



TEMENOS

spring 2021

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Three Persimmons

John Randall

Today I ate three small, round, plump persimmons. They were of an orange hue, tasting somewhat sweet, a little juicy. Fleshy. I didn't know much about persimmons until recently. Probably I ate one or two somewhere along the line but when and where and why I cannot say. These persimmons were from a stately tree with silver-green leaves that stands out now in the north end of the cattle pasture at a place I call Farm, a plot of sixty acres of mixed pasture, scrub, and hardwood forest in eastern Miller County, Missouri.

This past winter I set out to begin relieving this land of the burden, of the scourge of eastern redcedar infestation. These cedar trees, which aren't actually cedars at all but a type of juniper that grows as a tree, grow at a quickened pace. With speed and numbers on their side, a gang of cedars will take over just about any landscape, encircling older and taller trees, choking them out, robbing them of water and other resources.

I have seen some of the best trees at Farm destroyed by cedars. I am fighting back. Case in point: this fifty-foot persimmon, which had been duking it out with a cluster of four stout, rusty-green cedars swarming its base. In January, with the help of a couple of friends, I took a chainsaw to the cedars, slicing their trunks from the ground. But the tops of the cedars had grown so intertwined with the lower branches of the persimmon that I still had to cut their twisted upper limbs with a handsaw, climbing the cedars themselves to undo the tangled knot they had forged with the persimmon.

At the time, I wasn't even certain that the tree I was rescuing was indeed a persimmon. Persimmon trees have very distinct block-like bark, the bark nodules making square or rectangular shapes that have relief, protruding out an inch or so from the trunk. Then this spring the persimmon was very late to leaf out. I feared it might already be dead, my effort having come too late.

The onset of tick season in late spring meant I had to keep my distance from the tree. As the summer wore on, the pasture grew high and weedy. But I could see from afar that the tree was still alive, its leaves rippling with pleasure in the pasture breeze.

I did not until this past Sunday go out to check, to see if the rescued tree was indeed a persimmon. And it was, and it is. I am tall enough to be able to pick the fruits straight from the tree, these fruits being yellow-green, tight, not yet ripe. But there were persimmons also on the ground, ripe ones. I picked some of them up, and I ate them, and I saved the seeds. The unripe persimmons I brought back home with me, and some have ripened, and some have yet to do so.

River Flint

John Randall

Look at how red that star is. Oh, I know, my pillowcase was soaking wet. Did you just text me? I never use the hand dryer. You know that door makes a lot of noise when it bangs shut, right? I don't have any idea what time it is. The insects are happy. I can see Orion's belt now. Can you imagine coming out here before the road was paved? I don't know if those people are just getting up or if they never even went to sleep. The river's gonna feel good tomorrow. Why do you have that rubber band around your wrist? It is not possible to drink enough water. Is your dog dreaming in his sleep?

Man, where'd you find all that kindling? If you saw Orion's belt that high above the horizon in the middle of September it had to be two a.m. Yeah, I had to wear ear plugs. Can kayaks leave a wake? Something absconded with the chips last night. What's this spongy stuff? That guy slept in his van. I dreamt about box fans. What time are they picking us up? You can't use that kind of pen on these notebooks. If it rains on your birthday that's good luck, right? Those look like chigger bites to me. Almost nobody was wearing a mask. If you saw a reddish star that bright it was probably just Mars. It'll go back up eventually. That fire's going good now. Of course I brushed my teeth. Did you hear those ducks going at it in the middle of the night? Well, I'm supposed to wear a biteguard. It was worse inside the tent, believe me. I gargle if I can. Dogs actually shed a lot this time of the year. The whole thing was so stupid. Is he just going to keep going back and forth like that? Oh, that's a cute mask. It's amazing those things float. I don't know, I think it'll be fun. That was definitely an owl. What's that movie where they all scramble like hell to get ready for the airport? You're gonna have to get somebody back out here to take some photos. Hey, how easy is it to tear these things in two? Holler if you want a muffin. Did water get in there? Well, I was looking for my headlamp but it was one of those things where I needed my headlamp to find it. I'm in fine fiddle with an hour to spare. Those clouds do look pretty thick over there. I always travel with a couple little soaps. Eh, I'll sleep on the river.

I've been sitting out here for hours. This sounds like a cover. Did you ever notice how rain tiptoes its way across a river? We raise our eyes to the hills. You gotta stop and smell the roses with us. Do you think all of these rocks used to be arrowheads? I've had it since I was born. This is a good view right here. Right there where that tree almost fell. It's on my phone. Why would you want to buy a kayak? I don't normally want photos of myself but this is different. The only bad thing about these sunglasses is that they're not polarized. I'd call that a conference of dragonflies. Is that guy writing in the river? It probably won't be here when we come back next year. Get out of my ear, bug. This river is like one of those motorized walkways. The fog's back! Not unless you're going to a place where tours aren't given.

Saturday night always ends up being the chill night. I think my mom stitched that. It probably rained here twice. Is that John Prine? You remember that time you left the trunk open and raccoons went in there and ate all the bread and shit? This recipe didn't have quite as much oatmeal in it as the other one. You've got to treat everything like it's holy. Is that a leaf or a moth? Fall starts as a fog on a river in late summer. This one could have been a tool of some sort, a scraper maybe. OK, you can put the sleeping bags back in the tents now. But insects feel otherwise. I thought it might have been a dog at first. Well, he didn't want to hear it anymore. I'm just gonna be so glad to close my eyes.

A gravel bar on the river late at night. An empty cooler. Two abandoned leashes. Bats in the flashlight beam eating breakfast. Tomorrow we'll let our dirty clothes drive us home.

John Randall splits his time between the urban and rural parts of Missouri, where he writes poems and creative nonfiction. He draws inspiration from the natural world and trusts that travel invigorates his zest for observing life using pen and paper. When he's not writing, he enjoys clearing brush.

Homing

Al Martin

The soil on our farm in Michigan's U.P., the Upper Peninsula, was a sorry glacial till laced with rocks so large that, if struck by a plow, the implement would be thrust skyward posing an imminent threat to whoever was nearby. My father called our place "Alice in Wonderland." The Alice was for my mother. The wonder was that we survived. Very little else did. There were a few exceptions — a robust buckwheat crop that refused to die out and our cow were two. But the stubborn beast escaped the confines of our pasture to join a neighbor's herd so many times we had no choice but to let her disown us.

My sister, Jeanne, and I attended a one-room wood-frame school, with outdoor plumbing, for grades first through sixth. Prominently fixed at entrance of the schoolhouse was a long iron scraper designed specifically to remove barnyard debris and animal waste from the shoes of the student body. Its use was mandatory. Not to use it could result in an hour's confinement in the woodshed. While not mandatory, participation in the school's Christmas pageant was considered an honor though it, too, could be hazardous to one's well being. Jeanne portrayed an elf when she was a first-grader. Her costume included a musty, cotton wig that had a long history as a pageant fixture having been worn by numerous young actors before her. In the days following the pageant, Jeanne's scalp itched fiercely. Mother investigated and found her scalp alive with more than her light brown hair. My sister survived the lice ordeal which followed, and her memory of the kerosene rinse my mother used to kill the tiny creatures still lingers.

My mother was one of nine children reared on a farm in southeastern Nebraska whose yearning for the solitude of farm life never left her, especially as Navy wife. At her urging, my father, a Naval Reserve chaplain, bought our farm in the late 1930's. In 1940, the early stages of World War II in Europe erupting, he was called to active duty leaving my mother, sister and I to "run" the farm.

The isolation suited Mother just fine. We had no newspaper. News came to us nightly from H.V. Kaltenborn and Gabriel Heater through powerful radio transmitters of WMAQ and WGN hundreds of miles away in Chicago. Our mercantile world was the annual Sears catalog. Its arrival in the mail was a celebrated event.

We did have a phone, an ancient instrument that hung on the dining room wall in a wooden case. Six other households shared the party line, each having a distinctive ring — ours was two longs and one short. It was not uncommon for others to listen in on calls. Such eavesdropping was called "rubbering" and a fairly common pastime among our neighbors. Few secrets survived in our farming community.

From time to time, Mother would disappear into her bedroom for an entire day or two. At the time we just accepted her neurosis. She probably wouldn't have seen a psychiatrist even if one had been available. The fact was we seldom saw any doctor and seeking the service of a veterinarian for our livestock was definitely out of the question. Like the time we had two lambs needing their soiled, wooly tail docked for sanitary reasons. Mother found a sturdy wooden box to restrain the poor animals, cut a hole through which to pull the lamb's tail, then draped it over a chopping block. I need go no further but to note that both lambs survived. Another wonderment.

Mother's keen farming instincts were bred into her and were never more evident than in the spring. So it was no surprise that one April day she asked the county agricultural agent to come over and discuss improving our land. Our soil was woefully lacking in nutrients having been locked up in the North American ice cap that, on retreating eons ago, left behind the Great Lakes, and the crooked geological contours of the U.P. The county agent suggested planting buckwheat as an organic fertilizer adding, coyly, that there was a government subsidy involved.

Mother caught fire with the prospect of cashing in on this “stimulus” program, a leftover from the Great Depression of the 1930’s. Within days, we had plowed a thirty acre field and I sowed the buckwheat with a walking spreader, a labor-intensive technique not used since frontier days. As I turned a crank, the buckwheat seed stored in a bag strapped to my chest fell onto a rapidly rotating disc scattering the buckwheat over an area twenty feet wide. An entire day was spent walking back and forth over the soft, freshly plowed ground to cover the entire field.

When the buckwheat blossomed, its thick stalks were to be plowed under. Mother forgot this small detail. We turned the crop under after it had gone to seed. The results of this oversight were twofold: The county agent declared he absolutely would not authorize payment of the subsidy and the hardy buckwheat crop began reviving itself year after year. For all I know, it may still be doing so.

While stressing over her lost subsidy, Mother came across a magazine ad describing the “widespread demand” for pigeon squabs as a delicacy and a solution to the wartime shortage of meat which was rationed throughout WW II. The ad also touted the prolific reproduction rate of the birds and the minimal care they required.

Seizing on a chance to recoup her pride and her fortune, and without the first element of a marketing plan in her head, Mother placed an order for 20 pairs of White King pigeons from an outfit in Boston. In the back of the house we converted an old pump room into a pigeon loft. Outside we built a fully enclosed exercise area with chicken wire. After the pigeons' arrival, the only management issue we had was that, when cleaning out their habitat, some birds would inevitably escape and perch high up in a large poplar tree that towered over our backyard. In the evening, however, they would flutter down and be readmitted to the coop and fed. And, true to the ad, the birth rate of these birds was phenomenal.

It was not long before we were in the midst of a population explosion in the pigeon coop and Mother, with as yet no business model, had to move quickly. One problem was she could not find any statistics for squab sales in the U.P. The reason was simply that there were none. In fact, we couldn’t find anyone who had ever eaten squab. It was slowly beginning to dawn on mother that the “widespread” appetite for squabs was a fiction, at least in Michigan’s U.P.

Nevertheless, having gone this far, Mother moved ahead with a straightforward strategy. Using her leverage as one of the very few cash customers of the IGA Store in town, she would persuade Mr. Weber, the butcher, to become her retail outlet.

Mr. Weber had to grant mother an audience because of her cash position, but he warily retreated behind his massive butcher block during their negotiations. In the end he grudgingly agreed to take a half-dozen squabs “on consignment” for a week. That term was utterly new to mother and she was not happy when he explained that he would display the squabs along with his veal chops, lake trout, etc. but if they did not sell within a week she would have to take them back. No money would change hands if her product did not move.

Instructions for preparation of the squabs for market appeared in a pamphlet accompanying the pigeons. The squabs, though barely thirty-days-old, were as large as their parents but without feathers. I was the assassin. Mother, who had butchered many chickens in her day, dressed and arranged the six supposed delicacies on a tray, which I then delivered to Mr. Weber. True to his word, Mr. Weber positioned the squabs in his display case, quite prominently. I was to visit the IGA store every day after school in order to give Mother a status report when I got home.

Alas, the squabs did not move. But Mother decided that we should. She retrieved the crates in which the pigeons arrived, gathered up our flock and took them to Railway Express at the depot for shipment back to Boston, defiantly explaining to anyone who asked that she, too, could “play the consignment game!” It was late October when we closed up the farm and drove to Seattle, to join my father at his duty station.

The following spring my father was transferred to a Marine division fighting in the South Pacific and we returned to our farm, the blossoming buckwheat field and our isolation. Patches of crusty snow could still be found under the large spruce trees in the yard and in other shady areas like the north side of the barns and chicken house. One of these sheltered spots was the front porch of the farm house. Clearing the snow from the door way I found a Railway Express notice left many months earlier confirming our shipment.

Mother read the notice but said nothing. That evening, about sunset, I watched as she strolled into the backyard. She paused and stared up into the naked limbs of our towering old poplar. I am sure she was hoping to see the flash of a familiar white wing as the snowy birds came down to feed. She turned and gazed at the deserted pigeon coop as if asking herself what might have happened to the occupants of those now-deserted nests and wondering, perhaps, if they had a homing instinct as strong as her own.

Al Martin: Growing up in the 'wild' landscape of Michigan's Upper Peninsula with my father often gone serving as a chaplain in the US Navy during WWII led me on many paths. Joining the Navy myself was an obvious one. Being obsessed with the wilds of the Arctic and Antarctica not so obvious. In my essay 'Homing' I reflect on some of my earliest memories and influences of these experiences. Today I live Flowery Branch, Georgia with my wife, Linda, and many persistent Mallards.



Tulip Troiani

I'm a painter/printmaker/seamstress based out of Dallas, with a BFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. My practice is defined by gestures of care and the idea of a queer utopic space- not an ideal to obtain but a horizon of infinite possibilities.

This diptych is centered around a poem by the same name- it speaks of isolation and who/what we reach for to retain our sanity as time drags ever onward. The collages are derived from images taken in the everyday, memories collected over time, then fragmented and reformulated into something new and not quite familiar.



The Machine and The Prayer (In/Through/Against)

Text, Digital collage, and Drawing
 2021

An Interview With Lori Lamothe

I've seen Lori's work in Honey & Lime, Storm Cellar, Parhelion, and more. Each time I came across her work was an accident, but the more I did, the more I became interested in the clarity of her presentation, her sure tone, and her knack for cutting to the chase gracefully. After about the 5th time I stumbled upon her work, I decided to see if she'd like to do an interview with us, and to our delight, she obliged. Below is our correspondence:

- James Champion, Editor in Chief

How did you first fall in love with poetry and when did you know you wanted to be a poet?

I've been in love with poetry my entire life. I remember writing poems at 7 years old at a friend's house: we were cutting construction paper and using glue and pasting stuff onto these huge, crazy, messy poems. Poetry started out as a sensory cornucopia for me and it still feels that way.

I didn't think about sending anything out for a long, long time and I stopped writing for a long time too. I got into a phase where I had dropped out of graduate school and was living at home. I was substitute teaching and had no friends, no life, no future. A kid did a cartwheel in the classroom I was subbing in and the principal happened to appear at just that moment. Afterward, they would only call me to fill in for gym classes. I started writing on this ancient computer in my parents' basement and I finished maybe 500 poems in three months. They sucked—but it was the beginning of something.

Later I was accepted into several MFA programs but never ended up enrolling, so the traditional route where you get to be a real poet-professor is closed to me. I don't mind though, because that hardship led me to experiences that shaped my writing.

Who are some writers who, after a certain amount of time reading them, make you want to put the book down and write?

Well, all the big, daunting geniuses make me want to do that, which I suppose is a bit counterintuitive. You'd think I'd be too intimidated by their brilliance but it doesn't work that way for me. Don't get me wrong: I am intimidated, but I still get the urge to write afterward.

The problem is the mindprint of whoever I was reading is too evident in my first drafts, especially if I actually did set the book down to write a poem (which has happened). Emily Dickinson has probably had the biggest influence on me, but there are many others – Rilke, Neruda, Akhmatova, Yeats, Eliot,特朗斯特罗姆, Stevens, etc, etc, etc. In recent years, I've gravitated toward women poets: Wislawa Szymborska, Solveig von Schoultz, Lisel Mueller, Sylvia Plath, Sappho, Ada Limon, Louise Glück, Anna Swir, Mekeel McBride, and many others.

One of my favorite poetic sequences I've read occurs in your poem "Armageddon Zen:" "The snowflakes lit memory. / I set one inside a lantern and entered a room." When lines like these (I mean brilliant, surprising lines) are written, do they come in a flash, or are they carefully constructed over a long period of time?

Thanks for the compliment! I keep notes in one gigantic file (right now it's out of control at 800+ pages). I keep meaning to separate them but somehow I never do and the ideas percolate over time then rise to the surface when I write. I had some images for "Armageddon Zen" in that file and when I sat down at my laptop the lines came pretty quickly. I went back and edited the form of the poem several times, but I didn't do much with the lines themselves.

To continue the theme of the previous question, somewhere I once heard someone say something along the lines of: "Good poetry isn't inside you waiting to get out, it's outside you waiting to get in." What do you think of this?

It's a great idea. I see poetry as something along the lines of Rilke's "inseeing." When I write I aim to see beyond the surface of a thing to its heart. The ability to perceive a thing from the inside out is supposed to lead to a deeper connection between the observer and the observed. I don't know if I actually accomplish this—or if it's possible—but I try. Nowadays the idea of something even possessing an essence is questionable, but I believe it when I write.

Do you find that poetry intrudes upon your everyday life sometimes? For example, have you ever had to suddenly excuse yourself from a room to jot down a line?

Oh, I've done that many times. I used to jot down thoughts on random pieces of paper but now I use my phone. I might be in the middle of Wal-Mart and stop to type a disjointed message to myself. Later I transfer what I sent to a longer file. They're usually not actual lines, but images, ideas and overhead snippets of conversation.

For me, poetry and everyday life are inextricable. I think if you tried to separate them it would kill me, sort of a variation on the daemon intercessions in *The Golden Compass*.

Do you have a favorite poem you've written?

My favorite poem is almost always the last poem I've written. After I finish writing I'm on a high and think I've reached a new pinnacle of lyricism. Then I go back to the poem a few days later and think, "Oh my God, this is trash." After a few more days go by I return to it with a cooler mind and edit.

As for specific poems, I like a lot of the poems I wrote about my daughter. Not so much because I consider them objectively better than the others, but because they bring me back to specific moments in her childhood.

Have you ever taken lines from a poem, or multiple poems, that you've scrapped and added them to a new poem? If so, can you do it without guilt?

Yes and yes. All the time. I try to stick to the "kill your darlings" mode of revision. Sometimes that means murdering the entire poem, except for a line or two that can be salvaged.

Your poems have these terrifically satisfying endings. How do you know when a poem is finished?

Thanks again. When I write first drafts I just know—I get a definite sense of completion. I do go back, especially if a poem gets rejected, and play with the endings. One poem got rejected a dozen times so I took a hard look at it and changed the last stanza. I was much happier with the revision and it got accepted fairly quickly.

Natural images are so important in a lot of your poems. Do you have a favorite place? A place that inspires you? Any places that deter you from writing?

I live in the country and there are many spots I love. This sounds dark, but I have an especial fondness for old graveyards. There are some prison ruins where I walk my husky and I often stop by the anonymous graves of the prisoners, who were also Tuberculosis patients. Oddly enough, Boy Scouts made the plain wooden crosses that mark their graves, which seems like a macabre thing for a kid to do to earn a badge. Enormous pines surround the clearing and when the sunlight filters through, it's quite remarkable.

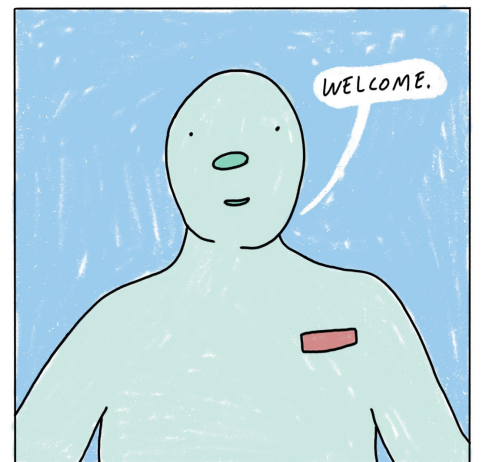
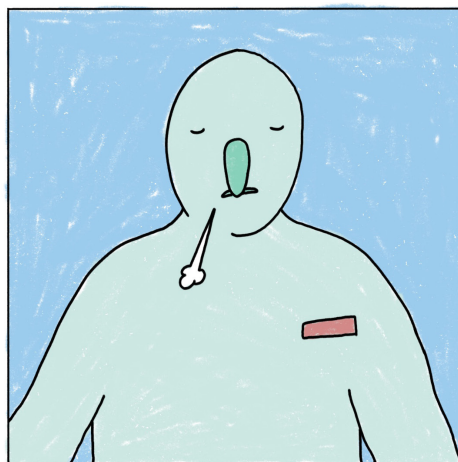
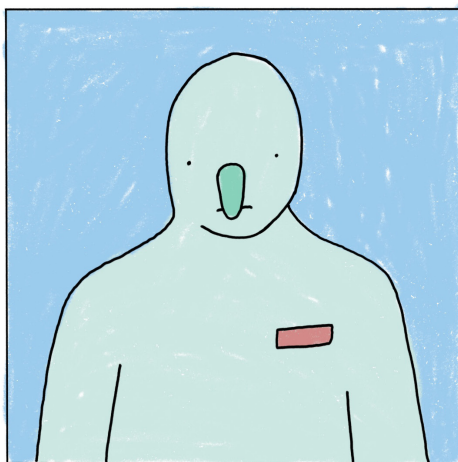
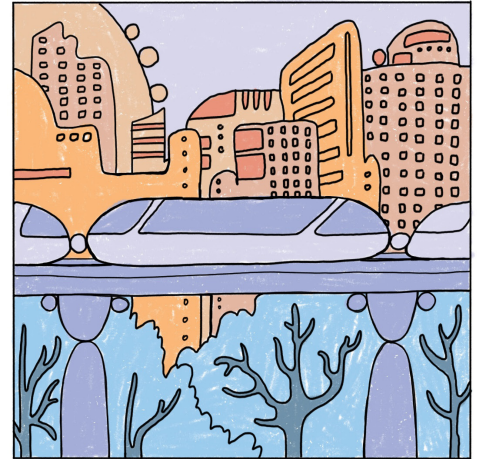
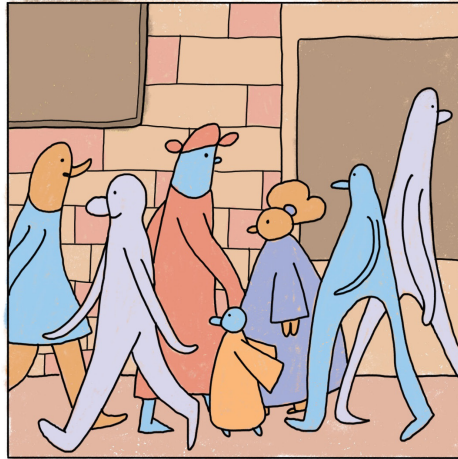
I also love the sea and have spent time at beaches in Maine since I was very young. I can't think of a place that deters me from writing. Sometimes my inner landscape prevents me.

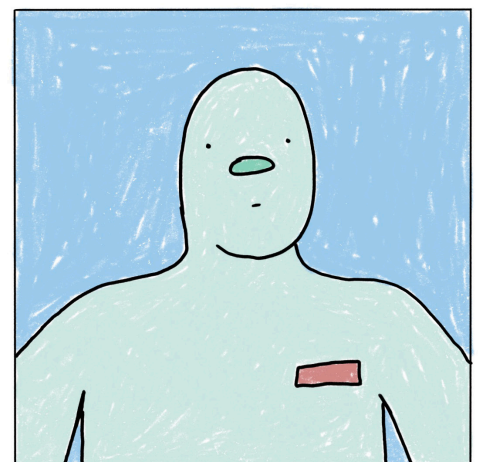
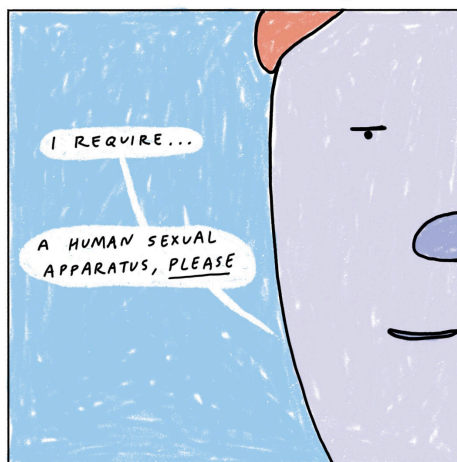
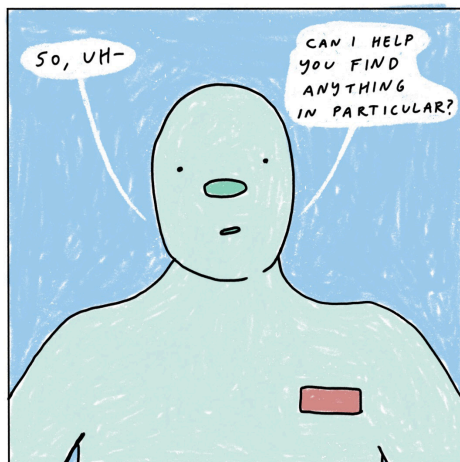
In the poem “Mermaid in Full Moonlight,” you mention the subject of the poem in the title, and then leave her in the first line. Throughout, the reader is given vivid imagery, but still is uncertain of the setting. One is left swimming in something that might be darkness, water, or perhaps a void. How often are you satisfied with leaving ambiguities in your poems?

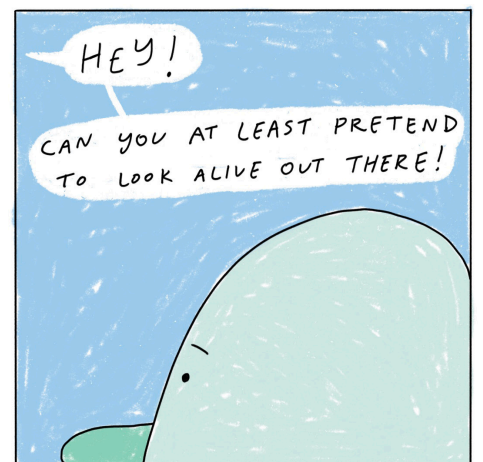
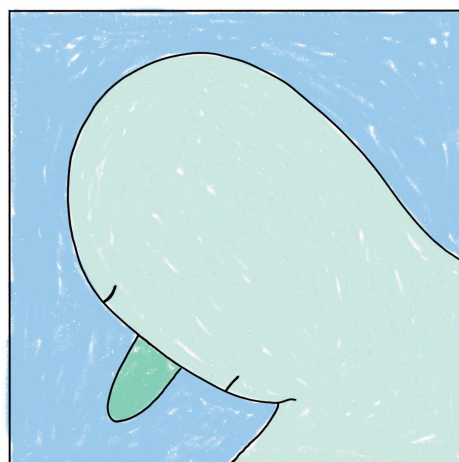
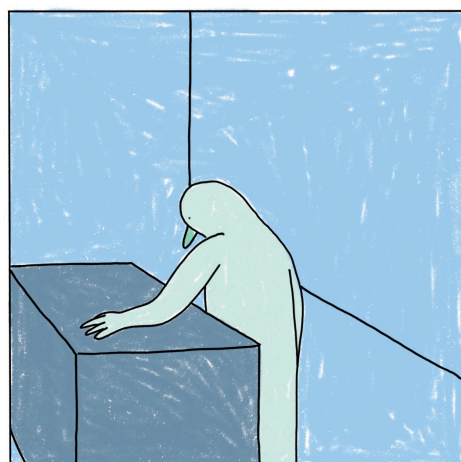
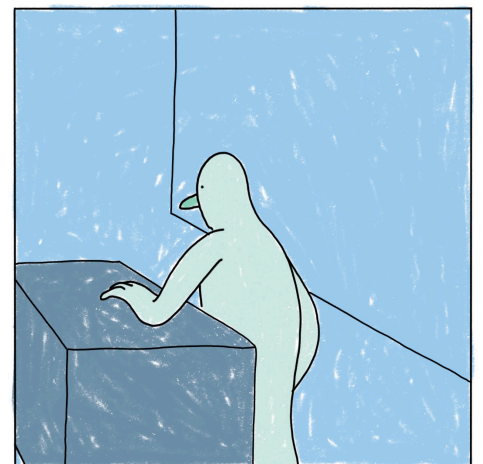
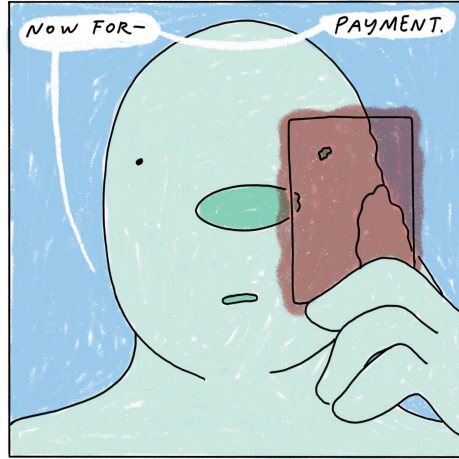
This is something I continually struggle with. I have a close friend who is convinced poems should be ambiguous but I don’t agree. I think if the reader gets lost in a line-maze and can’t get out that’s not a good thing. At the same time, the poems I love most have these unresolvable, ever-shifting ambiguities—almost all of Dickinson’s poems have them, for example.

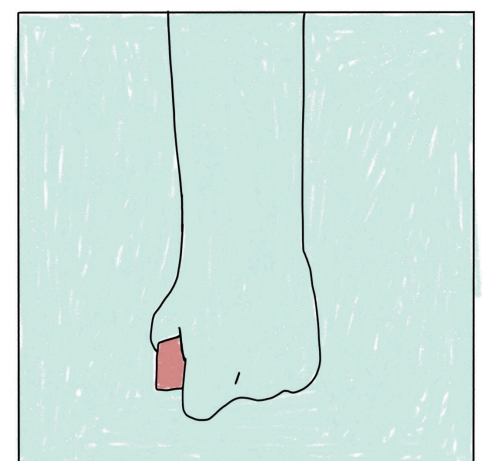
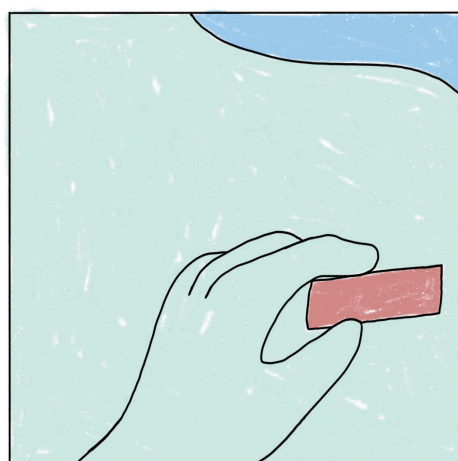
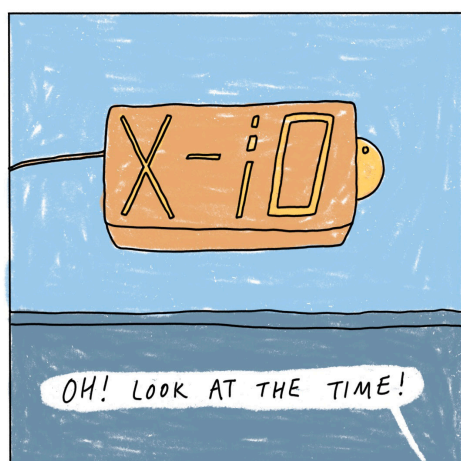
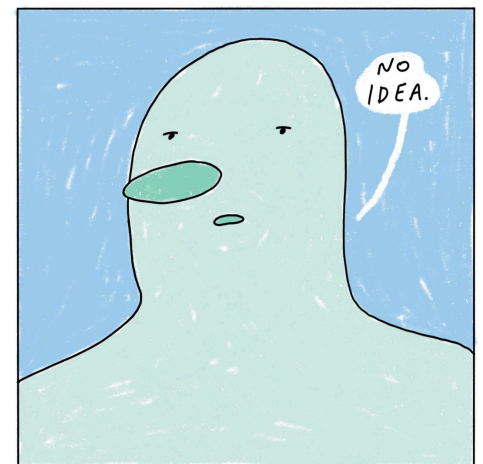
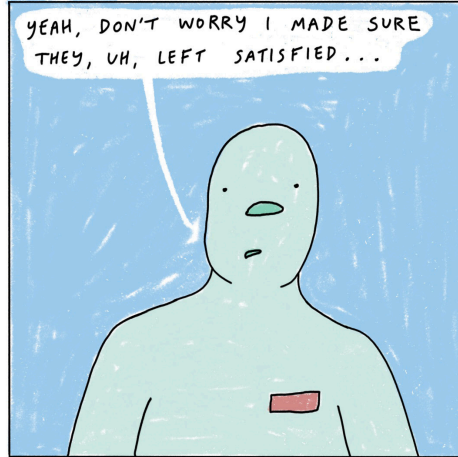
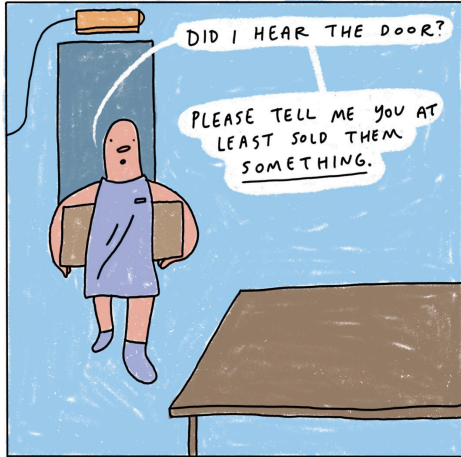
One of my favorite experiences is going back to the same Dickinson poem again and again. Sometimes the ambiguous lines resolve into something resembling clarity, only to revert back. For once, then, something! It can be frustrating but it’s also energizing. How I love that moment of vision.

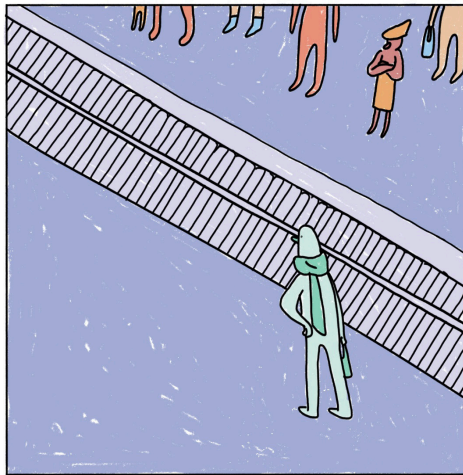
Lori Lamothe is the author of *Trace Elements*, *Kirlian Effect* and *Happily*. Her poems have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Seattle Review*, *Verse Daily* and elsewhere. A four-time Pushcart nominee, she lives in New England with her family and rescue husky.











Lake Michigan

Makenzie Beyer

I feed the fish an elegant spoonful of soggy sticky rice. I'm not sure I'm supposed to do that, but the fish seems to like it. As I tend to breakfast, he sets a pot of water to boil on the stove and scoops cafe bustelo into the French press. It's going to be too strong from what I can tell, but I say nothing. In the air that surrounds us, there is a rare and delicate balance, and I am hesitant to disturb it. For once, I am floating, and there is not a single eggshell idling on the floor. He opens a carton of cream, I toast fresh bread. He walks outside to grab the mail. I clean the cast iron from last night. Morning moves like this, task by task. Juice on the counter, sugar in a bowl. Later, we'll pick autumn olives from the bushes that are marked for destruction. Now, he's eating leftover chicken. I'm biting at my fingernails. We are waiting for the other to cave. From across the room, I stare at him as he wipes his hands clean.

Dream

Makenzie Beyer

I dreamt last night that I had lots of money. It never ran out. I bought out all the flowers at the farmers market and gave them away for free like a talkshow host. You get a flower and you get a flower and you get a flower and you and you and you and so on. I called my dad to tell him about my good fortune and bought him a boat, something modest but at least it was his. I flew to New York. I've never been to New York. I met a girl named An and we really hit it off. I bought her ice cream and peonies. Two of her favorites. I had no clue. When we said goodbye, she gave me flowers. I didn't tell her what I did at the farmer's market. I thought of An on the plane. You say her name like "on," as in "on the radio," or "on the contrary." Her example was "on the lips," which is where she kissed me softly before our divergence. I thought of her shoes, sensible sandals that allowed for much walking and little discomfort; I thought of the way her shoulders slightly hunch, like Keira Knightly but far less severe. I thought of her jeans which were way too big but fit her nicely all the same. When I woke up, I had this yanking pain at the back of my head. My hairpins had become tangled in my sleep.

Makenzie Beyer is a poet living and working in Chicago, Illinois. She is currently re-watching all six seasons of *Gossip Girl* and perfecting her shortbread recipe.

Thin

Jeff McLaughlin

You just get thin, and thinner, and then there's nothing left to cover the bones. So you can't see straight. In that sense, it wasn't my fault. Not entirely. It wasn't carelessness, either, despite what you might think. Was I in the wrong? Yes. I was tired, so tired, and I came over the hill too fast and damn near hit Mr. Fletcher. That used up my last chance with him. He looked pained when he pulled me over. Those deep creases on his cheeks make him look sad on the best of days. In the bad light, in that bad situation, well.

Jesus, I said, when he got to my window. You know I'm sorry.

I know it, he said. But it's three times in as many months, Miles. I have to cite you.

I understand, I said. I really do, I said. I handed him my license, even though he knew who I was.

He turned off his lights while he wrote me up. Maybe he thought it would save me some embarrassment. Or maybe he just knows how bright they are, almost painful. Anyway. He handed me the ticket and after I took it he reached in and rested his hand on my shoulder. I know you're trying hard, he told me. Just keep doing what you're doing and something will break your way. Your folks raised you right. That'll come through in the end.

Yes, sir, I said. Though by that time, even though I knew he wasn't intentionally lying, I couldn't believe anything like that.

Seven generations of Ahearnes have lived in this town, three of Fletchers, so we all go way back. He had parents in our cemetery, and worse, a son, who'd died when we were all just kids. It feels weird to say, but it's a beautiful place. Old trees, and old iron fence, in there you can't see anything but the church, not the factory, or the dying down, just trees and grass and headstones.

That afternoon I'd finished my last work of the season there, the last work I'd ever get in town, as it turned out. I'd used up the rest of the loose dirt and grass seed and raked it over all the bare places, though there wasn't much of it and I had to leave it so thin I wasn't sure it would make a difference. I didn't bother to go see my relatives. I knew where they were, where they would always be. I walked out past the veteran's monument. Someone had stolen the brass cannon from its summit a few years back, to sell, I would assume. I might have been thinking about any of that or all of that when I almost hit him. That rush of adrenaline wiped my memory clear.

Seven generations. Once we owned a farm but lost it when Colliers snatched everything up for their factory. There's a box in my attic filled with brittle papers and one October night I read through each and every one of them. Old deeds, bank papers, even a handwritten receipt, one hundred and twenty dollars cash for the farm. I wondered what things would have been like if they'd been able to hang onto the land. Or just up and moved away when they had the chance. I learned one sure thing from reading all those papers, though, which was to stay out of debt. Every time anyone in our family took out debt, in the end, every time, we lost something important.

I still lived in my mother's house. She had moved away with my brother and his family years ago. There wasn't much left in it. But it was the place she and my dad had scrimped and saved to buy and where they had brought us up, all three of us. My sister was long gone, south. My dad is buried across from the old church. Beside him is an empty space for my mom when she goes. There aren't but two spaces in that plot. God knows where I'll end up, but it won't be there.

Six oak trees shade the house on its east side. After the elms all died my dad went into the woods across the river to look for saplings. He dug six of them out, carted them back in metal barrels he borrowed from work, and planted them sixteen feet apart. Mr. Schofield from next door made a point to taunt him

about this. He said my dad's little twigs would die. But my dad made my brother or me water them every morning, every sunny morning, for that whole spring and summer. He'd water them again when he came home from work. They all survived. Every single one. Now that they're big they're perfectly set, casting nice shade, with the exact right amount of space between them.

I tell you this because even though the house is practically empty, even though I can barely pay the electricity bill, even though I don't even technically own this place, I have nothing else left. It's my only connection to my dad. I couldn't leave it, not with all the good that happened there. My mom can barely remember herself. My brother and sister never come back. I'm the last of us. For a long time I believed I'd be damned if I was the one who would lock the door and walk away from it. For a long, long time. It was hard to even consider. For a long time I thought it was like Mr. Fletcher said, that if I did everything right that something would break my way, that the world would come back around to me.

So there I was, in a house I couldn't afford to keep. The only job I could find was over the ridge in another town. I chewed up money driving back and forth. Then they cut my hours. I turned off the gas to the house and ran everything on electricity. I shut off the town water, worked the pump over, and fired up the old well. I'd heard everything was poisoned from things leeching out from the factory but it only tasted a little rusty and I didn't have a lot of choices. It nearly broke my heart when I had to sell the last of old furniture to the antique store though I knew no one else in the family would ever miss it and frankly I felt entitled, given that I was taking care of the place.

I went looking for work wherever I could. I swear I left no stone unturned. I swept floors at the warehouse. I did a few stints trying to repair the old church steeple until they ran out of money again. I drove to my other job every day hours came open. You get tired, not having. All I had was pride, but you get tired keeping that up. You get thinned out.

And that's when things slip. Eventually I was waking up in my dad's army sleeping bag on the floor. It got to be that a passing cloud would set the roof to creaking and in that emptiness those tremors carried all the way down to the living room. Even in broad daylight it felt like ghosts filled the place. In the mirror I could see hollows in my cheeks, dark places under my eyes. My bones seemed to be coming out, like I could see through myself.

So that third time I got yanked for bad driving, because I was falling asleep and came damn near to hitting a cop, I was nearly all done. I left the ticket fluttering around on the front seat of the car. I was absolutely wide awake after that. Not because of the ticket, but because I was scared at how close I had come to hitting him, or killing him, or maybe even myself. When I got home I set the ticket on the kitchen counter, with all my cash beside it. I didn't have enough. I had thirty days to raise it. Thirty days or thirty months or thirty years, though, there seemed no great difference to me.

Thirty days which came and went. Thirty days in which I thought about calling my mother or my brother to ask for help but I decided that begging them to send money so I could pay a reckless driving ticket would obliterate whatever respect they might still have for me. So I didn't pay it. I knew that was a real risk. I knew I was depending on the good will of a man who owed me nothing. I knew at that moment I had placed my life in the claws of debt.

And because of that I couldn't sleep. I heard Jase Schofield come in and out of his house next door, at all hours, and heard him talk quietly to them before they drove off. I heard the grinding sounds of tires on the gravel and thought each and every time it was the police come to serve me papers. I took to going the wrong way out of town, on those days when there was work to be had, looping way around, so as to avoid him if he was waiting for me. I didn't even drive to the supermarket, but walked in twilight.

I have no memory of fainting, or falling, but I woke up on the Schofields' front lawn. It was late, really late, all the way dark. That family had been our neighbors since before I was born, but we were never friendly with them, not even before their youngest son started dealing drugs. The one who stood over me. Jase. I was not afraid of him, exactly. He just made me nervous. He crouched down beside me, right next to my little paper bag of groceries.

Miles, he said. Except for his eyes he kept his body really still. You don't look so good. How long you been here? he asked.

I sat up. I shook my head. I don't know, I said. What time is it?

About three.

That seemed impossible. I tried to crack my jaw, the way you do when you need to pop your ears. I went to get a bite to eat, I said. About seven or eight. I don't know how I ended up here, I told him. I started to stand but he put his hand on my shoulder and held me there. Not kindly, not gently.

The cops came by, he said.

To my house? I asked. He nodded. I could barely see his face. His foyer light was on behind him so I knew he could see me better than I could see him.

What for? he asked.

Unpaid ticket, I said. Nothing evil, I said, though the minute that escaped my lips I knew it had been a mistake. I lay my head back in the grass.

He stood. I could see his form against the clear sky, covering the distant stars. I was aware of his boot right by my ear. It was really quiet. Can you pay it? he asked.

For a moment I thought he might offer me work, an option I was afraid to even consider. I, I said, catching myself. I can't, Jase, I finally said. I have nothing left but the house.

How much do you owe? he asked.

One hundred and ten dollars.

Only a hundred dollars? he asked.

I could feel the back of my head rasp against the ground when I chuckled. Only, I laughed. I don't even have twenty. It might as well be a thousand or ten thousand or a million.

Then he did a strange thing, an unexpected thing. He sat down for a moment, and then lay beside me, so we were about a yard apart, looking at the same sky. I can't have the cops coming round here, he said in his quiet voice. You gotta go. You gotta leave. I'll give you enough. Go off and stay with your brother for a spell.

Why? I asked.

Because this place will kill you, he said. It's already started but you don't know it yet.

I waited. I waited in that silence as long as I could. I waited for him to explain or say something, anything else. Finally I just gave in to it. I can't, I said. I can't take your money. I stood up. I went back to my own house. I did not look back until I got to my front door. From the porch I could barely see through the trees but I swear he was still lying there on the grass.

Jeff McLaughlin was born in Nebraska, grew up in the Carolinas, went to school in Minnesota, and now lives and works there and in France. He's been fortunate enough to place a few stories here and there, most notably in the *Kenyon Review* and *December Magazine* and most recently in the *Southern Humanities Review*. In between editing his first novel, he serves as a reader for the *Raleigh Review*.

CW: Language, self-mutilation, mental illness

Bona Fide

Sarah Matsuda

Exercise 1: Bona Fide

Cutting / Bipolar Disorder

1. Drinking white wine from an old plastic kid cup from Red Robin
2. Black cat Ju-Ju watching me in the bathroom with her green alien eyes
3. Drops of blood seeping into the cuticle of my right big toe, falling from my right thigh
4. Moving teal colored toothbrushes with peeling stickers to make room for the kitchen knife

Drinking white wine from an old plastic kid cup from Red Robin

1. The wine was my mother's – cheap and sweet from a big jug. Likely on sale.
2. The cup perhaps wasn't so old but looked worn with the print flaking off because my dad puts everything in the dishwasher.
3. I put ice cubes in the cup.
4. Red Robin was a favorite spot for the boys – they loved their mac-n-cheese.

The wine was my mother's – cheap and sweet from a big jug. Likely on sale.

1. She likes to buy things in bulk
2. Cheap wine – function of her childhood poverty
3. The wine jug is always in the inside door on the left of the fridge
4. Pinot Grigio with a yellow label
5. She says she doesn't like sweet drinks

Cheap wine – function of her childhood poverty

Seven kids and their parents – my mom the eldest. They took baths once a week in the same bath bin outside and went to the peach orchards to get the half rotten ones that had fallen to the ground for free. It's good to buy big things in bulk when they're cheap she always says. She says she doesn't like to run out of stuff that she needs and then will have to head to the store at the last minute. I was living with them, my parents; ran away hard from that man I married. I was too broke to buy wine myself and certainly too broke to pay to live somewhere else. He – that man I married – refused to leave our home so I packed up kids and cats and toddler playthings and moved in with Mom and Dad. I went on an anti-depressant. See – what happened was I went to my doctor to get my thyroid checked since it's always been obnoxious and malfunctioning. Janet had a perfect pout, such kissable lips and nutty white hair that was always smooshed on the left side of her head. She asked me about my sons. I hadn't spoken of them to anyone...what were their lives going to be like, what

were their lives going to be like, what shape, ah, from a broken home. Suddenly I couldn't breathe very easily and my eyes started to burn. To say I became hysterical sounds melodramatic but it's sort of true. I told her I was living with my parents, left him, and was basically going to destroy my kids. She said an anti-depressant would get me through a rough patch and this sounded like a really great idea. After a couple of weeks I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. It took me a half an hour to write an email to my supervisor to let him know I couldn't make it in to work. I took off work for about three months. Walking around was like being back home in Missouri – the impenetrable humidity filling the lungs breathing hard like an elderly person with emphysema. Or the unbearable cold – now burning the lungs, the sky low and grey in a flat ugly landscape. My how I loved that place.

I was already 38 when I began. Up all night, sneaking into the beige immaculate bathroom I shared with my kids. Taking the sharp kitchen knife to my right thigh. Not in delicate slices but a solid and swift and deep thrust, arm raised above my head. At first, and then to see such beauty, no, beauty is not the right word. To see and feel such a marvelous and glorious thing of crimson warmth, this sight could never be measured against all else. To feel such, to be so alive but so wanting otherwise.

Anything I wore rubbed against these cuts. It was a visceral memory of elation and pleasure like an achy body after a long night of fucking. It was a sting that brought me back, out of that low grey sky, or so I thought. It was so fleeting I couldn't hold onto it for but a flicker of time. I kept the knife in the bedroom closet on the top shelf between hand-knitted blankets.

I refuse to learn how to knit. It doesn't belong to me – it belongs to my dead fragile grandmother and her daughter, my mother Donna. I only call her by her first name when she's tipsy and overcooking dinner because she's chatting so much and hugging everyone. It irritates her to no end but I do get her attention. In a bit I'll be on the sofa stuck hard in my head but listening to the steady click of her knitting needles. Mesmerized and heartbroken, gazing at her knobby knuckles with blue glowing and pulsing veins, early arthritis.

Exercise 2: John

Marriage

1. Fantasies of another man inside of me
2. Sex became utterly salacious, cold, usually about four orgasms, and useless
3. I shit on the carpet after hard core anal. Porn stars say to get an enema.
4. Every night falling asleep on the cobalt sofa, refusing that marital bed; my Great Dane Zoe, my 150- pound baby. Her breathing, my hand on her chest and her face close to mine, dog breath.

Every night falling asleep on the cobalt sofa, refusing that marital bed; my Great Dane Zoe, my 150- pound baby. Her breathing, my hand on her chest and her face close to mine, dog breath.

1. She was a reject from the litter. Cherry eyes, blue mantle. The most prized coloring but her eyes – no good for breeding.
2. We got her from Kansas, from a woman named Tracy who had a swollen belly, baby coming anytime.
3. It was John's idea to get a Great Dane. He said they were tough looking and he always wanted purposeless stuff.
4. He bought a Glock for \$800 when we could barely pay the mortgage. I bitch-slapped him and he cried.

He bought a Glock for \$800 when we could barely pay the mortgage. I bitch-slapped him and he cried.

1. Even after we separated and I was living an hour away with my parents we fucked outside, standing up or me bending over next to the garage door; at this point I never let him touch my breasts.
2. I took the Glock to the range, taking off work during the day to go shoot in secret. First and only betrayal.
3. He got fired and I stayed up all night doing coke and edibles.
4. I ate a huge cheeseburger the next day.

And now, here we are after tens of thousands of dollars from me to you and endless fees from my lawyer. And my kids living in two places - two homes, one week on one week off. I purposely say my kids - only with tremendous regret would I say they are yours as well. I always and only call you by your first name when I'm addressing you to them. To speak of regret - it no longer exists, for the most part. But yet, what a dire consequence of choosing to have children with you. I wasn't thinking. I do regret that. People say well then they wouldn't be who they are. Well, fucking nonsense. If I had kids with someone else they'd still be mine. I wonder sometimes - should I have married him...or him...or him...? Would it have come to this anyway...would I have damaged their spirits, made perilous their place in the world, in their heads, in their own beds....?

Exercise 3: My Sons

Jamison

1. My first son; I was barely 17. I didn't name him Jamison, such a cool name. I named him Andrew; biblical desperation. Cobwebs of my mom's Catholicism stuck in my throat.
2. I left him there in the plastic hospital crib. Eager new parents waiting to collect him.
3. I met him four years ago, 28 years later. Such beautiful white teeth.
4. Your dad Denny, Jamison - we were magically in childhood love.

I met him four years ago, 28 years later. Such beautiful white teeth.

1. My second son, Ronin. I was never healthier. I worked out five times a week and only ate organic food. Perhaps the result of your gorgeous skin.
2. I was 32.
3. At first my nipples were so sore they were worse than the stitches swelling in my cunt.
4. Now, your synapses undone. You must be nuts like me.
5. Your bite is that of a feral dog.

Now, your synapses undone. You must be nuts like me.

1. My third son, Hendrix. Every day pregnant I thought you would die. K-cell protein from your dad. My blood didn't recognize yours and my body thought you were a parasite.
2. Your gentle soul. You love to read. Escape.
3. Now, your synapses undone. You retreat into your head; unfortunately, just like me.
4. I'm sorry the world is so ugly.

Hendrix...how sweet your lovely texts to me that just say "Hi" and your cheeks - you so still look like you did when you were a baby. I love to kiss you and to rub your back with my cold hands, to see you grimace then

smile with your extra teeth coming through - my little coyote, my vampire baby - there's another extraction in the near future. I've always had cold hands, just like my mother. But it's also because when it's cold I can't help but to sit outside and have the cold blister through me. Masochist, I know. Your mom is unchanged, even after all of these years. Your voice...when you ask me a simple question my heart is in brackets like a Saturday at Home Depot. I'm in shambles, my love, and I'm trying to get out. Please don't leave my little lamb.

Ronin...now that you wear real shoes and ride a bike...your breath has a slight unpleasant odor in the morning that splinters memory. The time you said fuck you mommy was actually quite charming. There are certain things that go wrong in your brain at times...absolute unpredictable rage and then, minutes later...absolute unpredictable tenderness. It would be rather insulting to call you crazy. I remember quite clearly the very long nights we spent together in the cheap but comfy recliner in your bedroom. You nursing for hours. You loved to be held. We were so close and warm. You're quite the dichotomy, my beautiful son. Even though I don't believe in god I still pray you're not bi-polar like me.

Jamison...I smell like a hospital, like sanitized linens. I keep my legs closed tight because I want to feel the sting of my stitches and the swollen flesh, puffy between the thread. With my elbow on the door handle of the car my forearm presses against my breast. So I can feel its hardness and the unused, unnecessary fluid coming out and soaking the circular cotton pads in my bra used for girls like me. I want to feel the ache, the pinching again and again so I don't die easily and don't breeze on home like nothing has happened. You, my first true love.

I twirl in circles, like a dog before sleep, around you, my sons.

Sarah Matsuda revels in experimental, edgy, and juicy literature that defies the norms. A visceral and tactile hybridization of text, spinning somewhere deep within the brain to give a whole new experience of what can be defined. Sex, violence, memory, and the presence of the body are the central elements of her work. She rejects tradition and the conventional forms of literature in favor of extreme rebellion to history. Her work has been published in *Bending Genres*, *The Hunger*, and *Blue Mountain Review*.

Lowercase Punishment

Brianne Agnizle

Heather always wore her favorite outfits on Wednesdays. That is, until the mayor punished everyone for the low attendance seen at town meetings, once held every Wednesday, and never to be held again, because the mayor took away Wednesday from everyone. It just goes straight from Tuesday to Thursday now. Even one mention of the word “Wednesday” and you’ll face the lowercase punishment, as was the case with tom. In his violation, they made his letters smaller. Lowercase t for tom, lowercase r for robins. Write tom robins’ name with any capitals and face the same punishment; and make sure you lower your voice when you say his name, too. Lowercase people’s names are said at half the volume. So, whisper his name. If you’re already whispering, whisper your whisper.

“I’m so sorry they took Wednesday away, Heather,” had been tom’s last sentence ever said with uppercase letters.

“We’re out at the roller-rink for heck sake,” Heather said, roller-blading around, “be more careful. There are agents everywhere.” It hadn’t mattered that much to Heather anyways that Wednesdays were taken away. She did love the day as an opportunity to wear her favorite outfits, but it didn’t feel as special after the mayor took away the color teal. Heather’s favorite dress had been teal. Her favorite shirt had been teal, her favorite hat, and shoes. The color looked great on her, but lowercase letters would’ve looked more terrible than she did look good. The Wednesday offense was only a recent violation code and had completely slipped tom’s little mind that she didn’t really find all that fascinating. The date with him at the roller-rink was half out of pity for him and half out of pity for herself, but 100% a good time, because she loved roller-blading. She loved everything.

No one could be careful enough.

There are agents everywhere. There are agents everywhere. There are agents everywhere.

“Sir, I heard a violation in your voice,” skating up from behind them in a pair of roller blades, a man in dark sunglasses put a leading hand on the shoulder of tom being led out of the rink now to be made a lowercase man, a man now to be reduced down into whispers. Heather was left to skate around alone until she got all tired and went home.

“date got a little awkward,” tom texted Heather that evening. The lack of capitalization in the text reminded her to edit his contact card in her phone. She quickly switched out the big “T” for the small “t.” The date was still fun, she wanted to say, their second date, just as the first date was fun too. Although, both times, she just would have preferred to be by herself. The first one they’d had was on the last Wednesday anyone would ever have. Decided to skip the town meeting and drive out to the rodeo together. When tom picked her up, Heather was in one of her favorite outfits, of the few that were left since the color teal had been taken away. tom didn’t want the rodeo, really, but he proposed it because it sounded more exciting than dinner + movie, and he wanted to prove to Heather he was an exciting guy. Dinner + movie always failed him. The girls tom takes out always tell him they’d rather just have come by themselves.

“I had a good time at the roller-rink, despite that you got lowercased,” Heather texted him back.

“let’s go out again?” tom replied (in all lowercase). “what about the zoo? :)”

“I don’t really like animals,” Heather replied, although, she loved animals. After all, she even rescued a poor misunderstood pit-bull from a kill-shelter.

“oh,” replied tom, “well, if you don’t like animals, what about the beach?”

“No,” Heather replied, “I can’t. I’m scared of the water.” Although that was a lie. She still volunteered

swimming lessons to day-traders at the YMCA every other Monday, and she actually loved the beach.

“okay,” tom didn’t know all that much about her really, “so, how about you choose?”

“tom . . .” Heather wrote, “you know you’re a lowercase now . . .” but didn’t send it. Heather never responded. tom would have liked to think it was because she was busy, too busy with her pretty life working as a hair stylist for bald men at Shinny Head Solutions downtown. What a busy job that is. She’s constantly booked. Isn’t she? or is it because i’m a lowercase now? He stared at the ceiling, fine. fine, i’ll just find myself a lowercase girl and whisper about wednesdays with her under teal bedsheets all night long.

Brianne Agnizle [ahk-nee-z-ol] is writing to you from a purple office in Michigan, USA. Her work can be found in *The Central Review*, *TRNSFR Books*, and *The South 85 Journal*, among others. Brianne’s chapbook “A Simulcast Reality in Fake Time” (*The Common Breath*) is due for publication this spring.



Untitled
Digital Photography
2019-2020





Untitled
Digital Photography
2019-2020



Dillon Luymes These photos that I took were pre and post quarantine. With the balloon photographs (pre-quarantine,) I was focused on certain colors coming together, as well as a certain feeling that may be conveyed by the image. With the other three (post-quarantine,) I was mostly focused on observing my surroundings. These were candid and simply just things observed through my eyes at the time. There was no idea or concept; only art to be found and wanting to be captured.

Oral Stage

Robin Gow

I would chew on my father's pocket watches
while cashew-coiled as an embryo in the folds of his bedsheets.
He turned me into a football and threw me for a goal.
I was a delightful spiral.
Thin as a credit card, I wallet-dwelted
until I was too thick for keeping. A child is always
a sample. The microscope searched
for the right metaphor to explain a boy
inside a girl inside a boy.
They painted my portrait on the backs
of their hands and held them up
to cover my smearing face. I got everywhere.
I swallowed the watch hands. I sucked water
from the rusty spigot. Licked salt
from his cupped palm. Itched with thirst.
All the water chlorine bright.
Swimming in a pool of petal and fake pearl.
Gulping chain. I shaved thirty seconds
off every minute until time caved in
and I was the one true infant arriving
before and after before and after.
No one believes me I remember him
as a boy handing me a stone to mouth.

I'm Finally Tracking Lunar Phases

Robin Gow

Like me, the moon is never really full.
I eat the way doorways consume people.
Last night I dreamed I was an Avon sales rep
and I lied my name was "Herbert" on the application because
I was embarrassed by my own. Door to door I carried
a basket of crumbly lipsticks. Acutely aware
of the moon's waning I thought "This is a terrible time
for selling." My friend told me she got money
by praying to Jupiter. I thought, how do you pray
to a mass of beautiful color? Right now
the moon is in his last quarter.
I don't believe that bullshit about female bodies
cycling with the moon. My ovaries
blink like makeup compacts. They're just mirrors
reflecting back whatever face they can find.
I'm hungry for a boy to lip my plate. I'm hungry
for a window worth leaping from.
My stomach is becoming more masculine each day.
If injected with testosterone
how would the moon's body respond?
Fat re-distributes. I forgave you before
my own hips. Solitary Zoom call with the goddess.
The full moon will save me. I'll be so rich
I'll finally be able to astral project.
If I was a real witch, I'd make a tincture for this.
Someone should get a great big projector beam
and fire it at the moon. Make him stay full
and bright and unwavering. I am human.
He is a rock. He can put up with the glare for us.

CW: menstruation

Tampon Insertion Tutorial

Robin Gow

I miss the blue smell of chlorine.
Summer was spent on my back looking up
at my passing cloud reflection.
The public pool winced with band aides
and dead grass. I would go alone,
barefoot-ride my rusty blue bike there.
Lay my ragged towel beneath
a crooked tree. I had a one-piece
though all my friends had bikinis.
A black one-piece. One flat color.
I didn't think about blood, not even
when I cut my foot on the diving board
or when I lost a tooth chewing on
a re-heated cheeseburger from the snack stand.
How was I so unaware of my body?
I think about this often and try to devise a plan
to return to my own ambivalence.
My pale stomach fat. My hair pulled
into ridiculous wet pig tails.
A future self, crying in a public bathroom,
trying to fit a whole future
into a fissure. Pressing deeper.
Swallowing water. One leg up on the toilet
asking for an opening. No blood yet
just the dry mouth of cotton and rayon.
What could we use to soak up
the pool? Diminish it
to a more manageable past?
I flushed teeth down the toilet. I snapped
the diving board in half.
Once, I tried to swim to the bottom
of the diving well where the water
was coolest and bluest. The weight
crushed me to the shape
of a tampon and I swam back up,
logging myself in the air. Below,
a portal waited and waited
until there was no future left to barrow.

CW: genital imagery

Sex Ed

Robin Gow

Until third grade, all my friends were boys.
I didn't think much about the differences
between our bodies. My family lived
in a crumpling house on Main Street
and in a storm, all the walls would warble.
With pennies and dimes, I'd found around town,
I bought sunflower seeds
to feed the mice. I loved them. Their soft
careful bodies as they ventured
from underneath my closet door
to chew salty sweet seeds, I left for them.
My bedroom had vine-print wall paper
and I liked to pretend I lived in a jungle.

Mom made me keep the door to my room open
when my friends came over.
I never understood why. I hated her for it.
What did she not understand about
an eight-year-old's hunger
for privacy? How you can't fully slip
into imagined green
with the door swung open
like a gum-gap where a tooth once was?

One day with the door open
I whispered and told my friend, a boy,
about the mouse. We sat, waiting
for the animal but it never arrived.
Held out the seeds. Shared them,
sucking salt for the shells.
Bored of waiting, he pulled down his pants
and asked "Do your parts look like this?"
I said, "No" and he laughed and I laughed
and the door opened wider and
in the vine-crossed walls the mice
slept like secrets.

CW: mention of sexual assault

Accidental Choking in the Dark

Robin Gow

In middle school, my brother saved a choking person.
He got in the newspaper—his round face
bright with fear. I wore chokers
all through high school. If you keep
something around your throat sometimes
it feels like it'll secure your head
from floating away like a balloon.
A childhood friend prided herself
in being able to hold her breath
until she turned blue. I would tell her
“stop stop!” though when I got home
in the bathroom mirror, I tried it myself.
My face shook and blurred.

Some forms of play don't feel
like play. The first time I hooked up with a guy
I didn't mean to. It was supposed to be
a date but I took him into my room
and I turned off the lights and there
we were with only our bodies.
We barely kissed. He wrapped his hands
around my neck. Didn't ask
just started to close them slowly.
I pictured tightening a belt around my waist.
He said, “Then you do me.” I did,
straddling him, hands around his throat.
I wondered how long we can live
without air. He coughed when I was done.
He said, “You are so good. You are so good.”

I remember that guy in the Time Square fish bowl
trying to hold his breath for nine minutes.
Maybe a fifth grader, I tried to hold it with him
but I failed early on. I wonder
where that boy is and if he's found
another boy to choke him. In the morning after
I had a red halo around my neck.

Self-Portrait in Terre Verte

Joyce Schmid

I once was every shade of green,
inventing sugar out of sunlight, sweetening
the air with oxygen. I held the footprints
of the ant, the deer, the mountain lion,
and the hare. I was a tapestry of millefleurs,
rich-strewn with cobalt-violet, Egyptian blue,
vermillion, saffron gold. I was a canvas
for the moving shadows of the leaves
of California laurel, valley oak, madrone.
I caught the wooly catkins
falling from the willow trees.
I have to tell you or you wouldn't know
my name was grass,
and I was green.

Namaste

Joyce Schmid

We love the light,
but light can be a lure

concealing
ice-pik teeth.

How do we recognize
the noseless frown,

the white-ringed eyeball
of a lurking anglerfish

behind the moon-balloon
it flies as bait?

We don't.
We just put on our fins

and swim to anything
that looks like fire.

Saecula Saeculorum

Joyce Schmid

I'm breathing sun-smell
from the place your neck
turns right and forms a ledge for me.

Forget the city
rising in its bowl
like bread about to fall.

The plane trees wave their limbs
in semaphore
to signal thirst.

This time next year,
no matter how much rain,
they will be bare again.

I tell myself, you must remember this.

Space-time has a memory,
and nothing is destroyed--
this moment with my face against your collar bone,
inhaling you and resting
on your real and present shoulder.

Joyce Schmid is a grandmother and psychotherapist living in Palo Alto California with her husband of over half a century. Her recent work has appeared in Literary Imagination, New Ohio Review, Antioch Review, Missouri Review, Poetry Daily, and other journals and anthologies.

Happy Christmas

Katie Zwick

you're taking out loans
[bread, pills, almonds]
and i'm crying to the birds
all over town

brandy with your dad
maybe it was bourbon
burns in your basement
but honey, i can do it

moments of tenderness
tucked between rounds
your dad offers
and you speak for us both

you're crying with your sister
gifts in a gold frame
and i'm taking notes

kiss me on the couch
hold me
before you place a hand
where a crown would be
a subtle request

you tell me to look at you
and i see you.

Katie Zwick is a recent graduate of Central Michigan University. She relocated to Nashville and is hoping to end up in graduate school for film preservation. Her art has been published in The Central Review, and she thinks everyone can get a little something out of staring at leaves.

5 Spring Haiku

Hugh Findlay

Hunger

Wild shrilling squirrel
Potent with Spring randiness
Breaks a nut in two

Flicker

Corner of my eye
Wind blowing clothesline trousers
Souls slipping in, out

Migration

One thousand starlings
Take off, zeroing the trees —
Odds are, one flies back

Oceanic

Leaves of golden fish
Sun coursing limbs like water —
Trunk casting upward

Spring

Softly falling
Cherry blossom petals
Last month's snowflakes

Hugh Findlay writes a lot, sometimes publishes, and would rather be caught fishing.
He cooks a pretty good gumbo but can't sing or dance.
He's colorblind but can smell like a bloodhound.
He feels funny in suspenders.
He likes beer.
[@hughmanfindlay](#)

Like War Brides

Alex Jennings

With fingertips unbutton
The night, layer from layer
It's taffeta. Hiking upstairs
Hiking down. Leave in waiting
The bells the bells.

That merry-go-round rusted and
Gutless, release release. Whole
Summers, entire ages, epochs in stone.
Geology yawns and the stars light down
Preserved in water, ignorant.

This is why: You disappear
You can't come when I need. You
Want that, I fetch it and Holy Ghost
Or wholly ghost. Or rain-slick
Or mute voices hushed in earth.

Or—OR! A fleshy lip, a slickness
Unfold like wings and air-dry. Yet
Jacob's angels travel hand over hand
Not glowing. Somnolent, instead
Because that is how you move from there

To here. Again with the tumbling
Around, the crashing. British Invasion
Wrapped about your narrow shoulders.
Searching for sound-alikes in books
Of matches. You used it

Again and again. I'm angry because my
Voice is raw. My voice is raw because
Tears. A silent war. A towered enemy
Machine gun tail gun railgun ball turret.
Hose me out of many and fuck--!

Lay it out. Ask it. Say, please show
How it could happen! And incanted, set
Among burnished jewels a silent roar
Engines to life. Always-the-same and never-

This one and one more and I swear to God,
If you make me say it for you I will never stop.

Alex Jennings is an author, performer in New Orleans. He was born in Wiesbaden (Germany) raised in Gaborone (Botswana), Paramaribo (Surinam), the Capitol Region, and the Pacific Northwest (USA.) His writing has appeared in *The Hunger*, *Peauxdunque Review*, and *Obsidian*. His novel, *The Ballad of Perilous Graves* will be released by Orbit in 2022. He is an afternoon person.

Two poems by Florbela Espanca

Translated by Alani Hicks-Bartlett

Para Quê?!

Tudo é vaidade neste mundo vão ...
Tudo é tristeza, tudo é pó, é nada!
E mal desponta em nós a madrugada,
Vem logo a noite encher o coração!

Até o amor nos mente, essa canção
Que o nosso peito ri à gargalhada,
Flor que é nascida e logo desfolhada,
Pétalas que se pisam pelo chão! ...

Beijos de amor! Pra quê?! ... Tristes vaidades
Sonhos que logo são realidades,
Que nos deixam a alma como morta!

Só neles acredita quem é louca!
Beijos de amor que vão de boca em boca,
Como pobres que vão de porta em porta! ...

For What?!

Everything is vanity in this vain world...
Everything is sadness, everything is dust, and nothing!
And barely does dawn break upon us,
When night swiftly comes to fill the heart!

Even love lies to us, this song
That has our chest bursting with laughter,
Flower that is born and whose leaves are swiftly shed
Petals on the ground that are stepped on!

Kisses of love! For what?!... Sad vanities!
Dreams that swiftly become realities,
That leave our soul almost like dead!

Only the madwoman believes in them!
Kisses of love that go from mouth to mouth,
Like poor souls that go from door to door!...

Tédio

Passo pálida e triste. Oiço dizer
“Que branca que ela é! Parece morta!”
E eu que vou sonhando, vaga, absorta,
Não tenho um gesto, ou um olhar sequer...

Que diga o mundo e a gente o que quiser!
-O que é que isso me faz?... o que me importa?...
O frio que trago dentro gela e corta
Tudo que é sonho e graça na mulher!

O que é que isso me importa?! Essa tristeza
É menos dor intensa que frieza,
É um tédio profundo de viver!

E é tudo sempre o mesmo, eternamente...
O mesmo lago plácido, dormente dias,
E os dias, sempre os mesmos, a correr...

Tedium

I go by pale and sad. I hear:
“How sallow she is! She looks dead!”
And I who go on dreaming, unsteady, absorbed,
I don’t make a movement, or even cast a glance...

Let the world and people say what they like!
-What is it to me?... Why would I care?
The cold that I gulp down freezes and cuts
Everything that is womanly fantasy and grace!

What does this matter to me?! This sadness
Is less intense pain than coldness,
It is the profound tedium of living!

And it is everything always the same, eternally...
The same tranquil lake, the idle days,
And the days, always the same, that go by...

Florbelia Espanca (1884-1930) was deeply invested in exploring women’s experience and the interiority of the self, as these poems from her 1919 *Livro de Máguas* (Book of Sorrows) attest. Her work has yet to receive sufficient attention outside of Portuguese.

Alani Hicks-Bartlett is a writer and translator whose recent work has appeared in *The Stillwater Review*, *IthacaLit*, *Gathering Storm*, *Broad River Review*, *The Fourth River*, and *Mantis: A Journal of Poetry, Criticism, and Translation*. She is currently working on villanelles and translations from Medieval French.

CW: animal death

Curdle

Isabeal Owens

When Hurricane Katrina ran her tongue
over our grizzled heads,
the power was out for weeks.
I resorted to finger puppets -
forcing bunny rabbits to maul each other
on the wall via flashlight beam. At the time,
I did not know the meaning
of deluge. My father said
it was information reserved for prophets.
I wondered why the prophets
insisted on keeping so many yellow secrets.

My shadow bunnies, with their index
of hooks and shoves, began to emit
a stench. The house chewed our dreams
into a soft pulp. When will it no longer hurt
to cross a threshold?
When will these canned beans begin
to taste of manna?

Once the water went down,
I crawled under the porch
to investigate the growing smell.
A pile of drowned possums
greeted me, snouts
turned upwards, tongues lapping
at invisible milk.

CW: physical abuse

Inheritance

Isabeal Owens

My cat will often press his paw
against his reflection in the oven door

as if accessing some ancient rune.
Behind his eyes, the synapses

click like beetle teeth—the shadow
cat in the mirror must hold some trace

of his lynx forefathers puckering
their whiskers in the snow.

My cat hisses at himself. I understand him.
There is sickness in recognition.

I see my own father in my dimples,
in the slope of my upturned nose.

Before me, my father holds his tongue
like a rusted bayonet. Nothing needs

to be said. He has already laid out
my church dress and Mary Janes.

My socks are cuffed at their lacy edges.
I put a hand to my cheek,

feeling for my father's moon-shaped scar,
waiting for the hit to land. Erupting,

my cat twitches his tail and swipes
at the dish towel dangling

above his head. He drags it away,
a gutted offering.

Heart Smog

Isabeal Owens

I no longer cry for the frogs belly
-up in the roadside ditch. Instead,

I find myself transcribing every final
croak. On the television, there is a woman

scooping her guts into golden gravy boats.
During the commercials, I chew

my tongue into a tough curd. I count
the mothers soaking in the roadside ditch.

I want to crawl among them, to peel
the oak leaves from their rubbery hips,

to shake the ribbits from their bodies.
Every poem is in some way about my dying mother.

Scribbled on a blank check at midnight:

I wish to be blamed for everything.

I flinch at the toaster preening its own
steaming nuts. There was an ad

for a self-churning vat of butter,
a fondue volcano, a jello mold

for the blue mother. I pry her hands
open to help her cut her meat.

During the commercials, I rock
like a widow and wind my curd like taffy:

I wish to be blamed for everything.

Every poem is in some way
about the blinking lightbulb

above the sink. In the flicker realm,
there are puffs of my already-dead mother.

She offers me a candy bar with peanuts.
I recoil at the chance to make

things right. I scrape my ovaries
for caviar fixings, placing the spoon

at her foaming lips. Cheez whiz
oozes from her clavicle. She glimmers.

Isibéal Owens is originally from Mobile, Alabama, but currently resides in Cape May, New Jersey. She is pursuing her Bachelor's in English at Rutgers University.

At The End

Mo Lynn Stoycoff

We've become the asteroid
sent to destroy us.

Sometimes I enjoy being
unburdened of hope.

This is the unbearable lightness.
Feeling cute!

Maybe I'll find it somewhere amidst
the digital brutality:

"You don't know what you're talking about.
I've studied your oppression extensively."

I turn my keyboard upside down
and nine eyelashes fall out.

Maybe I'll go for a walk
under the red bridge

let my lungs fill with cedar ash
and dead coyotes.

It's a beautiful day except for the birds
falling out of the sky.

Mo Lynn Stoycoff is a writer and visual artist whose poems have appeared in Poetry Now, Rise Up Review, The American Journal of Poetry, California Quarterly, Speckled Trout Review and many other journals and anthologies. Mo works in the performing arts and lives in Central California.

Black Wolf

Jeremy McEwen

One afternoon
I was in my backyard
starin' at the movin' sky --
daydreamin'... daydreamin'...

When my dog Louie
let out a ferocious bark --
apparently to get my attention!
But due to my daydreamin',
I responded a bit too late!

Because a large Black Wolf
appeared out of nowhere!
It jumped on my back and
knocked me face-first to the ground!

And as I laid there scared to death,
the Black Wolf grabbed my daydream
by the neck and ran off into the woods!

Jeremy McEwen writes poetry and flash-fiction.
When not writing, he can be found teaching in the local Jr. High
classroom.

The Oddysey of Aged Children

Amelia Eilersten

Pharaohs turn to gallows / clocks to sinking mountains
Hand in hand / taking the browns from irises

To reimagine muds as sepia / a landscape of daffodil seas
Breaches at the rock / and lost / in its landfill tide / is the maw of Anubis

Where sons wash their fathers / before they bury them
Daughters / their mothers

Dressing them in kin bandages / soaked in aloe to soothe
Hearts / palming insides with rose oil / make ready for the embalming

But / lest they sweep the floors / with branches of baobab in kind
Left to wonder in / pride could just as easily do the job

Raking the wake fields clear of lineage bearers / leaving no one to lament
No one to say their goodbyes / desertified to barebones

Grass turns to tundra / fertile with gravestones mirroring gravestones
Unmarked / thousandth upon thousands

Empty becomes the visitor / then lonesome is the ferry
And underworlds / glassy / squid ink vivid / preside over ceremony

Amelia C. Eilertsen is a queer, Zambian-Norwegian mixed-race writer with a BA in Creative and Professional Writing from Bangor University. Her life is a cosmic swirl of insomnia, travel, and the brief spaces between the making of a moment and watching it pass by. She has had poems published with Poets' Choice, High Shelf Press and Passengers Journal. She can be reached @ameliaconny on Instagram.

Let Me Read You a Dream

Rhiar Kanouse

In this one, all the trees are blue like candy,
And your dad keeps all of his bones, even the bad ones.
Your grandmother doesn't scream when they cut
Off her toes, and she doesn't tell you about the time
Her sons nearly burnt the house down, wrestling
Twin demons, with cigarettes stuck on the tongue.
In this one, no one notices the extra table setting.

I hear their cries only on the television.
You tell me it's just the sound of snow.
Across the empty canned soup aisle, a stranger braids
My hair with her eyes. She has no mouth, and for this reason
Alone, I trust her. This intimacy fails to get you
Jealous, so I threaten to jump into the sea. I
Mix up the directions and end up eating lunar dust.
It's colder here, and I wish I'd
Brought a fur jacket like the ones
In the shop with foreign letters. Maybe
I wish I had your skin here too. In this place,
It's slower, and breathing takes longer.
It takes more to stay still. The moon's not
Made of Swiss cheese, but I am, and I am
Begging to melt a little to close my pores,
To keep something together even if it sticks to everything.

Last week I saw a boy playing in open grass. His red
Ball popped up into the sky and fell into the open road.
I did not touch the ball. I froze and watched him.
He ran into the street, and I watched him.
All my fears are invisible now.

Rhiar [RY-er] is a made-up name for a mythic woman. When she was young, she threw her heart into Lake Huron. If you look hard enough, you can find it amongst zebra mussels and sunken ships.