Lawrence West-- William Luther Baker-- Davis
Murray Brockie-- Swisher Kay Kalber-- and Anna Stiles (although I'm not sure where she is)

***Transcribed whispers of the turning pages**

*Where the shes go
Brush her beautiful
Hair with a broomstick beware
Left school in black robes

Loose Dirt Round the Stomping Ground

In an opaque gown -- her hair so free
only her name in the off-angle bangs
ascended to the woods for the commencement

Cut pill shaped speaker plays the
rules through its pores
white ooze and regimental cues
escape with each bump of audio

The young adults dance grasping
and inhaling the external
arthritis (sized) joints -- celebrate
tonight

4 they are leaving the center
no longer sucking their own good job fingers
but with the rest will be appointed
either -- 'Awning', 'Comforter', 'None', or 'We'

the obviously more presentable

also supply the soy piggy
there are those with energy
warm enough to cook
we gather round and sing
for the ring -- well there will be none

They are in the midst of
their fantasies to mature
do I understand the critiques
on the new imaginative?

It's nice if we all get what we want

In their slang and stupor they speak
as if the woods caught fire then
relate and identify then
hold up their chosen (appointed) finger

Right then I admired the Comforter
when I saw her raised finger
introverted message (saying) "fuck you" and
returning to the essence of home

But this was just for the ritual

See they all aren't gonna be able to
feel the same soon they
will vote with the same hands
tho there are rules about gesture meanings

The ideations seeped from the
narration they grew on and
Dedicated to
their hands where the lines make
their memoir

But do you remember?

She laid on top of me and put all her fingers in my mouth only months ago

Naming you Autumn and knowing you're gonna die

leafing through baby albums
context off the continuum
that picture in my hand in
the texture of your first non-sensible

blurry pictures grandparents outta
renew their prescriptions
continuing, through washing, scrubbing
bar residue is the icing fingered absent

missed out on the full aerial view
orange and brown and gold and raven all
potential to sprout from the ground-- or bird
beyond words, so happy before you had memories

metric measurement-- that threshold
sleepy because it's night --that description
fell short hmm why do I miss you so
December is when everyone's home-- at 12

complimentary grandparents accompany
absentees around the ball --feeding you small
sandwiches because of this your mouth never
grew-- I pay to come be with you now

kinetics to the death drop dance
we only had a single dance-- you'll follow
know my love google thesaurus
what you didn't retain was the careful

attention paid to each lock of your hair
bagged plastic-- blowing in the wind
laminated-- the only word you could spell

your name -- this is my favorite

No one uses it

Slover in the Spotlight

Spotlight thinning
(coming from) the slits
when there are no eyes looking
drapes themselves in skin

twisted and perfect
for a lid to wrap round it
cop out with closedness

one-sided woes
because I can't cry into your eyes
cop out and write
a map of how to close the distance

(So now) walking with purpose to get over you
but (still) sealed any openness
so, I'm loitering now
somehow makes me above ()
but the grain of salt I sent
drips down (rolls) cools you off

tougher crowd boo's with you
and helps you move on
from the pedestage (which is no longer so/ don't stal \start walking)

since I directed you wrong
blinded you with projections of who I think you and I are

I can only be what I see
I² was too much
only could raise to suspicion

without suspension

it's a bad play

write it off

Text Musings from 01.21.21

I believe and am under the impression that to be an artist and — I have learned through attention and thought that giving yourself completely to what I hear calling me — is the way to go about it — with my bargaining a tool and weapon where I must survive and keep going — but it is a sensitive position I must fight in — and in that a feeling of pain great — keeping myself open and always trying and fighting is necessary — but I am a fighter of the sensitivities and in that and everyone feels immense pain — but I'm wondering how my make up leaves me so much like a hurricane over then ocean — this eye of self-awareness is calm and clear — but thoughts work in loops and I am the depths of the ocean unaffected by the storm — in a blind way — (u can't see so deep down) I'm sure it's still effected

I am too the depths
I am the waves and the harsh rainfall
the wind and the breath
the rage
the gills of eternity
showing the vast differences of life and its resilience
the way I scale myself from wet muddying ground and rock to the top of the clouds
un-melted by the sun
or is this arrogance?
for it seems sometimes I melt as the rain

A mystic — a witch I am
to the oddities of weakness
of the heel — halting my ship
Like a swallowing, prideful, and large wave only here by the storm in my heart
I am fire tho
I am a witch
I will fly in the western sky
like the greenest
most flourishing, bloomable,
witch of the tornado portal
to a story land that I long to find
but is it to create?
to create — a triangulation
must fall over me

make me as strange as the Bermuda Triangle

It's an unpredictable wish
but who's sureness allows for certainty
in a wish it must be the long that give a wish a path to follow
I will be an artist
I will be a poet
and fight like an athlete for gods
graceful paradoxes and scolded
from the philosophers I admire
but even they say the artist
must be nuts
I'll call myself a chestnut
for my heart breaks
emotion that our ancestors
a kin to me discovered
ink for this
for us

we all love — we are all different — I have my purposes and my lottery is but a number I will transcribe
into beautiful verse as I fight and write and write!!

Collected Poems of Maddie Mertsch
Catalogued by *Love and Squalor*

Twisted (Published in the Fall 2019 issue of Love and Squalor)

Wrapped in My sugar coat
holding in my glucose
(cramping up)
knotted around my shoulders
needed a loose end to hang it
deadweight
suspension lifting tensions

flying dinner plate
that's been integrated
as a pigeon agent
leaving notes in
broken little pieces
so you have to put it together

I know

broken glass is dramatic
but I needed attention
I pull on my sleeve (and)
lead myself in a spin

of course You're sleeves came off
when summer came
it's hot
you talk like god
standing in the rain
standing in what you made

and we take in everything you summon

verse flowing in the same form and display that the stars are in
except yours could be felt watering down
the acid in our skin
(that u didn't have to take)

and the (few) drops that knocked on my humble skull
prone to answer
to manners with openness
pigeon holes when you misunderstand the syntax
and the agent betrayed its meaning

dripping till it wears the skull away
its importance was watered down
because before now was a drought

initial excitement of the sprinkle and its association to the top
topped off the sweetness
with a play on an association to pain
it got heavy
my sugar coat got soaked (disintegrated)
melted away (a flesh start)
inevitability of grasping for faith
I brought someone down
then wrapped myself in my god's
grabbed my wrist
and it felt like two people were dancing

valentines from mom

(Published in the Spring 2020 issue of Love and Squalor)

my mom sent me so much candy/ this one four/ valentines day/ this thought alone scares me/ oh love
oh love/ how I wish I could give you all this candy/ I just want love/ because of that I'll put all of this in
my body/ but then I won't get love/ my mother told me this as she says not what she does/ I'm scared
of all the extra chocolate she had to send/ I want her love I would only ever give it boundary less/ I
need to throw part of me away/ these chocolates I could give them to time/ but it's after me and my
mom/ habitually/ oh my I'll just eat one to stop crying about her/ and another woman who takes the
pain away/ by letting me think about her sometimes too whether it's all the chocolate I ate without
stopping or all the chocolate I gave without stopping/ love love's opposites/ you want it stopped/
thank you distractions I love you I think/ about you to stop crying/ but you get distracted now I'm
crying again/ throw away the chocolate in the most expensive heart shaped box my mom could ever
afford/ I'm filled with her/ I wanna stick my fingers down my throat and throw it up for her/ mom
you the biggest and sweetest heart/ don't let it stop because your love for hearts freezes you/ I see it
don't send me candy/ I can't handle thinking about what it means to you because I know what it
means to me/ please when I eat my mouth loves every second/ every time I eat I think about dying

Concept picks with small hairs (Published in the Fall 2020 issue of Love and Squalor)

like Coconut in the palm— milk and breasts mothers eggs— crack it with ur hand and you have milk— breast implants can feel like coconuts— concepts can get greasy(oil) it's just natural to fall—

making mistakes is critical— and stains the napkin which pats the doughy pizza— but napkins are comparable to currency— and a great debate on the nature of currency— textile wisdom, object or material— chooses pineapple—

it welcomes the absence of grease as it feels like it's gained potency will get you closer to coconut essence— on your head money looks like guess who(Heads up!)— would you welcome the guest or not trust them— pineapples have a very transparent etymology—

still their flesh eats your— but you're quicker so will you have them just to feel better about yourself— on many levels yes— but the tiers could be flattened and all for just health— flat health line and worm concepts— is dying the pause between understanding my next concept—

or is it a great concert where I finally go deaf— but I guess I can still feel the ground shake— some concepts you might not get yet— but it's ok small hairs will split ends and then— enter the multiverse

Spot Light (unpublished)

Our eyes close and i
(solover in the spotlight)

Spotlight thinning
(coming from) the slits
That when there are no eyes looking
(your eyes can)
Drape themselves with skin

twisted and perfect
for a lid to wrap round it
cop out with closedness

one sided woes
because I can't cry into your eyes
cop out and write
a map of how to close the distance

(So now) walking with purpose to get over you
but (still) sealed any openness
so I'm loitering now
somehow makes me above ()

but every tear drops with a grain of salt
what I sent
drips down (rolls) cools you off

tougher crowd boo's with you
and help you move on
from the pedestage (which is longer so/ don't stal start walking)

since I directed you wrong
blinded you with projections of who I think you and I are

i can only be what I see
i² was too much
only could raise to suspicion

without suspension
it's a bad play
write it off

Blood Gloves (unpublished)

Took my blood gloves off
by pulling each finger down the wall

Red handed, a Vandit
My friend, a partner in confession

A Sistine scene, finger painted
With my genes is
The creation from this
Chaos from not being at my own house

My friend said, "that's creative,
what you made and how you say you painted it"

"And I just want you to improve, so
It's the violent tint that is showing me different
You should definitely go for this image
But, blood should be red you know"

Then, my friend washed their hands and dried
We looked each other in the eyes
And said "goodbye"

Then, by my side is just the wall
That i confided -- in
Seeking comfort for the critique
of my friend
And talking over ways I could try it

I thought about why it dried like this--
When blood is closest to you
It is blue
And, since the air is different
It comes out a red tint

My wall, my partner in crime,
You took it all
I can see myself in you -- the purple lines drawn
And, i guess I don't really need to be on a bathroom wall
I turn the faucet on and wash it off