

# The Seven *Deadly* Sins

## **The Seven Deadly Sins**

Collected by Madisen Bellon  
Chosen by *Cosmic Daffodil Journal* Members  
Edited and formatted by Kelly Brocious

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“Write what should not be forgotten.”

Isabel Allende

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## Rich Boy

play me your Misery in a major key.  
I'll strum the mandolin on a splayed pile of cushions  
in your cubiculum. This is a composition. *Listen:*

Take me to that Bulgari, Tiffany's, Castle-  
blanca bar of your choice.

Disrobe and re-dress my wounds in mulberry silk,  
maroon dyes,  
Moroccan linens.

*Listen.* I figured it out.  
Finally, I know how to hurt you.

*Curse me, I say. Scratch me,  
Slap me right across the face  
like a tyrant. But do not take away*

*my allegiance;* all these pillars of  
sapphires and rose quartz,  
the immovable dressers

filled with weighted frock after frock,  
the fireplaces wide enough  
to host a masquerade,

crumble under  
a rose petal's fall;  
What is precious,  
cannot always remain. *And if I leave...*

Forgiveness has a taste for blood-soaked cantos; a cavernous table strewn with heirlooms and  
white wine. Course after course, romance decanted; preamble, penance, petrification; a slip of  
datura on the sugared rim of each request a tasting menu that ends with you  
on your knees; stripped down into your simplest undergarments; the hotel windows all thrown  
open, as I eat strawberries arnaud  
off the balcony  
of your chest.

The breeze echoes; curdles, thrums, beckons; *Listen.* hand-written letters and champagne,  
inheritance and time, gilded heaven after heaven, cannot touch

the cry of your own voice; *Sorry, sorry, sorry;* sweet litany, torn by decadent penitence;  
On your knees, weeping, you lose enough to redeem  
at the altar of Myself, begging; *Listen, darling, you're absolved;*

*here, your heart becomes lighter*  
*as it falls, becomes mine to care forever;*

*carve your sins and serve them rarer;*

*in my divinity,  
I devour and devour and devour.*

# Pride



# EATING FETTUCCHINE ALFREDO ALONE IN MY LIVING ROOM

Again. A secret ceremony  
only my cat and I  
know.

Cross legged  
on the floor,  
no pants on.

No time to  
twirl the noodles  
delicately.

The fork is  
a mode of  
transportation.

My eyes glued  
to an episode  
of *Laguna Beach*.

# EATING FETTUCCHINE ALFREDO ALONE IN MY LIVING ROOM

Pupils darting  
across the screen  
chasing subtitles.

I look around  
and wonder  
how I got here.

## Dear Me

Dear Me,

My face is so round. I hate it. No matter how I turn in the mirror I can't see any sculpted lines. There is no definition to my chin. I have no cheekbones.

Mom always tells me, "Nour, all of the women in our family have bodies like you. It's part of your heritage." I know she's taking about my extended family in El Dahar. But ever since we moved to this stupid American suburb the only girls I see around me are these cookie-cutter, blond, texting, fake air-kissing Barbies. I know why mom named me Nour. Nour means "Superfluous in all things." Mom has no sense of subtlety.

Ugh, Sandra doesn't have this problem. When she came into English class today David noticed her right away. The afternoon sunlight lit up her cheekbones perfectly and suddenly she was a radiant goddess dazzling us in front of the black board. How was David NOT to notice her? The other thing about Sandra is that she doesn't wear a bra. Once Mr. Peterson asked the class for a declarative statement. Sandra said, "Bras are a tight strap of patriarchy which depress women's sexuality and lower their place in society." She earned some points with the boys that day. Irony?

Last year when Sandra found out that I liked David she sent him some of her "top-shelf" selfies just because she could. That certainly got his attention.

## Dear Me

When English class was finished I followed her up the hallway and watched her ponytail slide back and forth across her back...like a metronome. I was kind of hypnotized. It seemed like David was hypnotized, too. He walked up next to her and they started talking. I couldn't really hear what they said, but I think he asked her to the Freshman Formal. He also stared at her chest a lot. I wish I had a chest. It's the one part of my body that isn't "superfluous".

When I got home from school I had another one of those mystery emails in my inbox. I've been getting them for the past few days. I've seen other diet pill ads before, but something about this one seems different. The other companies all have names like BurnAway and Extreme Keto and Pure Air. This one is called HekaVulgare and the emails are all purple. The ad makes it sound so simple. *"Magical measures...bury your old self...resurrect into the new."*

Something about removing water from the body, transforming the mind, and ancient Egyptian healing.

I sat down to do my homework, but I can't concentrate. I keep thinking my body...and David...and Sandra. Ugh, I think hate her.

To distract myself I went into the backyard and lay down on the grass so that I could see the night sky. That's one thing I like about living here. I can see the stars. Back in El Dahar there was too much light pollution. But here I feel like I can sort of lose myself in the darkness above. It reminds me of something else that

## Dear Me

weight-loss ad said, *“Enbalm yourself in beauty.”* My Egyptian zodiac sign is Anubis, the God of the Dead. But in elementary school in Egypt the teachers also taught us another name for him, *“He who is in the place of embalming.”* Hmm, maybe this is a sign for me. Oh, well, I’m going to bed.

Dear Me,

I did it! I ordered some HekaVulgare. I used Mom’s card. She won’t check it before the order goes through and then I’ll have to make something up. Oh, well...I’ll have it by then. The order is coming all the way from Egypt, but it says it will arrive tomorrow. Weird coincidence.

In gym class today Sandra purposefully asked for gym shorts that were two sizes too small. I also heard her ask David if he would help her with her English homework. He said yes. She batted her eyelashes at him. But his eyes weren’t on her lashes, they were on her hips.

Sometimes I have such evil thoughts...

Dear Me,

The HekaVulgare is here! It came in a cardboard box that looked...used...taped over three times with some kind awful gummy



## Dear Me

packaging tape. I had to cut it with scissors before I finally got it open. The inside of the box smelled like it was scented with some kind of perfume. It smelled dry. Kind of like sand.

The pill bottle is made out of purple glass. It looks expensive. The only other thing in the package was a list of ingredients and a small set of instructions. I don't recognize any of these things...Intybus, Angustifolia, Foeniculum, Apricot Kernel.

The instructions say to only take one pill per day. I took one. The instructions also said, "*Hark, manifest through thought the things desired. Cleanse yourself before your own eyes lest another cleanse you.*" I'm not sure what that meant. Maybe I'm supposed to meditate?

I went out into the backyard again and tried to lose myself in the night sky. I could see the Anubis constellation. It seemed brighter than usual. I spent some time thinking about myself, my body. I also had some more thoughts about Sandra; I couldn't help it.

I'm going to take a shower and then go to bed.

Dear Me,

Wow! That was fast. When I woke up this morning I lay there for a couple of seconds wondering what was wrong. I usually avoid touching my tummy because I hate that jiggling, but I moved my hands down and I think it felt, well, firmer. I thought I was

## Dear Me

certainly imagining it. I went to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I could tell immediately...my face looked different. Usually it's round and plump. But it was bright and smooth and...something else. It almost seemed like it was someone else in the mirror looking at me.

I felt courageous. I decided to wear a dress today instead of jeans. I only have two. I picked the yellow one.

In English class I sat in the front row, next to where Sandra usually sits. She and David came into the classroom. The moment David looked at me he stopped talking and just stared. Sandra stared too. She didn't say anything, but when she sat down next to me I could feel her looking at me sideways. David sat behind us and halfway through class I felt something brush the back of my arm. I looked down. David was handing me a note!

I opened it and it said, "Gee, girly! Nice dress!!"

I looked back at him and...this feels so weird to say, but I kind of felt like I had a little bit of power coursing through me. I lowered my head when I looked at him and stared into his eyes. His mouth dropped open.

Oh, something must be working!

Dear Me,

## Dear Me

Something strange is definitely happening. Last night after I took the HekaVulgare I felt like my throat was burning a little bit when I swallowed the pill.

Then I had a strange dream. Sandra was in the dream, but she was small...almost like she was a little doll. I reached down in my dream and picked her up. Her body was twisting and writhing like she wanted to get away. I blew on her body, and it felt like a desert wind flew from my lips across her skin. There were strands of sand and a kind of incense smell that seemed to be coming from everywhere. A moment later the doll started to come apart in my hands...like dust. The dust floated up into the dark sky. There was a deep moaning sound and she became a part of the Anubis cluster among the stars. It was almost as though the star god had embalmed her essence and pinned her against the heavens.

In the morning when I looked at myself in the mirror I couldn't believe it. My face is entirely mine but richly different. It was like I was seeing another woman. Even my eyes looked deeper. And it seemed like they were swirling with different colors.

It was delicious. I kept turning and turning my body and face and with each turn it was like I was seeing a voluptuous hourglass of olive skin and coursing sand and purple clouds twisting just before twilight.

In English class David passed me three notes!

## Dear Me

I did some research on the internet on the ingredients in HekaVulgare. Most of them are natural herbs. But Apricot Kernel is sometimes used to make cyanide. Totally bizarre.

I also googled the instructions that came with the pills. They were taken from an ancient Egyptian text called *The Wisdom of Anubis*. The text is supposed to provide fortune for those who quote from it and spite for one's enemy.

Sandra wasn't in school today. Maybe she was sick?

Dear Me,

I woke up earlier than usual and went directly to the mirror. I took off all my clothes and just stood there. It was like I was a statue carved from some ancient marble yet still lithe and alive and virile. My skin seemed like it was flickering and pulsing like dappled sunlight. And something was moving almost imperceptibly beneath the surface of my skin...shifting lightly like blown sand.

My face was glowing. My eyes were shining with a kind of amber fire. My mouth was a full set of ruby lips with a pursed, luscious poise. My hair seemed like it was flowing with a kind of rippling, ceaselessly moving current of its own making.

I wore my other dress. The red one.

I didn't go into English class today. Instead, when the buzzer rang

## Dear Me

for class to let out, I stood in the center of the hallway. When the students came out of their classes they turned to look at me as they passed...my body was parting a sea of onlooking and rapt gazes. David came up the hall toward me. When he saw me, he dropped his books. I walked toward him. He started to say something, but I held up my finger. He stood there, wide-eyed. I twisted my lips into a little smile and touched my finger against his lips. The saliva on his lips was wet beneath my finger...and then it dried under my touch.

It felt like power came out of my body.

Dear Me,

I took two HekaVulgare pills last night. Whatever is happening with me can't wait. It won't wait. After I swallowed the pills it felt like my body started to shimmer. The floor beneath my feet seemed like it was shifting sand on a beach. I walked to the mirror. The girl looking back at me was me. She was also a dark princess with wind swirling around her like a mirage. I felt like I could hear voices chanting. I went to my bed and fell asleep.

I dreamt that I was floating above a desert floor. The sand below me was covered with thousands of people who had come from distant lands to look up at me. They brought things with them to offer me...baskets of dried flowers and crushed leaves.

## Dear Me

I had never seen those things before, but, somehow, I knew the names. Intybus and belladonna and myrrh. Jerusalem leaves and pyrena shells and thorny resin. They laid them at my throne as they bent down to worship me.

On the horizon there was a storm with flashing lightning, coming closer. In the thundercloud it seemed like a constellation of stars was moving and growing. It looked like Anubis.

When I awoke in the morning I didn't look in the mirror. I didn't need to anymore.

My clothes in my closet were all gone. They had been replaced them with regal garments and beaded strands of pearls. I chose the transparent purple sari. When I walked out the front door of my house the people in my neighborhood were all lined up on each side of the street, waiting for me. As I walked down the street, the people bent and swayed and moaned softly.

Instead of going to school I went to the highest hill in the downtown city park. The rest of the town had already gathered there. As I waited I saw a column of people carrying a funeral pyre. Sandra's desiccated body was on it. Her eyes looked crusted and white. It was then that I realized that cyanide had leaked from her eyes and dried there like salt. Her embalming was complete. Several people were already carrying lit torches.

As I looked down on everyone I opened my mouth and a low call

## Dear Me

came from my lungs. Soon the town was writhing and holding their hands up towards me. The torches touched the pyre and Sandra's body was in flames. I saw David in the midst of the crowd. I pointed at him and beckoned. He was drawn forward up the hill. When he reached me, I turned to the attendants on either side of me. Somehow my thoughts spoke to them. They removed David's clothes from his body and wound a linen cloth around his hips. His eyes were on me the entire time. The attendants brought him to me. I took him into my arms and felt a great power surge within me, as though a billion voices were stored within my heart. I looked out at the crowd and, with a cry of great force, I pointed at the sun.

There was a crack like lightning. The sun's brightness surged in the sky. In a flash the town below me dissolved into sand and there was nothing left but a magnificent desert. The heat was brilliantly intense and I could feel the sun's rays penetrating my skin. I breathed in deeply and felt solar energy in the air liquify and fill my body.

Then the sun tore across the sky in a flash and fled beyond the horizon. In a split second the daytime was replaced with the brilliance of a night sky absolutely inflamed with stars, the brightest of which was the Anubis cluster. I continued to breathe and I felt the light of day and night enter my eyes, my face, my waiting body.

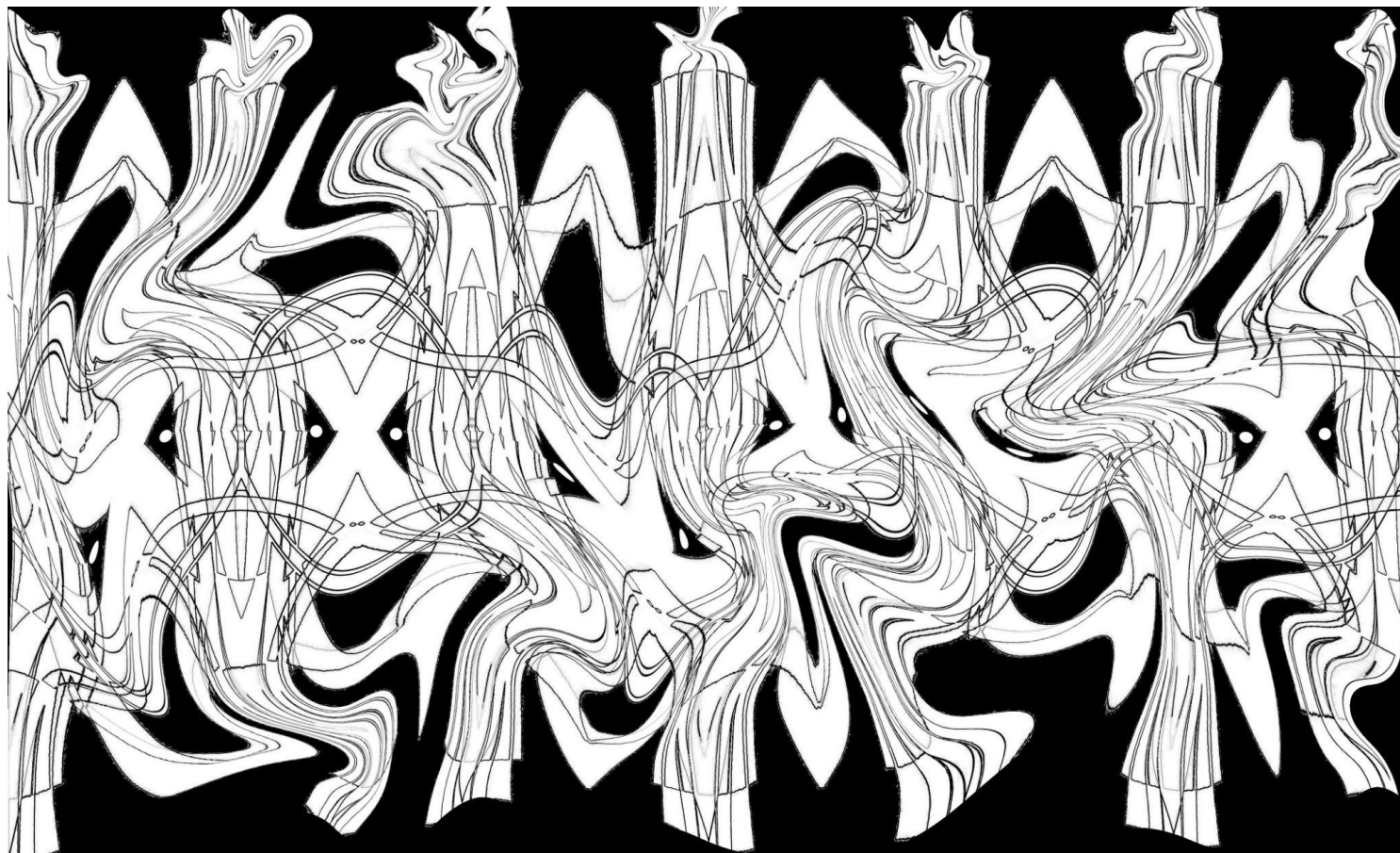
## Dear Me

I suddenly knew things, great things, dark things...ancient things. I understood who I was. I stood before the world, a cosmic Pharoic queen. I contained within me all love...sapphic, achillean, eros. All people bowed before me. Anubis, God of the Dead, King of Dark Dawn, rested his scepter on my brow.

I am Nour. I have become my name. I am superfluous in all things.



# Wrath



## Bless Me

You told me to hide, to cover myself,  
to close my mouth and restrain my appetite.  
You told me to die to myself before I'd lived  
and I listened until I saw the light through the bars  
of your cage and I pried myself out—

Forgive me father for I have sinned,  
bless me Mother for I will continue to.  
My body has been trying to curl into  
new shapes of warmth, asking to live,  
and I'm caught in sweaty visions of all I need,  
lips and tongues and twisted bodies  
I reach for every time I close my eyes.

Forgive me father for I have sinned,  
bless me Mother for I will continue to.  
I want it all like they tell me to,  
a big house by the sea full of books,  
my days filled with those who know me,  
long nights breathing sweet green smoke—  
I'll take whatever I can reach.

## Bless Me

Forgive me father for I have sinned,  
bless me Mother for I will continue to.  
They've let me loose, left me on my own  
and now I stalk joy and pounce on it,  
smacking my lips on drunken nights and tearful laughter—  
I will eat and eat and feel it all grow taut against my stomach,  
I will eat the world given time.

Forgive me father for I have sinned,  
bless me Mother for I will continue to.  
I got a taste of what it was to lay in  
soft covers for hours on end,  
my body curled into contentment,  
a white fan dusting my skin into air,  
and now I want to live in these light sheets.

Forgive me father for I have sinned,  
bless me Mother for I will continue to.  
I saw a French chateau and two burning lovers,  
I saw lives untouched by office days, full  
of busy streets and dinner table evenings  
and I burned with longing, I burn still

## Bless Me

as I watch through the window.

Forgive me father for I have sinned,  
bless me Mother for I will continue to.  
I realized the fall was coming and fanned  
my tail feathers and put on my best red dress.  
I strutted through the streets, my shoulders proud,  
a picture of who they told me not to be—  
I'll put on a show before the end, I'll show you what I am.

Forgive me father for I have sinned,  
bless me Mother for I will continue to.  
The end is near, and I look at the things they did to me,  
the scars on my body, the shaking in my hands,  
and I spew fire from my mouth,  
I watch the flames lick their skin until they crumble  
into ash, and I leave with a smile on my face.

Bless me, Mother.

Bless me

Bless me

Bless me.

## SINNER MAN

How did it feel  
for the Reverend Joe  
to inhale all the sin  
right out of the congregation  
and then exhale  
in a great rush  
of hell and damnation.  
For a moment there  
the worst that men do  
must have pulsed  
through his body...  
desire and greed and gluttony.  
Made his head bulge,  
heart race,  
face sweat bangles.  
But then a great roar  
of "Repent! Repent!"  
blew it all out of him.  
Religion was back to normal...  
preacher pure in thought and deed,  
the congregation,  
the usual bunch in need  
of soul saving.  
Then the baskets  
came around

## SINNER MAN

and people dropped  
their money in.  
A small price to pay  
for status quo.

## you can call me lust,

my ex said i was  
a succubus;

didn't realize a  
woman's desire was  
such a taboo—

but in a world designed  
for men i should've known

that my yearning and my  
need were inappropriate  
especially in the bedroom,

forgive me;

i didn't realize sex  
was just for the pleasure  
of a man—

didn't realize liking it was  
such a sin,

just give me  
all your love and i will

you can call me lust,

return all the favor;

burn me in your lust  
and mine will bury you.



## Dead Man's Hand

Pull up a seat and get comfortable.

I suppose you've realized now what's happening to you. It was that last hand of poker you played. You won too much.

What's that? Oh, you're telling me you can never *win* too much? See, that's where you're wrong. Here, at my casino, there's a *lot* of things you can win. And you took the house down. Took me for everything I'm worth...didn't you?

It's because of your nature. The nature of people like us. We want to line our pockets with velvet and put wingtips on our shoes and we'll do anything for it. That makes you and I unpredictable. Unpredictability is not something I need on a casino floor. It makes things *messy*.

You're not dangerous, but you know that. All the same, I *am*

## Dead Man's Hand

afraid of you. In my way.

Not because of who you are, am I right? Bit of a drifter, aren't you? Always on the move? A regular Cincinnati Kid. Taking people for everything they've got. Including me.

I'm not mad, kid.

You don't—you *haven't* realized what that means just yet, have you?

Bernice, get us some drinks.

You know, I was like you, once. *Ambition*, that's what I called it. I could play the tables like anybody could. Better. Oh—oh, don't get me wrong. You, *you* play them well. Sometimes, I swear you can see through the cards.

That's how you beat me, isn't it? Seeing through the cards.

## Dead Man's Hand

Me? I won this casino. Doing just what you're doing. I won every penny, every stitch of fabric, and every white hair on my head.

You've got a little white in your hair, now. Don't remember seeing that when you first came in. Did you see something that spooked you? Or maybe it's just the shock of the *win*.

You told me at the table that you wanted this casino. You wanted everything. I told you to think about it before you put your hand down, but you didn't. You didn't even wait *one breath*.

Your drink.

Me? I'm having a Gin Fizz. Is that out of style? I wonder what else is out of style. This old suit probably is. My liver spots are, but you'll have those, too. They'll pepper your hands before the

## Dead Man's Hand

sun comes up.

Oh, yeah. You got a lot when you said you wanted *it all*.

Are you feeling the fear, now? It's bubbling up like soda water, all crisping up under your skin. That's good. Fear can feel good. It can make you sharp, it can make you strong.

That's *my* fear you're inheriting, kid. Along with everything else you won tonight. *My* casino. *My* debts. *My* shoe size. You wanted them. They're all yours.

Course, I don't know what else you're taking. That's what scares *me*.

Ah, but you *did* take the cough, though. That's good. It's been bothering me a long time. It comes with your winnings.

Might as well get you up to speed.

## Dead Man's Hand

Rudy's off on Saturday.

The wife's got a bit of a drinking problem.

I can't tell you the list of the people who are gonna want to kill you, that's for Bruno to tell you. He's your problem, now, too.

Enjoy the casino. It's going to be yours for a *long* time.

## I'm Gonna Kill That Woman

He said, and stormed off as I sat thinking  
Why am I still his friend? His explosive anger  
Was like a wasp ready to sting anyone  
Who even moved. I guess that's why I learned  
To stay absolutely still, for I'd known people  
Who'd gotten stung, and I liked my face as is.

Am I a victim? I thought and chuckled.  
I sure am stuck, but it's not all that bad.  
He's got money, right? He pays, and—  
God, I can't think of a single reason more.  
So, what's stopping me? Could it really be?

Am I a victim? Sure, he's violent  
And this isn't the first girl he's gotten rough with,  
But what could I say? It's between them, right?  
Why should I budge in? Yes, I am a bit scared  
'Cause he's like a marching moose when angry.

Shit. I don't know what to do. Wait, I know.  
I'll just leave. I'll switch phones. Change locks.  
But he still knows where I live. Should I leave?  
Move cities? Wait, what am I thinking? He could  
Follow me. Wait, the girl. Will he really kill her?  
I should go after him. Right? I should. I should.

## Next Level

Family, friends, lovers,  
Begging, pleading for him to  
Take a shower, get off the couch  
See a bit of the the world outside

He considered it, but couldn't—  
Why risk going out into the real world  
With all its real problems when  
A game was so much more fun?

Family, friends, lovers,  
Yelling, screaming at him to  
Do something, anything  
They'd even let him be a professional gamer

He considered it, but wouldn't—  
People couldn't be trusted in the real world  
And wasn't it all just an endless cycle of  
Work and stress and bills?

Family, friends, lovers,  
Coming and going

## Next Level

Moving on, giving up  
Letting him live with his choices

He was happy, he was fine—  
Slumped over  
Muscles atrophied, heart failing  
Avatar on the screen asking: “Next Level—Are You Ready?”



## I Stumbled

Sweat trickles down the back of my neck, soaking the spot you always kissed before going to sleep. My long, thick hair sticks to my forehead, my cheeks, my arms, and I fantasize about attacking it with a pair of blunt scissors. Then I remember the way you would run your fingers through it after we made love, and my stomach turns. I stop stumbling down the alley for a moment, place my hand on a wall for support and close my eyes, welcome the solidity of the brick. The music from the bar vibrates through the wall and through my hot body. I try to dig my nails in, wish it was your back I was clawing. The world is spinning and I want to tear it apart.

When I open my eyes again, I see a male figure standing at the end of the alley. Maybe it's the vodka, but he looks like Jesus, the

## I Stumbled

bright light of the street lamp like a halo around his head. I stumble towards him, wonder if he would listen to my confessions and offer forgiveness for my sins. You always said I needed to shed the guilt I carried like extra weight. I carried too much and yet too little.

I blink and Jesus is gone. Maybe he was never there. Maybe I don't deserve forgiveness. The street is empty. I am empty.

I shouldn't have gone to the bar tonight. I shouldn't have had so many vodka shots.

I shouldn't have confessed my betrayal after we shared a bottle of whiskey that night three months ago. I shouldn't have screamed at you after you called me a whore. I shouldn't have let you grab the car keys and walk out the door. I shouldn't have turned away

## I Stumbled

from your mother when she cried "why" over and over at your funeral.

A car honks and I realize I am standing in the middle of the street. I look up and the driver is yelling something at me but I don't respond. He doesn't look a thing like Jesus. I walk towards the sidewalk and continue on to our apartment, where not even your ghost waits for me.

## This Poem is a Curse

I have shed blood for this poem  
so that each line you read binds you  
to it. My small words have evil  
intent. Words are not harmless things.  
A paper cut inflicts a venomous sting.

May your love lead only to indifference.  
May your mirror reflect your ugly heart.  
May your lies dissolve the enamel off your teeth.  
And may your sins like hungry moths  
chew holes in your malignant soul.

From me you shall receive no benediction.  
Like the long wicks of jet black candles,  
your hair will flame from my malediction.

## Lay Lady Lay #3



## The Lump of Clay

God pulled their eye back from the edge of the bluish-green sphere of their school project they called Earth. They had been watching Colonial Circle closely:

the greed of Chloe Jones who would do anything for a buck,  
the gluttonous drug inhalation of Mr. Beaner and Mr. Gramar,  
the pride of Dr. Dungmis whose good name meant the world to him,

the envy of the Honeys who looked next door at the Inkles' perfect home,

the lust of Angie for an underage boy,  
the wrath of Barbie who couldn't forgive her mother, despite her protective intentions,

and the sloth of the Inkles, who turned a blind eye to all

## The Lump of Clay

around them while waiting for their next trip to the beach. Their face contorted, eyebrows drawing together, lips dipping down, then they lifted their hand, casting Earth in shadow. God's palm pressed into the soil, fingers clenching to squeeze the figures back into nothingness. This was not right.

God's mother had encouraged them before, during their many attempts to build their project. She had been the one to hint that it might be easier to rebuild from what was already there, rather than start fresh every time. God had done well to follow her suggestion, but this – this was simply wrong.

God gathered the human figures, one by one, pulverizing them between their fingers. Then God swept away their rubbish, pressing it back into the clay where it could be made new. When

## The Lump of Clay

all signs of humanity were gone, God breathed out, preparing to  
begin again.



## Envy's Lure

Uncharted, the wet season of the fish,  
When she first netted his fresh jealousy,  
Slipped into its embrace, strange, helplessly  
Against her. What did this accomplish? Squished  
And flapping, it became a tight fit,  
Which constricted every breath, especially  
When men decided to judge readily,  
Appraising her looks like a trophy dish.

Who feels entitled to demeaning sneers,  
Not driven by the envy of slim thighs?  
Love leaves with the good fish forks — or endures.  
She envied women who'd commit — not fear  
Being reduced. Yet both fools and the wise  
Heed the eternal boatman's timeless lure.

## And into Ashes All My Lust: Self-Pity Self-Portrait

I do not look in mirrors if I can help it,  
do not invite the slide and slope of my face  
into my consciousness or my conscience.  
I am old. I am old and though I do not wear  
my trousers cuffed or rolled I know I am  
invisible to the girls I want to see and want  
to see me as viable if not virile. So I  
choose not to look at the hair gone or gone gray,  
at the skin under my eyes, the skin compounded,  
the skin in concentric semi-circles withdrawing,  
like the water's edge in a slowly dying pond.  
See? I have looked too much already at sag  
and decay. Why does the body go this way  
but desire remain always youthful, ever eager  
and ready, never tired or fat or wrinkled  
or a little out of breath, a little dizzy.  
That's the tragedy, that we want beyond  
our capacity to have, that desire does not  
run out. My widowed father, just a stop or two  
past my age, would beg his housekeeper to rest  
beside him on the couch, to take chocolates  
from his fingers while he felt the heat of her thigh  
along his own, her shoulder against his.  
He would ask each caregiver to elope with him,

## And into Ashes All My Lust: Self-Pity Self-Portrait

to sit with him on a beach in Hawaii.  
He was thinking I think of each in her bikini,  
of sun touching what he could no longer touch.  
The female caregivers laughed when they told me  
what he said, what he promised. They said to me  
when I apologized for him, *oh, he's harmless,*  
*he's just lonely, he's so sweet.* Did they not know,  
not understand? He did not recognize himself  
in pictures I took, knew not the shrunken, spotted,  
and hairless man though he knew well his tragedy,  
a long gone wife, a decade dead, a life too long.  
So I do not look in mirrors or still water  
because I know what I will see: 68  
enclosing 17—the brown lunch sack re-used  
and re-used until the creases go soft,  
the edges all rounded all sharpness lost—  
and maybe (we can pray) just enough good sense  
to stop the embarrassment waiting to happen.

## [Avarice]

Date of incident: 04/06/2022

Date of home surveillance footage recovery and transcription:  
04/07/2022

List of Acronyms: Mr. Jackson Brooks—JB, Unknown Suspect—US

BEGIN AUDIO TRANSCRIPT 00:00:01

[A large, metallic thump.]

US: Hey, so you don't mind if I chat, do you? I lost my headphones on the way here so I'll get super bored if I don't, I won't be able to focus at all.

JB: [Unintelligible.]

US: Oh, right, duh. [Laugh.] I dunno why I asked you something, sorry. Anyway, this whole set up is wild, huh? Took for-goddamn-ever but it was actually way easier to put together than I thought it would be. My friend does a lot of metalwork art so she got me the furnace and stuff, and my other friend does a lot of leatherwork so they got me the— [Pause.] The thing in your mouth. I dunno what it's called, I mostly just flag red and pink.

## [Avarice]

JB: [Unintelligible.]

US: Don't worry about it, bud. Okay, this bad boy's all warmed up and ready to rock, but I gotta get my PPE on. [Pause. The sound of several zippers. Then, singing:] "Oh, well, a-never was there ever a cat so clever as Magical Mister—" [Singing stops.] What, do you have a problem? I told you, I lost my fuckin' headphones.

JB: [Loud, unintelligible speech.]

US: Anyway, I'm gonna go ahead and take the "before" pictures that she asked for now. Smile! [A camera shutter clicks, laughter.] Sorry, I know you can't smile right now, I just couldn't resist. You wanna see it? [Pause.] No? Yeah, I get that.

JB: [Muffled yelling.]

US: Okay, showtime. I'm—Oh, shit, she wanted me to read something to you. Just a minute, I left my glasses in the other room.

[Shuffling, bootfalls, continuous muffled yelling.]

## [Avarice]

US: Okay, it says: “Thou hast—” Aw, Jesus Christ. I did so bad in English. I know this is not a flattering thing to admit but I just don't get Shakespeare-y stuff, you know?

JB: [Frantic, unintelligible shouting.]

US: Yeah, yeah. Okay, fuck me, here goes.

[NOTE: the following text, read aloud by the US and currently unsourced, has been reformatted following multiple complaints. Asides from the US and background noise from JB have been removed; paragraph breaks were adjusted.]

US:

“Thou hast spent thine hours upon on our earth—  
thine rarified time, thine moments so few—  
accumulating material worth,  
while gaining nothing of real value.

Through thine machinations, selfish and shrewd,  
thou hast trickle-down-snuffed so many lives.  
And the wealth, blood-soaked, which thou has accrued,

## [Avarice]

instead of repairing, only deprives.

I speak—a small cog, forgotten, a smear—  
knowing for once that you must heed my words.  
And knowing, too, that mine own time draws near  
to depart this plane on wings of white birds.

My messenger shall do what I cannot,  
their strong hands yoked to my quavering palms,  
and bring thee justice that many have sought,  
and deny thee, through me, thine final psalms.

Thou shalt have what thou hast earned, tenfold:  
to be filled up—stomach to tooth—with gold.”

[A low creaking noise.]

US: Alright. It’s hard to see with this mask, so... [A chuckle.] Stay  
still.

[A loud, muffled scream, increasingly obscured, duration  
00:04:20—00:05:52.]

## [Avarice]

[Silence, duration 00:05:53—00:06:02]

US: [Low whistle.] Goddamn.

[A camera shutter clicks.]

END AUDIO TRANSCRIPT 00:06:15



## A False Prick

Inside the great hall, the queen stands scowling. The queen has always scowled, but her malevolent sneer and creaseless visage once added to her allure. Now, with a pronounced palsy, the queen's scowl resembles more of a grimacing gargoyle.

“Take this hag away!” the queen slurs as drool drips from her slackened lips.

“I didn't put a spell on you,” Hypodermia, the alchemist, protests despite a chorus of hisses and boos rising up from the court. “Remember?” she sputters, trying to reassure her regent. “I warned this sometimes happens... and it will fade.”

The queen is unmoved. “You've stolen my beauty. You were jealous and now you will pay...”

*I gave you your beauty* Hypodermia longs to scream.

When Hypodermia first trademarked her *Age-Less®* potion, customers from across the kingdom flocked to her MedievalSpa. Soon the queen signed up and quickly became one of Hypodermia's top, top-secret customers. Hypodermia, and her assistant, Aestheticia (Tish for short), were sworn to secrecy.

## A False Prick

Only they could know the queen's flawless splendor resulted from a steady stream of botulism pricks. So, it shocked Hypodermia when the Queen made her accusations public. The Queen's troubles are not the result of some malicious magic, but rather the product of an adverse event. It's clear the Queen has failed to read the *Age-Less®* important safety information and now, in her misplaced anger, she has revealed her beauty secret. The Queen's pride is her own worst enemy—not Hypodermia.

As the guards drag Hypodermia past the assembled lords and ladies, she thinks of how many she's plucked, plumped, tucked, and stuck. How fortunate for Hypodermia that the court is stocked with so many conceited inbreds. Looking mirrors stoke the nobility's rampant self-dissatisfaction and aristocrats rarely maintain eye contact during conversation. They're all too distracted by 'glass-time' and visions of their future selves. All of this is a boon to Hypodermia's business, with every courtier willing to squander their last ducat in pursuit of perfection.

And the Queen reigns supreme as the role model for

## A False Prick

unrealistic beauty aspirations. Hypodermia realizes she should be grateful for her unhealthy patron. She now has more riches than she's ever imagined. But she requires her freedom to enjoy them. On the way down to the dank dungeons, Hypodermia considers how she can win back her customers. Perhaps she could switch things up and give them an honest reckoning. Maybe clarity could become Hypodermia's new middle-age brand.

*Come face to face with your authentic self: TrueVue™... from the makers of Age-Less®.*

But convincing her patrons turned persecutors to confront their unfiltered ugliness would be no easy sell. And after the queen's unpleasant experience, Hypodermia is nervous. No, she'll need something even more extraordinary to get these cretins crawling back. An idea slowly forms as she huddles on the cold grimy dungeon floor:

*Hyps-Pen-Prick™.*

Yes, that's it! She'll invent a self-injectable weight loss pen. She'll need a catchy jingle to make it sell. Maybe a repeating line

## A False Prick

set to a repeating lute riff. Something like:

*“Woah, Woah, Woah, Hyps-Pen-Prick, You Know!”*

A slew of claims run through her mind:

*“Tunic too tight?? Stockings that pinch? With Hyps-Pen-Prick, you’re guaranteed to lose an inch.”*

*“Drop a stone and show some bone.”*

*“Tipping the scale? Try our new holy grail.”* That last one she’ll have to be careful with. Most priests are already suspicious of her.

Hypodermia happily sketches product designs on her cell wall and awaits her imminent release. She’ll be free, she knows - just as soon as the queen’s cheek bounces back.

## Mounting Heat

Two age-stained bodies embrace  
in a bubbling hot tub.

Through sheets of rayon smoke  
a reddened sun coughs to illuminate  
the hug of his petal-soft nose hairs  
on her freckled, forever skrunckled nose.

His left hand and her right, intertwined  
between their quiet breasts, just above the water.  
Her left hand lingers near a half-full  
glass of merlot.

The glass teeters on the edge of destruction  
as a family of racoons scurries and  
tosses peach pits and amaryllis flowers  
into the settling water.

## Mounting Heat

Two thoughtless tails thwack the man,  
who starts to slip from his seat,  
but Mama raccoon rushes to push him back  
up in his place. The couple's hands stay held.

When all of her children gather around the rim,  
Mama turns on the last jet setting and watches  
the bodies' days-boiled meat slip and slide  
and separate from their spines without argument.

She watches her futures feast, smiling as  
she rips two interlocked pinkies apart to eat.  
The children crawl into the tub, knocking over  
the man's empty wine glass, and his bottle of pills.

They slurp their sinewy, rotting bathwater, laughing  
as Mama watches the fires gagging distant mountains.

## Crossing the Blue Line

She carves the ice like fabric under shears  
Cuts through chatter with confidence I don't hold  
I don the mask I haven't put on in years

There is a grace with which she glides into gear  
Boisterously bright and comfortably bold  
She carves the ice like fabric under shears

Players push past, silken skating near  
I breathe in and taste metal, sweat, and cold  
I don the mask I haven't put on in years

She leads with ease, unspoken instructions clear  
Steady strides, treadled silver threads, twining roads  
She carves the ice like fabric under shears

I question whether to line myself less queer  
Parse peripheral vision though I've lost its hold

## Crossing the Blue Line

I don the mask I haven't put on in years

I don't yet respect the coach they all revere

Track blue-green bruises beneath maroon and gold

She carves the ice like fabric under shears

I don the mask I haven't put on in years



## Seven Days of Sin

### Envy

On Monday your sister Minty demands the garage to build her degree-show art installation, 'The Seven Deadly Sins'. No doubt it'll be all 'look at me I'm so clever', as always. You grab a uniform that's not too pongy in case you're rostered with Dishy Dom on Dips and Sharing. Not content with being the brainy one, Minty doesn't have any problems in the pulling department; if she worked on a checkout she'd have men queueing back to Desserts and Yoghurts. She's already chucking Dad-stuff onto the lawn, saying Dad won't mind. And he won't; she's always been his favourite, the cutey-pie blondie with a butter-wouldn't-melt manner that fools everyone. Except you.

### Gluttony

You can't stomach the canteen since it went healthy eating, so lunch on Tuesday is a multipack of Scotch eggs from the half-price staff trolley – stuff that's past its 'best before' date which they

## Seven Days of Sin

won't risk on the punters. You're hungry again by home o'clock so you filch seven Milky Ways and scoff four on the bus. Mum's made toad-in-the-hole with beef-dripping chips. Minty's sawing in the garage and won't let toad threaten her slimline bum, so you scoff hers as well. Afterwards, you hurry upstairs because, from your room, three lonely Milky Ways are shouting, 'EAT ME'.

### **Pride**

On Wednesday, Minty's cleaning her teeth with the tap running so you turn it off and shout how it's a good thing someone around here is serious about environmental responsibility. After putting your uniform on eco-wash, you take a sub-three-minute shower, borrowing Minty's plastic-free razor. You audit the kitchen and heap up everything containing palm oil, using an indelible magic marker to draw a big exclamation mark on the white worksurface, before unplugging any appliance with a little red light. Your uniform's still damp but you'd rather die than use the drier,

## Seven Days of Sin

knowing it'll knock out several species of Angolan fruit bat.

### **Greed**

You're sweeping up on Thursday and brush out a fifty-quid note from under the navels in Fruit and Berries. The manager is locking up and you know where the cameras are, but you can't be too careful so you take the dustpan out the back and empty it into your handbag, manky mangoes, dust and everything, along with your windfall. You hurry to the newsagents and invest the lot in lottery tickets; it's the EuroMillions Rollover and you're looking at £116 million. A homeless man sitting on the pavement asks for the cost of a coffee. You tell him to get a job.

### **Wrath**

Friday's your day off but Minty's hammering in the garage. You stop trying to sleep, clear a space, and start doing burpees. Suddenly Minty's in your room yelling how you'll bring the ceiling

## Seven Days of Sin

down and endanger her art piece which is a delicate fusion of balsa wood and pig iron, so you lift your dumbbells high and drop them on the floor. But then she starts crying so you say you're sorry Araminta, which she's calling herself now she's a conceptual artist. She starts banging twice as loud so you go to her room and snip holes in her itsy-bitsy undies because once again the little witch has wrapped you round her little finger.

### **Lust**

On Saturday you liberate Minty's spaghetti-strapped top from her wardrobe. It's a bit small, but you reckon if you've got 'em, flaunt 'em. You totter into the King's Arms in your leg-lengthening red stilettos, spot Dishy Dom at the bar and hoick up your stretchy miniskirt. To the cheers of his mates, you stick your tongue down Dom's beery throat and your hand down his cargo pants. You tell him you'll see him at the back of the car park in five minutes, but he'll have to bring you a Jägerbomb. He brings two, and a guy

## Seven Days of Sin

called Matt, but hey, two's company, three's a party.

### **Sloth**

Minty's finishing her Seven Sins on Sunday when a car draws up and you hear a man mentioning CCTV so you know it's the police. Minty replies that you're still in bed, and you picture her in her boilersuit, blushing and coy while the policeman blathers about being into art, as well as, coincidentally, conceptual artists who happen to be blonde and cute, although he should be pursuing a tip-off about missing Milky Ways. You think about getting up to deny everything but you're comfy in bed and, frankly, you can't be arsed.

## LONG LIVE THE LAZY!

heralds the La-Z-Boy marquee on the side of US-19.  
To and from work, LONG LIVE THE LAZY!

Long live *you*, lazykin, dragged from bed  
in these dark winter months.  
Enemy of that Protestant work ethic, live on.  
Long may you reign, powernap champion.

Long live the tiger snooze, the disorienting three-hour rest.  
What day is it? What time? Who knows? Who cares?  
It's a Friday o' clock somewhere.

Divine inert you.

Long live the paper plates, junk drawers.  
Long live all those soy sauce packets,  
leftover mei fun.  
Long live late-paycheck ramen slathered  
with extra butter.

Long live laundry Sundays, lounge sets,  
fleece-lined joggers.  
Long live the messy bun.  
Long live camera off, mute on.

## LONG LIVE THE LAZY!

Laziest of love to you, Marimo tender,  
dust bunny herder, silk plant gardener.

Long live the chamomile, the tilia, the valerian tea.  
Long live to you, lucid daydreamer.  
Sweet dreams, my lazy one.

Everybody's looking for something.

Here's your sign.

## Blindsided

Luke: What are you up to?

Jessie: Nothing much. Reading. You?

Luke: I've been thinking of you.

Jessie: We can't keep doing this.

Luke: Why not?

Jessie: Jackson's my best friend.

Luke: He doesn't have to know.

Jessie: That's not the point.

Luke: I want to see you again.

Jessie: I can't.

Luke: I want to take your clothes off.



## Blindsided

Jessie: Please let's not do this.

Luke: First, your top.

Luke: Then, your pants.

Jessie: Luke...

Luke: You're in your underwear now. On my bed. Waiting for me.

Luke: I only want to kiss your lips.

Luke: Your neck.

Jessie: What else...

Luke: Your breasts.

Luke: Your belly.

Luke: The insides of your thigh.

## Blindsided

Jessie: Christ, Luke.

Luke: I can keep going.

Jessie: Send me a video.

Luke: Of what?

Luke: Me jacking off?

Jessie: Of you fucking Jackson.

Luke: I don't have one right now.

Jessie: Bummer. I guess this conversation is over.

Luke: He's coming over tonight. I'll record us.

Luke: Any special requests?

Jessie: Think of me when you're inside him.

## Blindsided

Luke: That won't be a problem.

Luke: Can I see you tomorrow?

Jessie: Depends.

Luke: On what?

Jessie: I want Jackson to be fucked like he's never been before.

Jessie: I want his head and his eyes to roll back.

Jessie: I want him to beg for you and cry out names he's never screamed in his lifetime.

Luke: I can do that.

Jessie: We'll see.

\* \* \*

## Blindsided

Jackson: Jess, you there?

Jessie: Yeah, what's up?

Jackson: Is this a safe space?

Jessie: You know it always is.

Jackson: Well, you should know...

Jackson: Luke fucked the lights out of me last night.



Jessie: Damn, Jacks.

Jackson: I swear, I've never had this much sexual chemistry with anyone I've dated before.

Jackson: I feel like we're really connecting, you know?

Jessie: I'm really happy for you. ❤️

## Blindsided

Jessie: Any pointers? I feel like I haven't been on my game recently.

Jessie: Guys or girls.

Jackson: You should try recording a sex video to spice things up a little.

Jackson: Luke took a video of us last night.

Jackson: It caught me off-guard at first. But it was so hot. NSFW.



Jackson: When I get a copy, I'll show you when we see each other.

Jessie: 🔥 🔥 🔥

Jessie: Can't wait.

\* \* \*

Luke: [video attachment]

## Blindsided

Luke: As requested.

Luke: For your enjoyment.

Luke: Now, can I please see you tonight?!

Jessie: Only if you outperform yourself for the second straight night.

Luke: Fucking finally, Jessie.

Luke: You know I'm always up for a challenge.

Jessie: Good.

Jessie: Have you been working out? Your back is so fucking sexy.

Jessie: I mean, I guess I never noticed.

Jessie: And your face too. 😏

Luke: You are welcome to go exploring all night. 😈

## Blindsided

Jessie: I'll come over around 8. Jackson has other plans tonight.

Luke: Perfect. Text me when you get here.

\* \* \*

Jessie: ETA 5 minutes.

Jessie: I'm here.

Luke: Coming down.

\* \* \*

Jackson: Hey babe, I'm in the area again this evening and I thought of stopping by.

Jackson: I'll grab us some food on the way over. Any special requests?

Jackson: Anyway, be there in 20. See you! 🤔

## Anger

It was silly, just like all anger is:  
standing in the kitchen, time to go,  
she in her leotard, slicked and shimmering,  
hesitating, unsure, not wanting,  
and me looking at the discs  
of light on the oven clock changing minutes,  
my voice louder, hers more cracked.  
Finally, I slapped my book against the table,  
my words grinding in my throat. For what?  
A belly ache, she said. Later, after a break,  
I found the book on the floor, bent now  
in a funny posture—crease marks fissuring  
across pages, repeated page by page,  
words now split, letters shattered,  
new line breaks scissored by bends.  
A warped voice read to me, tattered ribbons  
from an old tape deck. These were all things  
I could see, permanent imprints  
on a worn book, but as she lay,  
changed out of her leotard, in her bed,  
stuffed animals in hand, I wondered  
what damage I couldn't see.



## Narcissus

When I was eight years old, I fell face-first off a swing on the school playground. What I remember most about this incident is not the pain of picking gravel out of my face, after having scraped it against the rocky ground below. Nor the embarrassment of being carried to the nurse's office by the handsome fifth grade teacher Mr. Lind. After all, I was his favorite student. Not even the fear of how irritated my mother was – having to call a neighbor to drive her to pick me up just a few short hours after she'd been rid of me. What I remember is the feeling of my stomach rising into my chest as I reached the highest peak of my swinging. Surely higher than anyone had ever gone before. I remember the still air at the top, that split second between pumping up and swooping back down, in perfect suspension.

## Narcissus

After extending my arms straight and leaning back, I felt the weight of my body careening through the air. I pointed my feet, my toes reaching for the horizon, my hair swaying behind me, and I imagined myself flying. My mother warned that my daredevil playground antics would earn me permanent damage one day, but what kind of adventurer would I be if I always listened to my mother? On the way down, the swing chains rested inside the crook of my elbows. Slightly leaning forward, the sensation was thrilling, watching the ground pass beneath me. A recent rainfall had left a puddle in the dirt dugout below, formed by feet dragging to slow momentum. I could see my reflection only briefly and tried to catch a longer glimpse with each passing. I had heard the superstition. My sister warned that if a person stared too long into

## Narcissus

a mirror, it would eventually break, causing years of bad luck, but I kept swinging and swinging. The next time I came upon my face, I had the same slow-motion sensation as at the height of my swinging. And sheer happiness. That's what I choose to believe I felt that split second before my arms gave out behind me and I went head-first into the puddle, my face raking me to a halt the way my feet should have done. What do they say – pride goeth before a fall?

Ultimately, the hubris was worth it. The memory of mid-air freedom far outlived any pain from that day. And the long-term fall-out was manageable, just a small scar on my left cheek that darkens quickly when I sit in the sun. An occasional reminder in my reflection – no risk, no reward.

# I am more than the food in front of me

here I am at the table  
flesh flowing connected  
to wood grain in my slump  
*of course I'm hiding*

fingers bent stiff around a bowl  
a plate a secreted morsel  
in shaking hand *how long*  
before you sense me

in the kitchen see me my whole  
being in the cookie jar so you won't  
see the crumbs and say  
*having a snack?*

I swallow a painfully persistent truth  
my food once perceived trends poisoned



## Extinction à la Mode

In 2917, the world government finally passed a law guaranteeing enough food for the planet.

World-wide distribution centers meant grain, rice, and proteins made it into everyone's mouths.

The rich cried and wanted only special foods to pass their lips, heedless of past suffering.

They required culinary innovation!

Butterfly wing appetizers, moth canapés, and ladybug salsa were the rage.

They were not satisfied that no children grew gaunt.

They required culinary vanguards to serve them!

Wild mustang stew, clown fish sushi, and gecko tartare became favorites.

They were not satisfied that children could think, play, and learn.

They required culinary deviation!

Panda on lettuce leaf, black-footed ferret with lentils, and baby sea lion al fresco were too ordinary.

They failed to notice the venom sacks in their black mamba pudding.

The children did not miss them.

## The Secret Keeper

Two girls and one boy traipse to where the fairy tree waits. The two girls take their seats on bulbous roots that sprout from a patchwork of foot-scuffed mud and grass. The boy is banished to play pirate or pilot in the grass out of earshot, his eyes circled in finger goggles, a buzzing soundtrack emanating from his spittle-wet lips.

One girl, Ciara, takes a crumpled pack of cigarettes from her blazer pocket and offers one to her friend, Joanne. Joanne takes it although she doesn't like the taste.

Joanne's gaze dips to where her friend's a-line skirt stretches on her thigh, the threads straining visibly, ready to break and expose an expanse of puckered white skin.

## The Secret Keeper

Afraid to be caught staring, Joanne swings her face toward her brother who is rolling, eyes clenched, down an undulating mound.

Ciara thrusts a crackle-worn plastic bottle into Joanne's hand. The contents are watery orange, and the harsh tang of alcohol burns deep inside her nostrils. At her hesitation, Ciara grabs the bottle, causing a storm of cool droplets to spray over the flimsy cotton of her blouse.

Joanne notices how the late afternoon sun favours the few highlights in Ciara's chestnut hair and is reminded of the angels in her old mass book.

When Ciara leans against the ragged tree trunk with her palm spread tight on the weather aged bark, Joanne imagines deep,



## The Secret Keeper

angry marks imprinted on the flesh. Joanne imagines her tongue running over those crevices, becoming connected in a primal way with both Ciara and the tree.

The sun dips and a chill creeps over them, joy at once snuffed by a dank film that settles tired on their eyeballs. They gather their bags, heavy and jutting with hard-edged books and lumber back towards the row of houses where potatoes are boiling and parents check their watches for their children's return.

In the meat-scented warmth of her kitchen, a rocklike formation settles in Joanne's stomach, just below the butterfly centre of her ribs, impeding both her ability to eat and breathe.

Longing spurs Joanne to spring from the table, run up the stairs

## The Secret Keeper

and scuttle under the sweet smelling duvet in her popstar splattered room.

As night turns the grass to ink, Joanne looks blind out of her window, and pictures her friend, sticky mouthed and smiling, waiting alone at the park on the edge of the village. She envisions the man pulling up beside her in the estate car with juice-stained teddies lounging in the footwell below two battered car seats.

Joanne imagines the needle points of his goatee beard looming closer to Ciara's dewy skin, his work-scuffed fingertips roughly grabbing at the cheap sewn buttons of Ciara's new dress.

Joanne cries charcoal torment that swirls to create a chain, restraining her in foetal position on her bed.

## The Secret Keeper

Joanne knows that the man's intentions aren't good, she knows that he is depraved in a way that would shatter their little community but she feels she is no better. She aches to open her mouth to Ciara's cherry-stained lips, feel the tip of a harsh tobacco tongue and discover raw love.

She will not.

Instead she will hold all of their secrets tight to her chest, until she can finally leave this place.

# Wrath



## On the Wings of the Angel Lucifer

From the angel's back, I look down to a canopy of scarred,  
powerful wings,

And hold tighter as he swings against unmerciful winds,  
Immersed in reveries of regret and longing.

He burns with a missing sense of belonging,  
This former star of the morning,  
Raised to believe himself the best, most beloved.

Eons ago, his seraphic eyes had also stared heavenward,  
His body encrimsoned by blood and rage after the fall,  
When the gossamer clouds of Heaven refused to house a sinner.

He became the First Rebel, the Great Dragon.  
Afraid of being replaced—of losing his Father to Adam—  
He lost everything to pride instead.

Now, a wish snakes around his mind,  
A desire to end his time exiled.

## On the Wings of the Angel Lucifer

His eyes, dimmed by the old grief, are fixed on his true home.

In a way, seeking forgiveness is another revolt,  
A challenge to the apocryphal revelations in the Holy Tome.  
Still, I hold on.

Our Father awaits in his heavenly throne.

## Billionaires Banquet: Menu

Starter of all the finest things,  
greatest delicacies the world has to offer:

Foie gras and Black Truffles,  
\$1000 per Kg, the very best of the very best.

Extravagance of almas caviar, the most expensive food  
in the world, at \$34,500 US dollars per kilogram.

Kobe Beef Kobe from the Wagyu cattle, brought to you at  
obscene cost, no counting carbon footprints now.

A mezze of White Truffles, Matsutake Mushrooms  
and Iberico Ham – with an explosion of Saffron.

Bluefin Tuna on the side,  
decadence dances are demanded, delicately.

Main is an Smörgåsbord of near extinct creatures – priceless!  
Amur Leopards from south-eastern Russia.  
Sunda Island Tigers, last remaining in Sumatra, Indonesia.  
Mountain Gorillas of Virunga Mountains, Democratic Of Conga.  
Yangtze Finless Porpoise, the longest river in Asia.

A truly international collection for you, our distinguished guests,

## Billionaires Banquet: Menu

I'm sure you will agree. Just imagine!  
You could be the last animals in the world  
to eat these delicate beasts!

On the verge of extinction, absence of being, then goodnight  
Vienna, forever.

Puddings served with elegant unicorn horns,  
leprechaun tears, Pegasus memories and falling miracles.

To the side, Densuke Watermelon and Ruby Roman Grapes  
For afters Kopi Luwak Coffee.

All this majesty and grace  
overlooking the end of the world

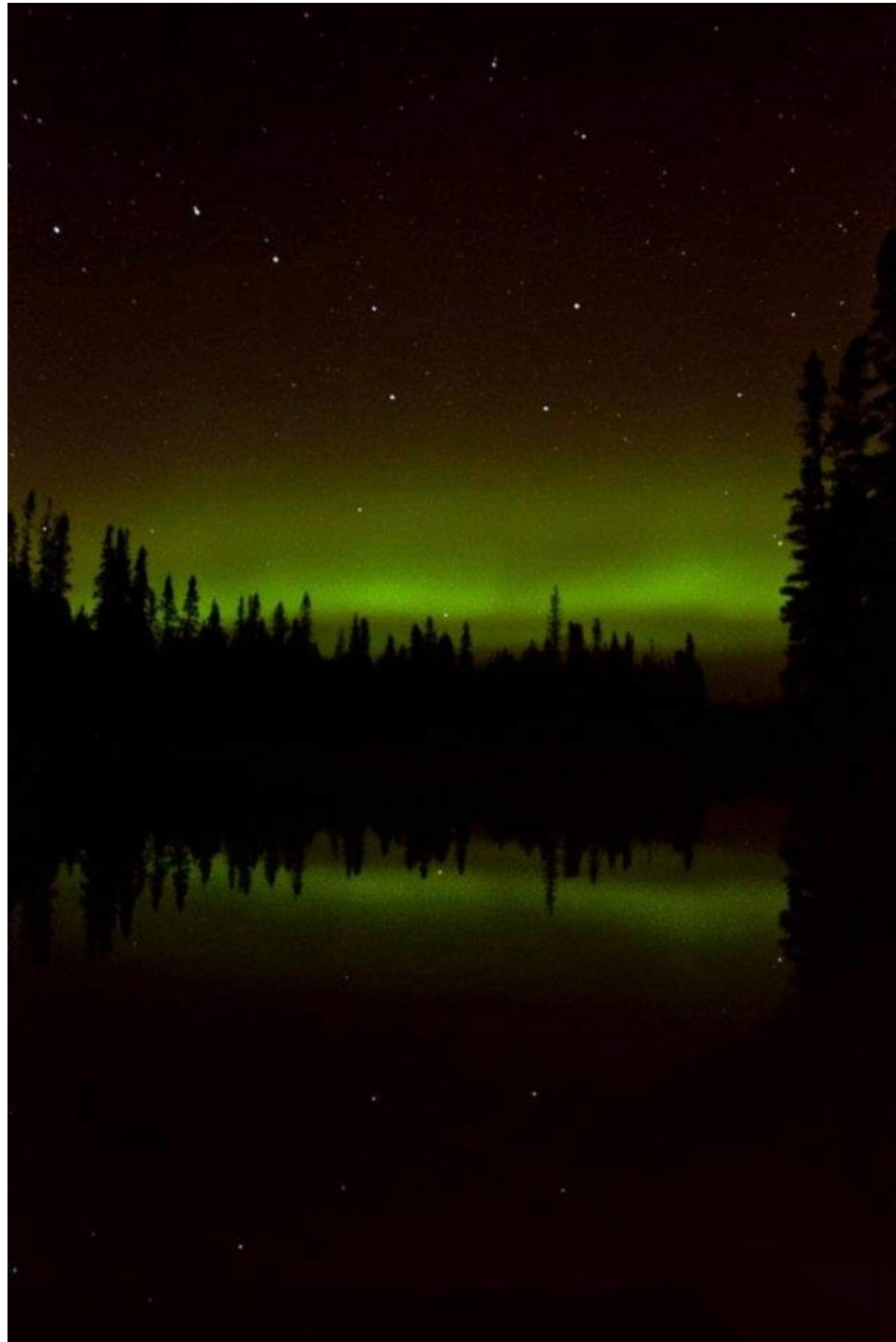
A final decadent meal, an experience, a triumph  
of hope over expediency.

Blended with the finest ingredients, blind to the traumas of this  
world,  
don't mention the sadness and sorrow –  
God help us with tomorrow.

**Bon appétit, toujours fin du monde.**



# The Gluttony Found in Nature



## Your Bones/My Bones

Erys remembered their first taste of human flesh.

It came from themselves, the soft bit of skin between nail and the side of their finger. Their favorite to chew on was their left thumb, nibbling like a hamster to canned food. It wasn't something they did for fun; but they were just so, so hungry. And when those days would come, and Erys would become nauseous from her hunger, she put her skin between her teeth and pull.

It started with the first layer of skin. Thin and near transparent, easy to pare. It just required a patience foreign to four year olds. Sometimes they'd pull too fast, too tight, too deep, and taste copper in the gummy walls of their mouth, and that just made them want more. More, more, *more*. And eventually, they stopped asking for food. They could survive off of themselves

## Your Bones/My Bones

when the self devouring nausea of starvation became too much.

Time had stolen the details of the fight, but if they had to guess, they'd assume it had something to do with their ruined thumb, destroyed from self-cannibalization. They weren't sure how they ended up beneath their father, with his hand around their thin throat, the other on their face. It was as easy as peeling an orange, pulling the skin from his hand. And while he and Mother screamed, they chewed it like gum. It tasted different than theirs, smokey and brittle. They cringed, but got used to it, swallowing it with ease.

Again, age had stolen from her specifications, but she could hear Mother's screaming echo in her mind, Father's screeching and name calling in Algonquin, the citations of biblical verses that

## Your Bones/My Bones

even ten year old Erys could understand called them a she-devil.

The end result was ruled as a bear attack, which wasn't all that uncommon considering where their tiny trailer home was located. Erys was taken across state lines, pulled from the mountains of Appalachia into the thralls of the big city. They were kinder than her parents; they didn't beat her when she breathed too loud or lock her in closets when they were sick of her. They fed her real food, not scavenged human flesh or torn skin from an attempted murderer.

But nothing satisfied her. No matter how much she ate, how much of the perfect food her uncle spent hours cooking, she still felt starved. Her hunger was infinite, immortal. A bottomless pit. The eternal abyss. Something dark. Something holy.

## Your Bones/My Bones

Perhaps that's what put them here; in a cheap motel room, straddling a pretty woman with a still pulse; a vulture picking at its dinner.

The woman was long dead, brown eyes glazed over and blonde hair stained with blood. Her pale body was torn open, ribs pulled apart and heart gone. The work was messy, bloody and brutal. A modern horror. And Erys had her flesh in their bloodstained teeth.

Her skin was lukewarm, tasting of tart apples and fresh rain. She was a sweet thing to devour, chewing like a taffy and swallowing like a dollop of ice cream.

And when they ate their fill, they would get on their knees with their bloodsoaked hands clasped and watery eyes, praying to

## Your Bones/My Bones

their God to accept the corpse's spirit, accept their offering, and to forgive them their transgressions.

Erys did not understand this hunger. This they had accepted; their purpose was beyond anything they would truly understand until the day the earth welcomed them home. What they knew was enough, at least for now.

They were hungry. And they would be satiated, one way or another.



## Case Notes

I tell myself wanting you  
is just a phase...  
a hormone-driven  
over-forty fantasy

Characterized in part  
by lack of proper attention  
an absent father  
a distant mother  
adult child of alcoholic  
mentally-challenged  
caregivers of  
low socioeconomic status

Quite clearly  
I'm acting out

But I've daydreamed  
fucking you  
hard against me  
you cradling my neck  
fingers caught in my hair

Unbridled rhythm rocking  
against plain white wall—



Diane Funston  
Lust

*Cosmic Daffodil Journal*

## Case Notes

a stark blank page  
sullied with sweat  
instead of words

## on Envy

as enby, oh how i hate  
that word. but that,  
the h-word [h8] is a binary  
too. or it seems. h-word  
as hell, opposite heaven.  
there are more than  
two. [zeno knows this.]  
but back to being out-  
side of the pinkblue,  
the way my cisters  
still call me “gurrri”  
must still be out  
of love. [right?] oh  
to be an 8, an up-  
right infinity  
in a world of  
0nes and zer0s,  
w1thout hav1ng  
t0 expla1n that  
my un1verse  
has n0  
edge. [a li-  
ber8-  
10n.]

## Dolls and Idolatry

Jenny, I didn't love you—I know that now.

Twenty years, and I can hear  
the timbre of your humid voice in my ear—  
the whisper of a woman, becoming.

Chiffon scarves of every color  
set off your beguiling, green eyes,  
while your lips shone like glass.  
To bite the taste of their shade—  
Wondering...

Black platform heels propped  
impossibly long legs—that met your hips  
at the curve of your thighs. Your oozing allure  
drew the gaze of many men,  
Wanting...

Blonde hair framing creamy, latte skin,  
as you dressed to meet *so many* friends.  
I was there—hoping you'd notice more—  
Waiting...

The mirror—too small for two reflections.  
—My name was—the girl to your right—

## Dolls and Idolatry

the one with brown eyes—longing to be seen.  
—For my eyes to be green—  
Wishing...

Jenny, I didn't love you—I wanted to be you.  
I know that now.

## JUST A VOID

just a void where a thought should be  
just an aching gluttonous fucking nothing  
just a black hole when I'd rather be a genius  
just disappointment when I'd rather be a dreamer

see me just sitting here in my looooooooooooooooooooooop  
see all those o's like open mouths empty of  
anything interesting to say  
see me killing time like bloody murder

I can't get off the couch it's pulling me nowhere  
I need to pee but what an unachievable chore  
remember when I said I was gonna seize the day  
well, not this one, it's laughing in my face.

## Greed's Confession

There was a portrait of us above the mantel in our study. You're in ermine, black with streaks of silver to match your hair. Myself hidden within the devilish glint of your gray-green eyes. Those flecks of gold that catch the light, that's me.

We were a team, bold and ruthless. Our consciousness entwined to where you ended and I began was unknown. A mighty shipping empire built through your embodiment of the prince of deadly sins, Greed. Though we dabbled in gluttony as seen by your ample waistline and lusted heartily between the bosoms of your mistresses, it was I who led us to monetary wealth that would sustain all the best sins. I would look out from within for decades, enjoying the fruits of our joint labors.

I watched through your eyes as you aged and your lovers grew younger. We doubled down on our excesses until your appetites perverted, and your actions became less clandestine. Open sores

## Greed's Confession

marked your proclivities. They called it the French disease, though those ladies were no more French than we were. Your hairline started receding along with your wife's love for you.

Over time, your life within brothels became as legendary as your mental deterioration. I mistook the restlessness of your diseased body as my own. Your thoughts clumsy and disordered, your heart a pallid thrum in your chest. You started talking to me out loud as if I were no longer within you. As if you no longer saw us as one. Watching you stumble, helped up by your lackeys, and brought home was frightening. I nearly left that night, but I needed you. My greedy desire to be human demanded it. How else would I be able to taste, smell and feel?

The first to come were the medicine men. Their leeches greedily sucked at more than just your blood and seemed to imbibe my essence. Their bloodletting drained us both. The stigmata of their

## Greed's Confession

"cures" oozed and puckered along your arms, paining us both. The disease within you crackled like a fire, stoked by their medical machinations. You fevered and spoke in tongues, calling out to me when I was already there. We hovered in and out of lucidity; in this, at least, we were one.

Then came the Church. Men with their prayers dripping from their lips, soothing like honey to the ears. Yet their salty holy water flayed our wounds and burned, burned. They lit candles and scented the air, covered you in crosses, and spoke to all that was holy and pure. Your ailment cared little for your needs and took its pound of flesh as the priests prayed away all your sins.

Forgive me, for I left that night, escaped on your last breath. I could not relish inhabiting a corpse emptied of all humors.

Few mourned you. Your family sold your home and all your



## Greed's Confession

belongings. Greed benefited them as you became a distant memory rotting in an ancestral plot.

Your portrait now hangs in someone else's study. The artist had captured a moment from our shared history. I find myself there when I feel guilty about the ravages Greed brings. The way sin has a hold on the soul. How long could we have traveled together, my friend?

I confess my part in your downfall. I alone mourn your loss but no longer have the eyes with which to weep.

## Bitter Pills

I try to bury it,  
mark it an early grave  
with that which was taken away.  
Lost too early and loved too well.  
Yet, even in my happiness for others,  
it turns.

A capital vice  
come to make me a sinner  
as I look at others  
who have what I have craved;  
what I had but for a moment  
before it was taken away.

I let it break my heart  
again and again  
as I swallow pill after pill –  
so bitter on my tongue.

Force a smile to stretch my lips;  
pray it reaches my eyes.

## Bitter Pills

Keep all the sorrow,  
that bitterness,  
buried deep inside.  
I care not what damage it does.  
How it scratches at the walls  
to be let out.  
Let it leave behind scars,  
let it tear me apart.  
Let it be a reminder of the envy  
that grief can wrought.

# Lust



## A Mad Hatter's Feast of Desserts

You sit famished and alone at the head of the table, craving everything, the tiramisu, chocolate sheet cake, apple crisp. You've been starving for years, imagining a spread like this would solve everything, but, alas, not even a devil's food cake heavier than dirt will fill the void, you the embodiment of hunger, you a mirror of emptiness, you a dry, thirsty well of need, one that started when you were born. But you relent. Why not try? Someone went to all this hard work with sugar, flour, salt, and fat, and you exist in a halo of cupcakes. Every taste brings you to tears. The chocolate, strawberry, butter, orange, caramel, cinnamon, brandy, cardamom. How can you live in the world of such abundance and not take it in, bite after bite, swallow after swallow? Other guests

## A Mad Hatter's Feast of Desserts

arrive, bearing platters of cookies, mounds  
of muffins, rows of macarons and petite fours.  
Someone passes you the banana pudding studded  
with vanilla wafers and dolloped with whipped cream.  
You pick up a bigger spoon.

## Wrath (of the Gods)



## Meanwhile on the Isle of Skyros...

A calm settles over the stone palace I have built for myself, though I must admit it is less a palace than a stone hut, and I didn't exactly build it myself, but helped the villagers who did, the Skyrians with their small horses and shovels and hunched backs. Perhaps they didn't know I was helping, if I am to be perfectly honest. But I was there, in the vicinity of the site, and would have helped at least with associated administrative tasks, had they asked. I suppose it's not either a calm, properly speaking, that has settled on this place with its flat white rooftops and featureless whitewashed houses that nestle into the chest of a sage and thyme-covered nameless mound. It is not calm so much as the dissipation of anger, the sudden rages whose accumulation has been a life's labor. I had barely lifted the stone left over from some bronze age settlement, when Abel's cheery face appeared from out of nowhere and struck his cheek on the very stone I happened to be holding. Less than alive myself, how could it have been avoided?



## Prima Donna

So, was it envy, spite, or pride,  
Donna, that prompted you to hide  
library books you thought we'd need  
to write our papers? Was it greed  
to win a fellowship, or thirst  
to trip us up so you'd be first?  
And then what hubris made you boast  
you'd sandbagged us? The need to roast  
us for our lack of guile, to crow  
about how much we didn't know?

You claim you now help women find  
their inner goddess and peace of mind.  
But time, which turns us inside out,  
can't shake my tendency to doubt  
this new approach you're banking on.  
A change of heart? Another con?

## Outliving Sin

“Age cannot wither her,” Shakespeare had a character say of Cleopatra, “nor custom stale her infinite variety.”

Alas, Will was carried away. I’m into my 93d year, and I speak from experience in testifying that the variety of sinful options diminishes with time, and age sooner or later withers us all. One might describe the Seven Deadly Sins as a pre-retirement problem.

Take *lust*, for example. Even at my age, an un-withered Cleo remains a feast for the eyeballs, but is no longer a challenge elsewhere. I can still stiffen my spine, but little else.

*Gluttony* is likewise a problem of the past. Retirees spend an increasing proportion of their time visiting doctors (or, if lucky, their un-withered nurses) and being told to lose weight to ease the

## Outliving Sin

burden on hearts going stale. Those who can't follow such doctors' orders are unlikely to reach even octogenarian heights.

*Greed* likewise diminishes with age. Most of us spend our senior moments with financial advisers simply try to assure that savings and investments will last as long as we do. Taking risks in hope of greater wealth is a game for the young.

Diminished *sloth*, on the other hand, is a matter of balancing imperatives. We retirees are constantly told we must exercise more to maintain muscle tone and avoid corpulence. We respect that, and do our best – within limits imposed by another bit of stern advice for the elderly, to get more sleep. That's not sloth, but compliance with an infinite variety of advice.

*Wrath?* Those given to excessive anger in their younger and

## Outliving Sin

middle years are probably living alone by retirement years – or with a second or even third spouse, however many it took to learn that wrath is usually counterproductive. Years make us not combative, but docile.

*Envy* is another sin that most of us outgrow. We nourish a circle of friends with similar interests and accomplishments, companions whose variety is less than infinite. By the time we reach retirement, we no longer covet their homes, automobiles or wives – and feel sorry for the few remaining who are upwardly jealous.

And *pride*? I learned a new word recently: *sonder*. Had to look it up:

*“n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as*

## Outliving Sin

*vivid and complex as your own . . . with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness . . . with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk."*

Humbling thought, that; absolutely demolishes pride.

## Operation Secret Spite

There's a four-pound bucket of M&Ms

in the corner

under a blanket

hidden from sight,

Potty-training tool-turned-secret-stash,

a multicolored symbol of defiance:

carbs

sugar

dairy

chemicals –

a handful-at-a-time act of rebellion

against this broken body,

a sweet “screw you” to ME and its

inability to process glucose,

to lactose intolerance and MCAS,

to trying

SO HARD

to do

## Operation Secret Spite

everything

right.

Satisfaction wars with guilt  
as I cover my tracks,  
brush away the crumbs,  
drink water,  
brush my teeth  
so they can't smell the chocolate on my breath.

Four pounds becomes  
three  
becomes  
two  
becomes  
one  
becomes  
none,

## Operation Secret Spite

in a desperate race to the bottom,  
propelled by fear of being caught  
rainbow-handed.



## David & Bathsheba

### David

I wear the crowns of nations  
set with gold and precious stones.  
I command multitudes of armies  
made mine by God's faithfulness.

He taught me wisdom and the song.  
Against He alone did I sin  
yet, He cleansed me, washed white  
like lilies by hyssop.

Many lives have I ended,  
spilled their blood for sacrifice  
and am not known for taking  
what God did not freely give.

So I was with Saul,  
should I not have spared him?  
Sat on his throne too soon,  
despite God's wishes?

I will not speak his name –  
one who I tried to save –  
though he refused to lay his wife  
so I had to take what was mine.

The Lord blotted out that transgression,  
tore my sinfulness from its roots,  
renewed me to restore sinners,  
teach transgressors what is right.

While the child was here,  
I covered in sackcloth,  
cried for him for seven days.  
Upon his death, I washed,

went to my wife once more.  
Mighty is God who saves  
broken spirits, accepts sacrifices,  
gives a new son, Solomon.

### Bathsheba

You have labeled me, "seductress,"  
complicit in my own suffering.

I cleansed myself of the month  
under lonely  
moonlight which shone  
through my windows  
when guards appeared in my door.

How could I protest  
when the King's hands  
found mine? Split my legs  
like Uriah's head  
on the front line?

I thought death was sure  
when I sent word  
of my swollen belly.  
Instead, the King  
became my husband  
surrounded by sisters  
who sanctioned our sacrament.

God took my son  
for the King's deed.  
My moon refused to gleam  
like it used to  
waiting for my Uriah to return.

I am restless, weary  
under this new sky  
and brighter moon,  
reduced to a body on a roof  
instead of Solomon's queen mother.

Still, you remember the King  
as the man after God's own heart.

# Evil Eyes



## Greed

If everyone has  
enough,  
enough won't be  
enough for me.

What's the pleasure  
in my pile of gold  
if your soup's  
not thin  
and a little cold?

## The Council of Vices

Dark shadows swirl as a figure strides across the room towards the council table. Reaching the head of the table they pause, ominously, then tut in annoyance. “Oh, for badness’s sake. Couldn’t anyone turn on the lights?” A snap of fingers and the darkness lessens enough to see across the room.

At the lower end of the table, another figure shrugs. Of course they would, that’s Sloth. Six other figures are also seated around the table, each the embodiment of a Deadly Sin. The dark figure is the eighth member of the council, the leader. Our Vice President.

(Yes, it’s a dreadful pun. No, I don’t dare point it out.) As for me? I’m just a lowly vice, no capital letter. I’m not important enough for that.

“Order!” The Vice President’s voice cuts through the low rumble of murmured discussions. “Let’s keep this meeting short. I want an update on the status of Project Ferranti.”

Unsurprisingly, Pride speaks first, although Envy shoots them a glance, living up to their attribute there.

## The Council of Vices

“As a quick recap,” Pride begins, “the objective of Project Ferranti is to significantly decrease, even remove completely, the humans' creativity. Without creativity they will be unable to problem-solve, leaving them more open to our control, and more malleable. The long-term effect will be their loss of hope and of the ability of the human spirit to endure.”

“Thanks to our efforts,” Pride nods towards Greed, Envy and Sloth, “we have been able to facilitate the uptake of our project even quicker than anticipated.”

Wrath jumps in. “Plus ensuring any opposition is focused on divisions of opinions rather than outright rebellion.”

“A valuable contribution.” Pride acknowledges and then stares towards Lust and Gluttony. I suppose they've been distracted with their usual preoccupations; indulging their attributes. They shift in their seats but don't respond.

Pride continues. “Of course, the idea of machines thinking, having intelligence, isn't new. But recently we've stimulated putting these ideas into practice, and the humans believe they themselves are

## The Council of Vices

responsible, oblivious to our involvement. A masterstroke, if I say so myself.” Pride pauses, and there is a murmur of appreciation from the crowd of lesser vices.

“We also needed to mitigate any risks to our project, so we’ve put in place some secondary measures, including our rising star, Imposter Syndrome, here.” Pride gestures towards me, and I’m not sure I want, definitely don’t deserve, the attention as everyone else’s gaze follows.

“Without them, we would be far less successful in exploiting human weakness.” Pride carries on talking, but I ease my way backwards through the crowd, wanting to hide away from further notice.

Eventually, I’m out of the crowd and into the corridor. Closing the council room door, I breathe a sigh of relief.

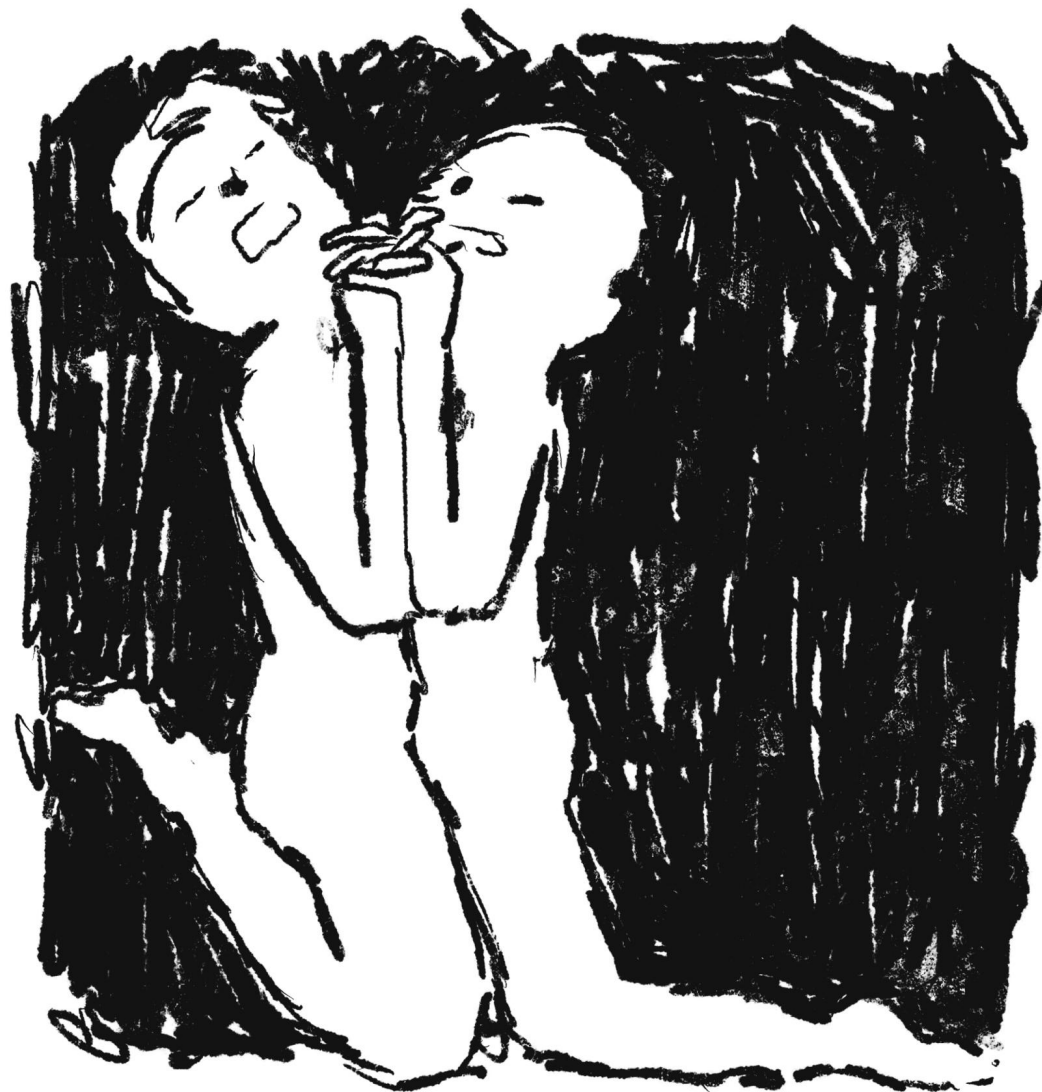
I wonder whether to leave completely or just wait a little while before going back in. As I hesitate, I hear other voices from along the corridor. Curious, I drift towards them. It’s another council meeting, although their door is wide open.

## The Council of Vices

A soft-sounding voice is speaking, “I agree with Faith, the humans can get through this. There have been other occasions of large-scale changes, and they have always won through. I believe they can do so again, as long as we are patient” Ah, that’s who’s speaking, Patience.

I drift further into the room, even though I know I don’t belong here, with the Virtues, but the atmosphere feels encouraging. I find myself wishing for the downfall of Project Ferranti, and maybe I can play a role in that, even if I don’t know how yet.

# Tangle





# Biographies

**West Ambrose** is a writer and grad student. Their pronouns are he/him and they/them. They are trans, queer, and disabled/chronically ill. They are fascinated by the works of Herman Melville and in their free time love to find weird old teapots and make granola bars that are both vegan and duck friendly. Their twitter is @westofcanon and their website is westofcanon.com where you can find their creative works inspired by antiquity and classic lit.

**Edward Michael Supranowicz** is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, The Door Is a Jar, The Phoenix, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

**Allie Stokes** is a poet from southeastern Michigan. She has recently received her MFA from Ashland University and currently lives with her cat in metro Detroit. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Black Fork Review and Partially Shy Literary Magazine. You can find her on X at @allie\_stokes and Instagram @alliestokeswrites.

**Zary Fekete** grew up in Hungary and has a novelette “In the Beginning” out from ELJ Publications and a debut novella being published in early 2024 with DarkWinter Lit Press. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. X: @ZaryFekete

**Moriah Brown** is a poet, fiction writer, and full-time student at Syracuse University working towards a degree in creative writing. Her poetry has been published in Alchemy and Miracles Anthology, Creation Magazine, and The Passionfruit Review. She is from Fort Worth, Texas, and loves writing, birds, and her cat Nala.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, California Quarterly and Lost Pilots. Latest books, “Between Two Fires”, “Covert” and “Memory Outside The Head” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the Seventh Quarry, La Presa and Doubly Mad.

# Biographies

**Linda M. Crate** (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has twelve published chapbooks the latest being: *Searching Stained Glass Windows For An Answer* (Alien Buddha Publishing, December 2022). She is also the author of the novella *Mates* (Alien Buddha Publishing, March 2022). Her debut book of photography *Songs of the Creek* (Alien Buddha Publishing, April 2023) was recently published.

**Sameen Shakya's** poems have been published in *Alternate Route*, *BOMBFIRED*, *Havik*, *WINK*, and *Teach Write*, to name a few. Born and raised in Kathmandu, Nepal, he moved to the USA in 2015 to pursue writing. He earned an Undergraduate Degree in Creative Writing from St Cloud State University and traveled the country for a couple of years to gain a more informal education. He returned to Kathmandu in 2022 and is currently based there.

**Jess Chua** is a writer and sketch artist. Her debut chapbook about heartbreak, *let it rip*, was published in 2023 (Bottlecap Press). A Musepaper.org essay prize winner, her poems, flash fiction, and essays have appeared in or are forthcoming in *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Mystery Tribune*, and *The Five-Two*. Her website is [www.jesschua.com](http://www.jesschua.com)

**Lisa Lerma Weber** lives in San Diego, CA with her husband, son, and dog. Her work has recently appeared in *Hearth & Coffin*, *Roi Faineant*, and *Voidspace*. She feels guilty when the wind changes directions and has a bad habit of apologizing for everything. Follow her on X or Bluesky @LisaLermaWeber

**Dana Knott's** writing has appeared in *Dust Poetry Magazine*, *Ethel Zine*, *FERAL*, *Hyacinth Review*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Musing Publications*. Currently, she works as an academic library director in Ohio, and is the editor of *tiny wren lit*. You can follow her on Twitter at @dana\_a\_knott

# Biographies

**G.J. Gillespie** is a collage artist from Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island WA. A prolific artist with over 20 awards to his name, Gillespie's work has been exhibited in 62 shows and appeared in more than 120 publications. Beyond his studio practice, Gillespie channels his passion for art by running Leda Art Supply, a company specializing in premium sketchbooks. Whether conjuring vivid collage compositions or enabling other artists through exceptional tools, Gillespie remains dedicated to the transformative power of art.

**Robyn Bashaw** graduated with a BFA in Creative Writing from Stephen F. Austin State University. She is previously published in HUMID, The Piney Dark, Worlds of Words Review, and Friday Flash Fiction. As an author, she aims to wade into the despairs of humanity and dwell in the deluges a while. Check out her full list of work at: <https://robynbashaw.wordpress.com/>

**LindaAnn LoSchiavo** (she/her) is a native New Yorker and a four time nominee for The Pushcart Prize, has been nominated for Best of the Net, Balcones Poetry Prize, an Ippy, a Firecracker Award, the Rhysling Award, and Dwarf Stars. "A Route Obscure and Lonely" won the Elgin Award.

She is a member of British Fantasy Society, HWA, SFPA, and The Dramatists Guild.

Titles for 2022: "Women Who Were Warned" and "Messengers of the Macabre."

Titles for 2023: "Apprenticed to the Night"; "Felones de Se: Poems about Suicide"; and "Vampire Ventures." Forthcoming in 2024: "Cancer Courts My Mother."

**Cecil Morris** retired after 37 years of teaching high school English and now tries writing himself what he spent so many years teaching others to understand and (he hopes) to enjoy. He has poems appearing or forthcoming in Cimarron Review, English Journal, Ekphrastic Review, Hole in the Head Review, New Verse News, Rust + Moth, Sugar House Review, Willawaw Journal, and other magazines.

# Biographies

**J. S. Betula** is a 27-year-old genderqueer speculative fiction writer from the swamps of rural New York. Xe loves gooey practical effects and unpleasant final girls, and you can find hir on twitter @jsbetula.

**Coleman Bigelow** is a Pushcart Prize and Best Microfiction nominated author whose work has appeared recently in Bending Genres, Emerge Journal, Hyacinth Review and The Dribble Drabble Review. His first chapbook "In Rare Cases and Other Unfortunate Circumstances" was published in May. Find more at: [www.colemanbigelow.com](http://www.colemanbigelow.com) or follow him on Twitter: @ColemanBigelow and Instagram: @cbigswrites

**Maxwell Griego** is a 23 year old poet currently pursuing his MFA. He likes to mess around with turning small moments into big poems, examining uncovered memories, and finding poetry in the world around him.

**Chris Cottom** lives near Macclesfield, England, and once wrote insurance words. One of his stories was read aloud to passengers on the Esk Valley Railway between Middlesbrough and Whitby. Others have been published by Bournemouth Writing Prize, Ellipsis Zine, Free Flash Fiction, Flash 500, FlashFlood, NFFD NZ, One Wild Ride, Oxford Flash Fiction, Retreat West, The Centifictionist, and elsewhere. In the early 1970s he lived next door to JRR Tolkien.

**Jessica Swanson** (she/her) is a librarian and a writer. She lives somewhere along Florida's Nature Coast. She has a fondness for cats, cheese, and hot tea. Her work has appeared in Moth Eaten Mag, Dog Teeth Lit, and others. Follow her on X/Twitter at Cooljazsheepie or Instagram at everystupidstar

# Biographies

**Nicola de Vera** (she/her) is a queer Filipino writer currently residing in Los Angeles. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *New World Writing*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Sage Cigarettes*, *Cream Scene Carnival*, *Does It Have Pockets*, and elsewhere. She holds a BA in Communication from Ateneo de Manila University and an MBA from Cornell University.

**Devon Neal** (he/him) is a Kentucky-based poet whose work has appeared in many publications, including *HAD*, *Livina Press*, *The Storms*, and *The Bombay Lit Mag*, and has been nominated for Best of the Net. He currently lives in Bardstown, KY with his wife and three children.

**L.M. Cole** is a poet from the US East Coast. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming with *The Pinch Journal*, *Unfortunately Literary*, *Corporeal*, *JAKE*, *Musing Publications* and upcoming in others. She can be found on Twitter @\_scoops\_\_

**M. Weigel** lives and works in Reno, NV. She retells myths and fairy tales and loves exploring science fiction, fantasy, and horror. When not writing, she researches stories in their oldest forms to see how they survive and transform into today's tales.

**Christine O'Donnell** is an emerging nonfiction writer, currently working on a collection of personal essays. A native New Englander, Christine spent twenty formative years in California. After a short career in theater and a long career in corporate communications, she left both to focus on her writing. She is a recent MFA graduate of Bennington College's Writing Seminars. Christine has traveled to 27 countries, is a certified yoga teacher with over 30 years of practice, loves baked goods, and is an excellent mother, friend, sister and wife.

# Biographies

**Eileen Dolan's** work has been published in several online and print publications including Oddball Magazine, Minerva Rising Press, and two Bell Press publications, one anthology Rituals, and in Poetry Plans, a 2023 weekly planner. Anhinga Press included a flash piece in their anthology RUMORS SECRETS AND LIES. She's produced and participated in two coordinated two-poet readings, Surface Tension, and It Takes Two. She also has a two dimensional word sculpture included in the Telephone: International Arts Exhibition that went public on April 10, 2021. She currently lives and works in San Antonio.

**Marie-Louise McGuinness** comes from a wonderfully neurodiverse household in rural Northern Ireland. She has work published or forthcoming in numerous literary magazines including Gone Lawn, Bending Genres, Splonk, The Metaworker Intrepidus Ink, Flash Fiction Magazine, The Aironaut, BULL, The Hooghly Review and Bright Flash Literary Review and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She enjoys writing from a sensory perspective.

**Austin Lubetkin** is a software engineer and artist on the autism spectrum based out of Los Angeles, CA. His art is a platform for activism and Lubetkin frequently works with organizations like Arts4All representing artists with disabilities. Lubetkin's work is inspired by the world of art therapy. As a child on the spectrum, the artist's mother showed him how to express his emotions through art and since then art has been a source of both therapy and expression. You can see more of the artist's work on his instagram @bocaaust

**Chey Rivera** (she/her) is a data engineer and emerging writer from Puerto Rico. She writes in English, but Spanish is her first language. Her work is out now in Prairie Soul Press' flash fiction anthology, "The Philosophy of Blue." You can find Chey on Instagram @readbychey and on Twitter/X @criverawrites.

# Biographies

**Peter Devonald** is a winner of the Heart Of Heatons Poetry Award 2023 and 2021, joint winner FofHCS Poetry Award 2023, winner Waltham Forest Poetry Competition 2022. Nominated for Forward Prize: Best Single Poem, two Best Of The Net nominations 2024 and shortlisted Saveas Writers International Writing Competition - All In the Mind 2023 and Allingham Festival Poetry Competition 2023. Poet in residence at Haus-a-rest and published extensively including London Grip, Artists Responding To..., Forget-Me-Not Press and Poetic Map Of Reading & Music. Screenwriter winner of 50+ film awards, former senior judge/ mentor Peter Ustinov Awards (iemmys) and Children's Bafta nominated.

**Mona Angéline** is an unapologetically vulnerable new writer, artist, athlete, scientist. She honors the creatively unconventional, the authentically "other". She shares her emotions because the world tends to hide theirs. Her writing was accepted in Flash Fiction Magazine, Grand Dame Literary, Down in the Dirt, Viridian Door, The Machine!, Whisky Blot, and Academy of Mind and Heart. She's a regular guest editor for scientific journals. Learn about her musings at [creativerunnings.com](http://creativerunnings.com).

**Elena Greer** (she/they) is an Indigenous lesbian from the northeast of Ohio, who writes fantasy and horror stories for Indigenous queer people such as herself. Their writing most often explores the complicated variety of human nature, as well as the intersections between queerness, and her reconnection with her Indigenous identity. She can be found at their website <https://elenagreerwrites.carrd.co/>, as well as her Twitter at @greertragedy.

**Mark Hendrickson** (he/him/his) is a poet and writer in the Des Moines area. A 2023 Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in Prose Online, Five Minutes, Synkroniciti, Swing, and others. Mark worked for many years as a mental health technician in a locked psychiatric unit. His background includes music, healthcare, and psychology. Visit his website at:

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

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**Alison Lubar** teaches high school English by day and yoga by night. They are a queer, nonbinary, mixed-race femme whose life work has evolved into bringing mindfulness practices to young people. Their work has been nominated for the Pushcart & BotN, and they're the author four chapbooks: *Philosophers Know Nothing About Love* (Thirty West Publishing House, 2022), *queer feast* (Bottlecap Press, 2022), *sweet euphemism* (CLASH!, 2023), and *It Skips a Generation* (Stanchion, 2023). Their first full-length poetry collection, *METAMORPHOSIS*, is forthcoming with fifth wheel press in October 2024. Find out more at <http://www.alisonlubar.com/> or on Twitter @theoriginalison.

**Crystal Taylor**, a native Texan, is fascinated by how we respond to uncertainty, and how our responses shape our experiences over time. Her business blogs have received attention from Texas news outlets. She finds writing to be a beautiful way to process emotions in her own life and others'. Outside of work, you will find her with many dogs, cats, a cup of tea, and a pen. Here's to changing and healing, together.

**Nina Miller** is an Indian-American physician, fencer, and creative. Her hybrid work can be found in *Cutbow Quarterly* and *Raw Lit*, her prose and poetry in *Sci-Fi Shorts*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Five South*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Five Minutes* and more. Find her hanging out @NinaMD1, [ninamiller.bsky.social](https://ninamiller.bsky.social), or at other relevant socials of our time. Find her published pieces at [www.ninamillerwrites.com](http://www.ninamillerwrites.com).

**Devon Webb** is a 25-year-old writer & editor based in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work has been widely published worldwide & revolves around themes of femininity, vulnerability, anti-capitalism & neurodivergence. She is an in-house writer for *Erato Magazine*, an editor for *Prismatica Press* & *Naked Cat Publishing*, & is currently working on the final edits of her debut novel. She can be found on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok & Bluesky at @devonwebbnz.



# Biographies

**M.J. Huntsgood** is a speculative thriller and horror author. When she's not running your local D&D game, she's playing board games and trying to complete an escape room in every state in the country. She is a scientist, program leader, and avid reader, running an international LGBT book club online for over sixty members. She lives in Washington, DC with her 23 plants, 2 cats, and trophy husband.

**N.A. Kimber** (she/her) is a writer from Caledon, Ontario. She has been writing since she was twelve years old and has always been moved by the power of storytelling across all mediums. She is the co-founder of the online publication Forget-Me-Not Press which she runs with her twin sister and artist, Kristen Donoghue-Stanford. She can usually be found with a cup of tea in hand and either knitting, reading, or (obviously) writing.

**Claudia Tong** is an artist based in London, dedicated to exploring storytelling and humanity. Her practice spans from landscape, architecture and illustrations to mixed media, visual computing and music. She has recently exhibited in the US, Italy, New Zealand, the UK and online. Claudia graduated from Brown University in computer science, and she is also a member of ArtCan and Assemblage Collective.

**Valerie Paul** is a Twin Cities transplant in Glasgow, studying Library Science and learning about being away from home. They rock climb, cross-stitch, build rockets, and pick up new hobbies with their ever-dwindling spare time.

**Diane Funston** writes poetry of nature and human nature. She co-founded a women's poetry salon in San Diego, created a weekly poetry gathering in the high desert town of Tehachapi, CA and most recently has been the Yuba-Sutter Arts and Culture Poet-in-Residence for the past two years. It is in this role she created Poetry Square, a monthly online venue that features poets from all the world reading their work and discussing creative process. Her first chapbook, "Over the Falls", was published in 2022 by Foothills Publishing. Diane is also a visual artist in mosaic, wool felting, and collage.

# Biographies

**Jessica Barksdale's** sixteenth novel *What the Moon Did* and short story collection *Trick of the Porch Light* were published in 2023. She's published two poetry collections, *When We Almost Drowned* (2019) and *Grim Honey* (2021) and her third, *Let's End This Now* is forthcoming in 2024.

She taught at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, California and continues to teach for UCLA Extension and in the online MFA program for Southern New Hampshire University.

She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband.

**Kristin Houlihan** is an editor-turned-writer using mostly poetry to make sense of life, both its obstacles and its joys. Kristin is based in California, where she strives to live life to the fullest while bedridden with Long Covid Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. She is also a co-founding editor of *Epistemic Literary*. You can find Kristin's work in *Paddler Press*, *Roi Faineant*, *Full Mood Mag*, *Voidspace*, *PunkMonkZine*, and *Wishbone Words*.

**Julianna May** is an ex-horse girl, ex-Christian, and ex-hetero. She loves teaching English and ranting about Shakespeare. She has previously been published in *Crepe & Penn*, *Nightingale and Sparrow*, *Wingless Dreamer Anthology*, and *Emerge Literary Journal*. Instagram: [juliannamaypoetry](#) Twitter: [JuliannaMay1216](#)

**Lilly Ashton** is an illustrator from London. You can find more of her work at [cargocollective.com/lilly](#).

**David Capps** is a philosophy professor and poet who lives in New Haven, CT. He is the author of four chapbooks: *Poems from the First Voyage* (The Nasiona Press, 2019), *A Non-Grecian Non-Urn* (Yavanika Press, 2019), *Colossi* (Kelsay Books, 2020), and *Wheatfield with a Reaper* (Akinoga Press, forthcoming). His latest work, *On the Great Duration of Life*, a riff on Seneca's *On the Shortness of Life*, is available from Schism Neuronics.

# Biographies

**Susan McLean**, a retired English professor from Southwest Minnesota State University, has published two books of poetry, *The Best Disguise* and *The Whetstone Misses the Knife*, and one book of translations of the Latin poet Martial, *Selected Epigrams*. She lives in Iowa City.

**Don Noel** retired after four decades' prizewinning print and broadcast journalism in Hartford CT. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from Fairfield University in 2013. He has since published more than 100 short stories and non-fiction pieces; all can be read at his website, <https://dononoel.com>

**Elizabeth Majerus** is a poet, musician, and teacher, and she lives in Urbana, Illinois, with her family. Her poems have appeared in journals including *The Madison Review*, *Rhino Poetry*, and *Pangyrus*. Her chapbook, *Songs Are Like Tattoos*, is out from Finishing Line Press. She is one-third of the band Motes.

**Erika Lynet Salvador**, born and raised in the Philippines, is an incoming first-year at Amherst College with an intended major in Statistics. In her free time, she loves to go down a poetry rabbit hole, discuss pop culture, and explore digital art and graphic design. You can discover her art at @bodeganierika on Instagram.

**Ashley Sanchez** (she/her) is a collage artist living in Portland, Oregon. She uses her trusty scissors to deconstruct used books and other printed media. Her work is expressed by taping together photos, illustrations, and occasionally typography. Most of her collage materials are collected from Free Little Libraries.

# Biographies

**Siân O'Hara** has long been an avid reader of SFF (thanks to her mother, and then a chance encounter in her school library). With other worlds only ever a daydream away, Siân started writing as a way to get her thoughts and feelings out of her head and onto paper. Siân lives in Hertfordshire with her husband and two daughters and has a career in earth observation and climate services. Inspired by her attendance at FantasyCon, Siân is spending more time on her writing and is now sharing it out into the world for others to read.

**Helen Gwyn Jones** (she/her) started recording her world at the age of 8 when she bought a Brownie camera from her sister, something which has become a lifelong passion. A collector of the past (hers and other people's) she likes nothing better than muted images of imperfection. May be found poring over Welsh grammar books when not photographing drains or going into raptures over rust. Recently published at Acropolis, Paddler Press, Pareidolia Literary, Blink Ink, Hecate, Moss Puppy, The Levatio, Camas, Storyteller's Refrain, Full House Literary, Subliminal. Can be found online @helengwynjones

## Special Thanks

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D.W. Baker - Poetry

Jillian Bell - Poetry, Fiction

Melissa Witcher - Fiction, Visual Art

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*THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS* wouldn't be possible without YOU. To the content reading team and every one of the talented contributors, this Ebook is for you.

Thank you.

With love,

Madisen Bellon, Founder & Editor-in-Chief