

Bloodlust Magazine

Issue 3



BLUTTONY

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Bloodlust Magazine:

a collection of dark, romantic works
where nothing is too taboo, too twisted,
too odd.

Thank you to each and every one of
our submitters for letting us give their
beautiful work a home. We are
incredibly excited for the opportunity to
present our readers with such a unique
and special collection of works.

Morrow Dowdle

BASEMENT

The true-crime movie comes out. The audience throws popcorn
at the screen. Don't go down there! they scream,
but they can't wait to see what happens next—

Domain of dust, old dryer rattle. Cobwebs on open rafters.
Creaky stairs, one nail upturned. Bare bulb clicked by string,
one stingy puddle of light. Something lurks

behind crates of outgrown athletic gear, stuffed animals
no one wants to keep or scrap. Or deeper still,
where water drips slow and cinderblock grows black—

A seventeen year-old girl with pageboy hair, 64 IQ.
Twelve high school football players. In the paper, later,
one father called them healthy red-blooded American males.

They promised her a date with her crush, if she'd play with them.
The steps she took down not her own. They made use
of her mouth, then bent her over. Upstairs,

it was still spring, everything pushing towards the light.
Daffodils broke through in the three days before she told.
She defended the men then, said They were my friends.

I hang my heart at half-mast when I think of her.
When I think of every red-blooded American someone
who calls us to a cold-hearted turn in the basement.

Morrow Dowdle

THE THERAPIST TELLS ME TO KILL MY MOTHER

*Close your eyes she says
Then you can see it better*

*

So I enter my mother's house

There's the Irish blessing in the window
Her great-aunt's bronzed baby shoes
The vase of sea glass I collected
The atrium with all that afternoon light

*

Go on says the therapist
But no one's there
So I strike
a match

Flames lace the drapes
The green couch catches

My mother arrives

Coughing
Frowning
Otherwise fine

Don't choke now the therapist says

*

An array of weapons appears
I click through them like viewfinder pictures
Gun
Knife
Mallet
Hatchet

I pick none but I'm gripping
the blade
Now my mother looks afraid

Morrow Dowdle

*

Do it the therapist says
 like the man

who handed me my first lit joint

It's like she needs this

 more than I

 Who am I
 if I proceed

*

When I open my eyes instead

 should I be ashamed

 There's nothing
 that her death can mend

She's not a boss I crush
 to get to a next level

 I will not play this game

Dia Kai Singh

SNAKESKIN

Put that beast in bible study.
Chain her up,
Muzzle her arrogant mouth until the cloth is
stained bloody
Do not flinch as she snarls and froths.
Try not to think of how her teeth could feel on
your neck.

Speak the scripture while she fights for breath,
Fill her head with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus
Ignore the blissfulness of her heartbeat
underneath your skin.
Try not to feel the sinful pang beneath your holy
soles as you voyeur her insolence.

Try to teach her a thing or two about
participation.
Ask her what tempted Eve to take the apple in
Eden,
Look her in the eyes when you weakly stutter
out your question of wily creatures dooming
humanity.
Brush her off when she smiles around her words
and simply says with gravity
Who fathered the serpent?
Feel your chest tighten when her tongue flicks
out to scent the air.
Hope she can't sense the strength of your resolve
bending regardless of prayer.
Try not to let veracity cause Adam's fall from
Eden.

Take her to church one day,
Revel in her amazement at the stained glass
windows,

Bathing The Savior in dancing rainbows.

Talk to her about God and His love for her,
And try not to pry when she suddenly speaks in
a voice of dripping vermouth and frankincense,
*How can he love me when he doesn't even love
himself?*

Pry anyways, and shudder at her unholy heat as
she leans against you to whisper in your ear.

Hodie mihi, cras tibi.

You will not move away as she takes you and
breaks you in the pews.

You will move closer, chasing her lips that taste
like Judas's betrayal.

You will move closer, under the knowing eyes of
Rafael, until you are indistinguishable, bonded,
melded.

You will not notice the sparkling light turn red at
the cross, trickling down the Lord's wrists.

Go into the forest and hunt a doe,
Shoot the 9-millimeter you keep just for
emergencies
And scream out loud when you hit your mark.
Wipe away your tears.
Skin her, wear her, become her.
Feel her wounds with envy
Bring the rest of her to the beast,
Ignore her looks of amused pity.

You are a *man*.

This *makes* you a man.

This makes *you* a man.

You *are* a man.



“THE DEVIL THAT DROWNED
THE MOON”

“SHE HOLDS THE MOON”

COSMIC HORROR

humanity will end with a death spiral
circling the drain of the cosmos like army ants

bug-eyed lambs falling over each other
screaming toward the sky for divine salvation

only to be crumpled and broken by the hands of god
drowned in an abyss of glittering black tar

there will be no war between worlds
there will be no elapsing dawn

just an unprejudiced universal bloodletting
and our nuclear shadow left as last words

READING THE SIGNS

like a chart:

I am analyzing the bullet points and indentations—
following the trends and predicting future dips. I'm
allowing the numbers to whisper in my ear, to lead me
like a dog. I trot alongside them content with the grip on my
leash, listening for changes in the wind—stepping with the
curves of the concrete.

like a disease:

I am following the cranial sutures on the x-ray like they're four
connected rivers—wondering what erosion lies at their meeting.
I'm taking notes of the body aches and hot flashes and adjusting
treatment. I'm trimming the dead ends like root rot and giving myself
grace. I'm siphoning out my blood and looking for humors, I'm inducing
vomiting to measure the bile, I'm using cheap paint to cover the stains.

like a palm:

I am tracing my hands with charcoal on parchment—
looking at the size and thickness of my fingers. I'm running along
my lifeline looking for islands and rough waters, for chains and crosses.
I'm studying the cracks of skin to see if cosmic bliss lies in the cards—if maybe
peeling back the layers might help my odds. I'm counting the bands of
my fingertips like I'm a dendrochronologist and time is baked into my flesh.

like a room:

I am examining the bones behind the gaudy wallpaper. I'm watching how
the corner cobwebs breathe with sudden gusts. I'm spreading the seams—
searching for the spatter of bed bugs. I'm looking at the dusted coral skeleton
of a space and planning a rebirth. the creaking of the floor sounding like
pushback. the hollow in the wall looking like a home. I'm putting my ear to the
floor, holding my breath, and listening for the lull.

DAREDEVIL CARTWHEEL

in utero it was destined our bodies would
be meteors / that our nails would curl into
each other's hands and draw blood / that
I would trade a lavalier for the crush of gravity

I would think nothing of how our skeletons lack
shape memory / or how our souls wouldn't linger
after impact / I'd know only the thrill of holding your
hands / and the loneliness left when we must let go

I LET THEM WEAR ME

Today, I'm having a rummage
It creeps in slow and seductive
Looks like fingers curling around the doorframe
One, then two, then three, then
It glares into me with devouring resolution
And a delicious pause reveals itself to me
As I enter into my fifth hour idling between the vape and the scroll
I know I mustn't, I know I shouldn't, really I can't
When the me that bows inward like this finds sweet servitude in its loosened grip
Laying down a backbone no longer defined by the ought of straightened defiance
Limply planted against the grain of these sheets

But the thought of that curve in my body bent by surrender
Strikes quivering pulse into this bowl full of electrically charged meat
Carried by the tether of my womb
The obligation to rinse habitual perversion crumbles with every crease of my hand
As it slides itself around this tool
With five suction settings to draw out all impending dissatisfaction
Ain't life a drag in its bonds and buckles
Well not anymore
Or maybe just a little

And before I can attempt to consider composure
Desperate half-moons are carving themselves into these knuckles
Cratering palmward
As I grip below in decisive abandon
To rip away the body everyone knows
Unclothed and throttling my hips against expectation
Arms of chairs, the banisters of creation
Becoming witness to this bucking beration
Rippling blur squinted into the pitting of this pale peach shifting back and forth
Focus as compromised as a poorly taken photograph
Doesn't look like anything anymore as I pile myself
Into the vibratory precept privately defining the I
Occupying this space - a blank crevice outlining itself
In the striking absurdity of it all

Vessels now protruding along the scoop of my breasts, arse, belly - carcass
I am the becoming of a nothing now
Black hole punctures mark the spots where my pupils belong
Rolling back into this neck basket held by the grab of my demons
As I root around down there in the bowels of a want that bears no end
Has no beginning and no fucking place to stamp itself out of wanton craze
Brazenly barreling into the score of my lips
To suck and suck and suck and suck
Unending vacuum seeks to take me by the sin of my clit

Laya Newland

And drag me inside out - deeper deeper deeper
I will fuck myself until there is nothing left beneath this fibrous folly to bollock
I am the manner of this levelling void
Defier of ravenous gravity holding my all to account
In a plungeful pulley, I am thrust alive in this waking dream
Split and burst to the seams, swift backhand to that normal pacing the streets
Outside of this complex intangible sink
I am in awe of
This heavenly dunk
Drunk on anticipatory unbutton

But the never ending has its sordid wee price
This body practicing deviancy in the precarious underbelly of boredom, with alarming
regularity
Returns to the pit of a challenge
I've made my bedlam out of habit's machinery
For all the men that have made a home inside my body
Adding up their pounds of gait and gravity in recreational perversion
While watchful aversion eyes around my doorway
Lying beside me for a confused second, the darkened mistake
Riddling the nerves again, disparaging quake ripples beneath the possession of my skin
As I let them wear me from time to time
Their staggering red-eyed host with her wits akimbo
And self-respect mortar and pestled between the clam of a grinder
We've all got our vices, our screws and our scuffs
But I don't even know whether I did it to myself
Or if I lay there undone
I see her now, the pulsing vulnerability to scramble and mutilate
Obligation often makes a meal of rationale and choice
Sure, not really informed or democratic
Sounding a bit like Brexit
But the sanctity of my sexuality shouldn't be political
Whether something is fed or hung umbilical
It ought to be automatic
Worn on every face

But here this body bids its truth to you
To sell itself down onto fetid depravity
For the buzz and the bleed
Making mince-meat mastery of the flaps of flesh
Fluidly folded by the pinch of my pelvis
Cradled in futility, this fabled suitability
And I'll rummage and rummage and rummage and rummage
Until those pounds are shifted from the bed
That mark the beginning of my bedlam
Loins ranked against their spread.



“THE FLESH WE SHARE”



CALL ME BEAU

After “The Summer and Winter Garden” by the Brothers Grimm.

Beasts don't worry about the cold. Beasts don't worry about their fathers. Beasts and their fur-lined arms so plush with muscle and fat—and fur. So much fur. You could make a coat out of them, but they'll sooner devour you whole. No chew. No teeth gnash. Just gulp. I wish to be pregnant without the baby. I wish to be the man with a library, not only the girl granted access to it. Prick my finger on a thorny rose laced with testosterone. Feed me a feast, for the man I desire, for the beast I desire to become.

SKIN AND BONES

I remember when you first came to me. You were skin and bones. Shaking like a leaf in the wind out in the cold. An insect crushed against a windshield. Sharp pointy hip bones jutting out far enough to cut passersby. I thought that my hand would crush you if I reached out to touch you. I'd break you like a delicate piece of china. Your eyes glass. Brimmed with tears. Weak. Frail. Starved. You reminded me of my past self. Before I became the woman I am today. I knew your story before you told it to me. Still I listened.

Your husband had told you that you needed to lose weight. That you were fat and undesirable. So you starved yourself. Fainted frequently. Were perpetually lightheaded and malnourished. He wanted you as tiny and as helpless as possible because then you'd be easier to take advantage of. The physical weakness rendering you unable to fight back or defend yourself in any way. When you would try to sneak food, he'd hit you. Hide it from you. Deny you any. You lived on nothing but bird seed for five consecutive months. You foraged the forest floor for edible wildflowers, berries, herbs and plants. A true empath, you were unable to cut any of the plants with your knife out of fear that you were hurting them. You only took what had already fallen from the trees, sharing your meals with squirrels, chipmunks and different species of birds. Becoming a reluctant green witch for your own survival. His pot belly taunting you at night when he lay in bed unconscious with his pyjama shirt riding up. You feared that he'd roll over onto you in the night and crush you in your sleep whenever you slept in the same bed next to him.

The first thing that I did when you came into my home was cook you a four course meal. I took you gently by the hand and led you to my kitchen. We made it together. I showed you how. You'd never known the simple pleasure of cooking for yourself before. You told me that not since you were a little girl watching your mother cook, back when she was still alive, had you cooked a meaningful meal. Now you were forced to eat scraps and seeds. Mouth watering as you drooled onto my kitchen floor once you smelt the fragrant spices and delectable meats I had. Craving a real meal. You'd been wishing for one for years. Some sort of sustenance to grant you the nutrients you needed to maintain some semblance or strength. Your dignity and humanity thrown away in the trash for the vultures to pick at and consume.

The more we spoke about how starved you felt, the clearer it became to me that he should suffer the same as you did now. With his bones sticking out in every which way for the rest of his days. Forever hungry but unable to satiate that hunger. I wanted him to feel the constant burn in his belly. The cramps, perpetual pangs of pain and chronic loud stomach growls.

I took the chicken out of the fridge, placed it on the counter and imagined that it was him. That the bumpy chicken flesh was his flesh. That every tiny thin little bone deep inside was one of his bones. I guided your hand as gently as I could, casting the spell.

"Skin and bones. That's what I shall reduce you to, skin and bones. A waif of a man. And every time you have the craving to eat, she will gain the weight from you and taste the taste of the food you yearn to chew. Savour it upon her tongue as you grow weaker and eventually become undone. A chicken that we boil together to make into stew. We'll use your bones for extra flavour and the bone marrow shall save her, making her all the braver."

Jade Walker

We dug our fingers into the flesh of the raw chicken picking out each little bone by hand as I recited the incantation. Slowly, ever so slowly, the chicken became his body. The more bones we extracted together the more the pale bumpy chicken skin darkened, twisting and convulsing underneath our fingertips. We heard soft distant wails of agony as we continued plucking the bones out. They grew louder the more bones we collected. When we dropped the chicken into the boiling caldron it screamed.

Your body became fuller by the light of the waxing new moon. Skin expanding. Thickening you out. Giving you curves you'd never had before. You stared down at your new body in pure bewilderment. You couldn't stop raking your fingers along your newly rounded plump thighs, butt and breasts. The buttons on your dress popping under the strain and stretch of exceedingly growing flesh. You tore the confining dress completely off your body. The sight to this day still brings a smile to my face when I remember it. You stood in my kitchen in nothing but your underwear dancing gleefully as we boiled your husband alive. Your giggling didn't subside once that night, your smile infectious even as you and I ate him alive together for dinner. Carving his lesh right off the bones with our knives. The more we ate of him the larger you would grow. No longer were you skin and bones.

STUDY SKIN

Pretend I'm the kind of girl who can handle
Hickeys,
Leave cavities on my enamel shoulders.
I will tell the bees:
I need honey fillings for these,
My love has some cold sores.
My hopes
Are a rat king.

Distract us from how I accept to be held
Like a memory,
For I understand, my love,
I am less than what will be left of me.
Pretend I'm the kind of girl who can handle
Mercy,
Engrave your murmurs of futures onto my pearlescent
Stomach.



"THE SCARLETT WOMAN"

IF ARMIE HAMMER WAS A LESBIAN

his cannibalistic desires would not have been a headline

it would have been fine
to say "I want to eat you"
on the first time

We have
what he cannot know

the Consumption.

of pithy parts,
bitter as the flesh,
cradled in careful canines.

sucked, soft and supine
sidled up behind
and in between.

it is okay for lesbians to say
"I am 100% a cannibal"

when We
Consume.

what aches you
what tears
what wants us
what tastes

our intimacy
to eat

and swallow whole.

Ellen Webre

THEY SAY IT IS THE WOLF WHO DEVOURS

I say it is the man

among the foxgloves.

The man who eats

amanita muscaria

and does not sicken or die,

but leaves me

frothing

at the mouth

like a dog

from his kiss.

THE GOD OF STARVATION

is deliberate

when he makes a ghost of me.

He and I shared a meal of pills yesterday,

dribbled milk across the table

let it mildew over rice and eggs.

The god of starvation

has me licking salt off his palms,

and drinking through a slotted spoon:

soup of soured calcium,

curdled cream, brackish marrow broth.

He wants to see me retching.

Wants to see me cleansed

from the inside

out, make me feral and unfamiliar with the art

of chewing because

he loves me

this way. Slendered to the bone

and snapping.

I am nothing

unless I trigger disgust. Jealousy.

unless death marches down my concave belly.

I used to feel the hunger,

now I bite through the blade of it

Ellen Webre

to drain myself of all flesh and fruit.

I want to be candlesmoke,

as light as air,

I want to be closer

to the end of extravagance.

The god of starvation empties me

of my lonely,

makes a feast of what I am

without.

Look with gentleness

upon this choice,

for I have abandoned the weight

of this body and I feel beautiful,

and oh,

I am so free.

Amelie Vile

AFTER ADAM MET EVE

Above the altar, between my legs, Christ hangs pale and exhausted,
with a rope around his neck.

"If I ever become a priest, shoot me in the head, right between my fucking eyes!" said Adam

Sugar. Salt. Iron. Flesh.

"You'd be awful at celibacy." said Eve

Everything here is made so that the body can feel both sacred and embarrassing at once.

The body of Christ.

The blood of Christ.

Consume this and remember.

Eat Him.

Drink Him.

Then spend your adolescence pretending hunger itself is shameful.

*"Don't you think this is **all a bit erotic?**"* said Eve

He likes to smoke behind the gymnasium
-mouth full of lithium.

*"I've seen her wash blood off her fingers in the bathroom sink
like rosaries held in restless hands."* said Adam

A cigarette burn on the stall door near the scratched graffiti.

MARY WAS HERE
GOD ISN'T

"Do I fuckin look alright?"

If Animals could smell blood,
Perhaps Catholic boys could too?

*I'd have given him head in the confessional if it meant I stood half a
chance at passing maths,"* said Eve

we are not innocent,
we are not guilty,
we are something worse...

I touch my own thoughts at night like contraband and
Maybe if I call him Daddy, God will forgive me this time?

Knees first.
Then mouths.
Then the dangerous architecture of tying wrists.

Amelie Vile

You learn quickly that confessionals and bedrooms
both involve whispering.

-like public executions.

*"I think God lives in the ceiling tiles.
I think he listens through the water damage
and
I think sainthood is just untreated psychosis"*
Said Adam

*"well, the doctor says I dissociate.
Sister Agnes says I lack discipline"* said Eve.

I hear God coughing in the back of my throat every time I want something.

He started sleeping with girls in the chapel
during classes. While she kept a razor tucked inside her Latin dictionary
beside translations for *salvation and sacrifice*.

ORA PRO NOBIS-*Pray for us.*

They call that one introspective,
at least until the ambulance arrives.

He exhaled smoke toward the dead

"Lizzy O'Conoll said she saw you crying during Mass once," said
Adam.

I was always both the artist and the vandal.

Maybe that's why I don't pray right anymore,
I just talk to ceilings.

"I'm not addicted to anything," said Adam.
-Talk about pleasure!

We are not supposed to be here, but we are always where we are not
supposed to be.

-looking up at him with fuck-me eyes and a serrated smile.

It was a sunday,
the day Eve ruined everything...



"CARCASS JANE DOE"

A BEGINNING IS ALSO AN END

when fat green bud opens like jaw,

toothsome petals unfurled and bared, that is the end
of budhood, and the beginning of being,

well, a “flower”.

i do not want to be a person who writes about

unspecified “flowers”. do
let me begin again—how the doe and

fawn crossing the hard grey river of road met haloed headlights, how Hadean
gave way to Holocene, our young epoch, so that

you and i could meet, how an end
is a beginning, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, how

i was born screaming for the world i would mourn, how every poem is
human echochamber, snake swallowing its own long scaled tail, how

all of my poems, somehow, become the end of the
world, our world, i mean, how, when i met you, i knew you would be

the greatest loss of my life, how i will love you anyway,
how the body curled in the grassy median bloated with the beginnings of

rot and worms, how the animal lived while it could,
how the plump green buds, well fed, pop up all around

NEPENTHES

in the timelapse bloom, there's a moment
the green stalk, bending, looks like a fly's
leg reaching up for help, before, seconds
later, which is actually days later, it swells
to a mantis arm, while, already, a hungry
gnat swarms, before, a few seconds more,
the green waxes to a snake's head, rears up,
phallic, before the top of the pitcher peels
back, opens, revealing the trap, the yonic,
damning sweetness

of curved leaves. in
Greek, Nepenthes means “no grief”, the
name of the drug given to homesick Helen,
no sorrow if you forget, or if you're a fly
(or butterfly, because horror doesn't spare
beauty) who's fallen into the carnivorous
plant, and can't scale the walls, like the girl
in the pit in The Silence of The Lambs, the
realization when she sees the bloody
fingernail on the rock: i'm trapped in my
skin.

TOURISTS ON ALL FOURS

The earth oozes milk
from its breast

bleeds across lips
at night

little clicks
inside the brain
resemble fallen leaves.

A NAKED SONG LEAKS FROM BONES

The human mouth
becomes a nest—

vocabulary
hatches eggs.

They taste
of earth—

an aftertaste
of shed skin.

FREE RANGE

I've bled out in playgrounds and apartments,
in trailer parks and church parking lots
after the preacher told us that love was
offering yourself on a silver platter—
this is my body, this is my blood.

I spilled until the Bible Belt ran red.

Gospel uttered to sons from fathers
around breakfast plates and farm stables
promised it meant good meat on the table
if the fencing was far enough away
that I never noticed it was there,
if the fingertips branding my hip
were gentler after I began to limp.

Gospel uttered to sons from fathers,
from sons to sons around boys room lockers,
around barbecue pits and office desks
where their wives framed photos sit
while she tucks their son in and kisses him goodnight.

This is my body, this is my blood,

but it is stuck between your molars
and the silver platter has never felt colder.

PREACHER'S BOY

He used the same fingers that slid between the pages
of the Good Book to make me get on my knees
on my bedroom floor after telling his parents
that we made it to Sunday service.

He doesn't believe in anything.
I believed in him.

Maybe whatever he felt inside of me answered
more prayers than God ever could or helped him
fall far enough from grace that he didn't want to
ask for forgiveness anymore, and he doesn't have to.

He'll smile at the next family dinner and
they'll tell him not to love the sin, but the sinner,
without knowing it wasn't me who pleaded
to feel something other than saved.

ENGULF

Excuse me, lover, if I appear untamed
My body set free as I whisper your name.

One glance from those coffee brown eyes I partake
Every wry wink a spell, each feathered touch an ache.

I wobble between a battle cry and a sigh
One half to surrender, the other to defy.

Dispatch of hellos and goodbyes, just set me afire
You own a heart engulfed in unabashed desire.

DHARMA'S FOUR TURNINGS

I. The First Turning (High)

They called it Peace.
An age of shining domes and clean-cut men,
whose suits fit like scripture,
whose smiles sold the lie like sacrament.
We built monuments of order
on the backs of conquered silence.
The child was taught to salute the flag,
to say grace before every slaughter.
The air buzzed with doctrine,
softened by suburban amnesia.

We believed in something
so long as it believed in us first.

II. The Second Turning (Awakening)

Then came the scream in the forest.
The acid-blossomed minds.
The heretics dancing in the streets
with flowers for bullets,
with blood for ink.

One by one, the faithful peeled back their skin,
found God waiting inside—
not above, but within.
The saints grew their hair long.
The idols were shattered by breath alone.

All was illusion, we cried,
and the walls listened —
but we did not listen to the silence
beneath the noise.

III. The Third Turning (Unraveling)

What comes after Revelation?
Not rapture,
but rot.

The myth unraveled thread by thread
until we wore it like fashion,
ironic and ash-stained.

The kings returned, but softer;
no longer crowned,
but still enthroned—
in boardrooms,

in algorithms,
in the dim light of a million black mirrors.

We forgot the Way,
and so made a million ways to forget.

Every truth was priced.
Every silence, monetized.
Even emptiness sold out.

IV. The Fourth Turning (Crisis / Vajrayana)

Now we return
to the Wheel's final wailing.
The age of fire and hunger.
The reckoning at the gates.

The Dharma is thunder now.
No gentle teachings,
no kind illusions—
only burning.

This is the Vajra path:
lightning,
weapon,
jewel.

Where wisdom wears the skull
and compassion wields the blade.

It is too late to wake up.
It is time to die
consciously.

Let the empires fall like leaves.
Let the false self burn.
And from this ash:
not rebirth,
but becoming.

Not a new world,
but the world
made true.

CHASM

I am in the embrace of an un-touchable boy.
His warmth is like a silhouette of the silk sari folded on my shoulders.
I act like a madman when asked which space I am embracing him in.
And I say, 'in the university campus.'
The other woman laughed at my madness and said there is no university in your city– I
wonder
where you are making a campus with such an uncalled boy.
Her laugh irritates me.
I hang myself in the orchid garden.
Now I am in the embrace of the petals
(pinkish blue) and tints of green leaves.

At 2100, someone opened a letter:
Dear lover,
If you want to be my bread,
I want to be your butter.
And when it rains,
I want to be the silhouette of a saffron saree
wrapped around your shoulder.
My body is a pedestal of the opium trade.
Kiss me, thy lover
So that at dawn I smell perfume
and at night I smoke cigarettes.
Court me to the graveyard beside you,
and trees whisper the tastes of your red wine
Hands crossed in a puzzle to shine
In every photo frame that lovers brew.

People say, 'Poet's poems are not for personal affinities.'
And I still practice to be remembered as a poet.

“BAD OMENS”



“DARK DRUID”



“CRYING DEATH”

IT NEVER RAINS IN LAHORE

It never rains in Lahore.

And when it does, it's always at the wrong time.

Like the morning someone so close to you has died, it feels as if you single handedly made it rain. Like the rain telling you, "You might not be God, but your grief is."

Like in the morning you have to be somewhere, you have to be someone. Like the mornings you've slept for twenty-three minutes, and your stomach sloshes with cold, bitter tea, like the overflowing gutters of your roads, like the battery acid of Rabia's cars.

She's driving. She looks put together; cold, made of alabaster. She is a doll with her mouth lined with lead.

I'm falling asleep in her car. Alex sings about tranquility and a hotel?

"I dreamt about teeth" I found my mouth saying.

She snorts. "Gross"

"Hundreds and hundreds of teeth. Rows and rows of them. Lined like nuns welcoming God" she looks at me differently. Or maybe it's her who's different. Her lips are darker now. Her limbs are longer. She scratches at her chin as if her stubble itches. Why would Rabia have stubble on her chin?

"I think I'm hallucinating"

She pulls up to a red light and looks at me again. Strange, I never remembered Pine Avenue with stops. The road seems endless. The rain is relentless. We can't see the car in front of us. But I have a feeling there is none. I have a feeling that the entire world is curved around the road we are on. And everyone else is on a different path.

I look at her through the rear-view mirror. The mirror distorts her. Her hair seems longer, her hairline pushed back to reveal a broader forehead, a darker forehead. Her limbs seem to elongate until they barely fit inside the car, until the car seems a space too small for a being so large. She blinks at me with darker eyes, speaks with a weight in her voice there wasn't before.

I look at the man in front of me. It has been almost two years since I saw him last.

I was looking at him through the back seat of a Mehran while he stood on the sidewalk waving goodbye. This giant of a man that ripped out my heart from between my legs.

The car radio sputters like a dying man coughing out his soul. Changing stations with a mind of its own.

Tune Ye Phul Jo Zulfon Main Saja Rakha hai

He rejoices, sings along. Shifting gears with a hand that almost seems too large, too hairy to be joined to a human arm. I have thought about these hands more than I have seen my own.

My mind spills full of memories as if the rain pattering on the windows is getting through the glass to my very being.

His scent. Tuscan Leather.

How he sounded. The way he looked at me when he was close.

The hair on his legs, how brutish it was. How he could hurt me. How I would have let him. How he always stopped.

Until he didn't.

Malaika Rai

I can never forgive Mehdi Hassan. I can never forgive Habib Jalib. I can never forgive Jagjit Singh.

They received a voice that never even called me back.

The road winds like a serpent, recoiling after swallowing a whole heart.

The rain continues to tap against the windows with increasing intensity, like a million tiny fists pounding against the glass. The wind itself has a howl like its mourning what it knows is about to come.

The radio quiets. He's silent too. No longer harmonizing with the ghazal. It's almost as if the storm has entered the car. I can see it in the frowning creases of his forehead. They look so much like my father's. The silence resembles my father's too. I almost reach out to him. Almost ask him what's wrong but something stops me. As if I know that even beside me, he's no longer with me.

His hand shoots out and wraps around the window's power button. The same hand has wrapped around my neck so many times I almost know how the button feels.

I watch in silent horror as the window reclines. The water begins to enter the car. The torrent enters through his side but dampens me, not him. The sound of the rain as it hits my open skin like a million tiny bullets kissing every inch is deafening. I imagine this is how hell must be, not fire but water, stinging into your skin like a million microscopic teeth, eating away, until you can't even open your eyes. I think I cried; I know I screamed.

But he didn't let up. The window never closed.

I think that is what hurt the most; the betrayal of it. I always knew the outside world was a cruel, rainy place but the man I loved most, brought the storm inside.

My eyes are full of water. Rain and tears amalgamated together in one salted tragedy. My mouth is open in a silent scream like my soul attempting to crawl out of me to escape the horror. But the deafening sound of the rain inside the car has ceased.

The sudden quiet hurts almost as much as the boom of the rain.

I open my eyes.

He is no longer in the driving seat.

The storm is gone.

I almost miss it. Almost want the delicious pain back.

I miss it in my mouth, in my fingertips.

The only indication that the storm opened up and swallowed me whole is my hair dripping on the seat of Rabia's beautiful, new car.

I am naked and cold and I have torn open the skin from my arms, clawing it with my own nails.

I look next to me.

The face I have seen the most stares back at me. My mother's beautiful, pained eyes. The ones I see stare at myself from a mirror every day.

Her mouth is set in one silent, disappointed line.

I want to talk to her, to explain myself. Tell her I didn't mean for this to happen. But how do I look at my mother after all the things I have let happen to me? The things I have done to feel loved?

It's strange looking at your own face in front of you. Older. Wrinklier. But so much more beautiful. You never get used to it. Never get used to seeing your eyes set in another face.

Looking in the window and seeing my reflection stare back at me I almost panic for a moment.

Is this me? Or is this also you, Amma?

The rain outside has stopped but we keep driving. My mother always drives slowly.

The infinite road stretches out in front of us and I want to pull my hair out from the root. I want to tell her to drive faster.

But drive faster to where?

I look at my mother again. Really look at her. Ethereal. Small. Delicate, but never frail. I

Malaika Rai

swallow my complaints. It doesn't matter if the road never ends while we drive slower than we could probably walk. No time with her would be enough.

I don't recall when I dozed off. But when I wake up, I'm in the driver's seat. The car keeps charging forward on this foggy road. It's nighttime. I jumped up. How do I steer? Stop? Accelerate? I never learnt to drive.

The car is cold. My teeth chatter. My fingertips numb. I keep holding the steering wheel. Tears stream down my face.

Is this purgatory? Am I paying for my sins? Am I paying for everyone's sins?

I can see as far as the headlights go. Not nearly enough.

The seat next to me isn't empty. A scared girl. The first thing I notice about her is how unremarkable she is. Tall but not nearly tall enough. Pretty enough to be desired, just not enough to be kept. Hair long enough to be pulled, not enough to be brushed off her quivering face.

She blinks at me. Quiet. Lanky. Unchosen. Drowning in the biggest car seat she's ever been in, that too Rabia's. I smirk, disgusted.

I hate her so much I want to pull her wrists off and smack her face with her own hands. Her very breath is ants crawling on my neck.

Goosebumps. Raised hair. I swallow the heaving in my chest.

She looks at me. Quiet. Waiting.

I want to peel her skin off just to see what's underneath. My own breath sours in my mouth.

I look away. I cannot stand her face.

Not the uneven brows. Not the one broken nail.

Not the eyes that still believe I'll be kind.

The eyes that look like my mother's. Like mine.

I'm overcome with revulsion for this thin woman.

I shake the car like a wronged god, rocking back and forth with rage.

"What do you want?"

She doesn't answer. Voiceless. Hoping for forgiveness.

I shriek. The windows vibrate. The glass shatters.

Lahore's July air rushes in hot and wet.

Shards slice through my skin, nest in hair, stick to lashes.

I bleed from my eyes.

My claws dig into my face.

And for a moment, as blood spills under my nails,

I feel like God.

Bloodthirsty. Cannibalistic.

I wonder if she knows she's me. I wonder if she knows I could slice her open, muscle by muscle, slow, delicate, deliberate and consume her.

I wonder if that's the salvation she wants.

She maintains her quiet. This stupid, weak woman is close to tears.

I want to maim. I want to devour it. But she has suffered enough. So, I turn inward.

I laugh at the absurdity of myself eating and watching myself.

Allah himself could not imagine a hell like this. I feel like Manto with his hubris.

I pull out my hair, clean from the root. Laughing still, screaming in pain. I slurp at them like noodles.

My own father, my own Kronos.

I wanted to be saved. So, I became the god who does the saving even if it means eating myself to do it.

I tear off my nails with my teeth. My precious, beautiful nails. I eat until I am inside me again. I am whole. I am monstrous. I am saved.

The enamel scratching my throat, blood and tears mixing and somewhere in the fire of my own flesh I find a stillness.

It's another hand. Unbloodied. Safe. anchoring.

The woman beside me does not flinch. Only bears witness to every shard of pain I consume, every fragment of myself I devour. She understands the price of healing.

My teeth ache. I am tired. So bone-wearily tired. She brushes the single lock of hair remaining on my scalp out of my face.

"There is a long way to go", I nod.

I grip the steering wheel with my gory hands. The cold leather further cut into my skin. The windscreen splatters with a few drops of soft water.

It never rains in Lahore.

And when it does, it's always at the wrong time.

TO BIRTH A HORSE

In recent months,
I have started to think of you
The violence,
The love,
The meaninglessness of the act
The gold of my bangles
Clinking
Against the white of your friend's
Pull-out mattress.
The red of my hymen,
The stain,
The same color as the kameez on my chest
I think of the dark hair on your legs,
The raised terrain of your abdomen
Where your horse took a bite
Right out of your chest.
I touch the ghost of it in my mind,
My fingers heavy with a sick envy.
I become that pony,
Chewing the memory of your skin,
My mouth warm with your blood
The meat drops with a clank
In the pit of my stomach.
In another life,
I would have liked to love you like a mother
To hold you inside me forever.
No fields, no horses, no teeth.
No lover jilted while still in the sheets
I would be the room with no windows again
The navel where your shameful kisses began
I would unbite every scar,
Pressing my palms against the soft of your ribs
Until the skin forgot the touch of another
I would give you my blood through a cord,
Not a wound.
Hold you so still,
Inside me like a womb
I would love you like a mother.
I would be the only thing that ever happens to you.

THE BITCH'S PRAYER

I squat down like a beast,
Ready to give birth
I lick my teeth,
Digesting my face
Take off your skin
Like an orange peel
Fill your mouth with my blood
Tell me I am your God
Or am I a dog?
Is that what I am?
A bitch?
A beast?
Just a woman in heat?
My nails curve like talons,
My hair down to my chest,
Slung along my breasts,
Like serpents
Licking,
Licking,
Wet
I want to bite.
And maim.
And hurt.
I adore you but
To hold your neck in between my teeth
Blood dripping down to my knees
Shaking your limp body around,
Flailing,
Flailing,
Dead.
This is how you kill an animal
This is how you love a man

FOR LADY LAZARUS

God hurls abuses
As the skies weep for touch
The grey wind settles in your lungs
And uncoils like a lazy python
From your throat,
To your guts
I bite the skin off my lips
My mouth filling with blood
With love
I tear off my fingernails
A baby girl,
Barely of 5,
Tugs from inside
She's scared of loud men
She's scared of their touch
Of speeding buses
Of the man in the church
She'd let God eat everything
And then she'll eat him up
She scratches at the walls from within
My skin covered with marks
I tell her to wait
To stay quiet
I tell her to look for her chance
She has blood in her eyes
She aims to maim
Beauty. Power. Hurt.
Blood drips down her thighs
Her hair wild
Her long nails clutched into a fist
Angry.
Insane.
Slut.
Baby's almost ten
She wants revenge
She screams her hunger
Men
Men
Men



“UNTIMELY RIPPED”



“EVERYTHING IS TRAGIC”

“THE HARVESTER”





“BLOOD PRIESTESS”

RE: X

It is always October.
And maybe always will be.
His body moves on gray, cold feet,
pulling forward, emptied of destination.

Fossils form in real time,
in the way the walls keep her outline,
lingering where she stood,
in the way the pillows collapse to her shape.

She exists in habits.

The house is haunted, and she is a ghost.
Her parasitic hands tug at the stitches of old wounds,
the places where she taught him how to bleed.

At night, he hears the sigh of hinges
on the door he cannot open,
the room he cannot enter.

He hears her voice.
The call of the siren.

From lips he cannot touch.

Love sours into resentment,
curdles like milk,
three months past expired.

She pours it out
and watches his hopes rise like smoke
in a room he cannot breathe in.
It's easy to confuse suffocation for warmth
when you're reaching for a flame that doesn't exist.

Her absence is not absence.
It is presence through subtraction,
a vacancy that breathes.

Outside, October mourns
in the language of falling leaves,
trees dragging grief down,
burying it in dirt.
It settles in the soil of his eyes.

The house buries her the same way.

In every room,
in every breath he takes
that never quite becomes air,
until his lungs are as dead and black as his heart,
until he is as empty as the house.

OPEN SEASON

There was a clearing kept for men
who liked their violence dressed as sport
a private gate, a waiting field,
a polished lodge, a hunter's court.

They spoke of seasons still to break,
of how the young ones bruise more sweet,
how venison, when barely weaned,
still carries sugar in the meat.

They spoke softly over clinking glass
while dusk went red behind the trees
like men who know the world will pass
through whatever hand holds the keys.

She'd watched them shoulder oak and iron,
watched startled feathers split the sky.
She thought their thunder was meant for birds,
for tender things that try to fly.

She was soft-kneed with a narrow frame,
a flicker threading through the ferns,
white constellations freckled her back,
still trembling where the forest turns.

She did not know the hand that fed
and fenced the meadow wide,
would be the hand that took the aim
and laid her on her side.

A blade unzipped the tender seam
the way a letter opens clean,
and warmth escaped into the frost
to meet the cold, October scene.

They spoke of weight and easy work,
the way a butcher counts his yield,
how smaller things are easier borne
when cleaned within the field.

The forest watched. The hounds were trained.
But the trees are owned and do not speak.
The gates were tall. The men were old.
And soft flesh yields to sharp teeth.

BREAD & CIRCUSES

Bodies press, the crowd
the city hums like a well-fed machine.

Laughter spills from the stadium lights,
distractions, a spreading disease.

The trick is abundance.

Give the people something warm in their hands.
Salt the air with music.

We are but pawns in the rich man's plans,
and most of us are clueless.

Who's in control?
It's not your holy father.

Blue-lit gods
in the form of a dopamine offer.

Comfort dulls the edge of sharp minds.

Why talk of hard times?
We give them our bodies, our hours,
our rage, a rusted blade.

Who are we to hold power,
when our comfort keeps us afraid?

TELL ME TO STOP

I hear soft strumming coming from Reed's bedroom. It's just past 2 a.m., and the rest of his bandmates, including my brother Griffin, are fast asleep.

It must be nice to not have a crushing sense of guilt that keeps you awake. But despite being a grown-ass adult, keeping secrets from Griff still feels like betrayal.

I wrap a knuckle softly on the wooden frame, the door already ajar, and Reed's head jerks up. His deep blue eyes soften when he sees me but quickly heat when they flit over my body. The oversized t-shirt I use for bed suddenly doesn't feel like enough, my nipples hardening under the thin fabric and the weight of his gaze.

"Hey, Sera," he whispers, balancing the guitar next to his bed where he sits.

"I just wanted to come by to—" Exactly how did I plan to have this conversation with Reed? "I think we should talk about what happened."

"I'm sorry." The words practically fall out of his mouth. "I shouldn't have kissed you." He lets out a humorless laugh. "I don't even know if I'm apologizing for tonight or when I did it five years ago. Griff's my best friend, Sera."

I pretend the regret in his voice doesn't sting.

He rests his hands on his knees, head bowed, as if the guilt is too much to shoulder. He'd let his guard down all those years ago, gave in to wanting me—and then told me it couldn't happen again in the next breath. That it was a mistake.

"No," I shake my head. "I'm the one who's sorry. I provoked you. I'm just as much at fault—"

"Sera—"

"No, listen." I put up my hands, a plea, and take a step forward. "I don't know what Griff would do if he found out. And you're with Delilah. If it gets out that you kissed another girl while dating America's sweetheart, they'll crucify you. You'll go back to being a heartless fuckboy in their eyes. We crossed a line. I know that." My words come out in a rush, my heart deflating more with each reason I give to prove what happened between us was wrong.

Because it felt so god-damn right. His hands threading through my hair, the surprisingly tender way his tongue met mine, the way he couldn't seem to find his breath when we'd parted. He didn't need to say it out loud, but I knew it hadn't just been a kiss for him, either. It wasn't a spontaneous ignition of lust—it was a fire that we'd stoked for years.

"You're right."

They're the last two words I want to hear Reed say.

"And I'm sorry about writing that song about you," he continues, running a hand through his dark hair. "I shouldn't have written it. I just—" he visibly swallows. "I don't know who I am or who I want to be if I'm not this version of myself. The playboy. The one who keeps everyone at arm's length. It's who I've been for the past five years. I don't know how to reconcile that version of me with the person you still seem to see me as."

"Reed." My voice sounds all wrong, heavy and thick. I cross the space between us and sit next to him. The scent of leather and bergamot and—him—does nothing to calm the thudding behind my ribs, my fingers tingling with the urge to touch him. "You're allowed to be whoever you want. You don't have to be who they expect you to be, who you think I expect you to be."

He turns his head toward me, hair falling in his eyes. They're still downcast, but I can tell something I've said is resonating.

I tuck my auburn hair behind my ear and turn to face him more fully. "I know you, Reed, regardless of how things changed between us for a while. You're still the guy who still over tips, even when the service is terrible. The one who still can't help but pet every Dachshund you see on the street because you secretly love how stubby their tiny little legs are."

One side of his mouth quirks up.

Rebecca Rome

"And," I poke his shoulder playfully. "You're still the guy who always tried to teach me how to play guitar."

"Yeah," he breathes out a laugh. "I would've guaranteed you first place in that seventh-grade talent show. But you never took me up on it."

Thanks to a burst of pubescent hormones, that was the year I started to realize I saw him as more than just Griff's best friend. That was the year I realized the fluttering in my chest when he gave me a secret smile, or called me "princess," or rubbed my feet during movie nights was far from platonic. Guitar lessons felt dangerous, like if he got too close, he'd smell the way I wanted him.

"Well," I lean down slightly to try to catch his eyes. "I'm here now."

His gaze snaps to me, eyes a shade darker now. "I don't think that's a good idea."

I let out a quiet laugh. "Are you afraid of me now, Reed?"

He assesses my face for any hesitation. But I've buried it deep, layering over top of it the hope that, despite the mistakes we've made, we can find our way back to the way we used to be.

"No." His tone is firm now. "No, of course not."

"Great." I nod, unsure which of us is lying. My brain screams that this is a monumentally bad idea, that manufacturing excuses to be alone will only invite more of what happened earlier. But my heart just wants to feel close to his again, to close the gap that five years apart carved between us.

I gesture toward the guitar leaning against the bed. "Let's get started then, shall we?"

"Sh-Sure," he stutters.

I hold out my hand so he can pass me the guitar, but he hesitates. "You don't just...start playing," he explains. "You need to get used to the feeling of strumming it first, before we talk about chords and stuff."

"Okay. How do we do that?"

"Here." He clears his throat and slowly settles behind me, bracketing my legs with his. My back presses against his solid chest as he hands me the guitar.

He places the fingers of his left hand on the neck of the guitar. "I want you to keep your left hand with mine while I change chords. And this hand," he taps my right wrist, "is going to strum lightly along the strings." He models the movement, his deft and calloused fingers skimming over the strings to produce a sound from deep inside the guitar's body. "Okay?" His voice sounds impossibly low against the shell of my ear. I pray he doesn't feel the involuntary shiver that rattles my body in response.

"Yeah. Got it."

He lets go of my right hand and shifts his left to a new chord, waiting for me to strum the strings and produce the sound. I do, but it's jarring, loud. "Too hard," he says, tripping over the choice words like he wants to take them back. "Softer. Relax."

I inhale slowly and let the air fall past my lips, forcing my shoulders to drop. This is Reed, I tell myself. The one who wiped away my tears when I didn't make the soccer team my freshman year of high school. The one who learned how to French braid hair the next year when I did so I could match my teammates on game days. The one who stayed up playing video games with Griffin, seemingly only on the rare nights I was out late with friends.

I strum the strings again, and this time, the sound comes out smooth.

"There you go. Again." His voice rumbles in my ear.

I do as he says, the low timbre of his praise raising goosebumps along my arms.

"Good, princess." The old nickname sends a tingling sensation straight between my thighs. I try to ignore the pulsing that starts there as I strum again and again, Reed changing chords with each pass I make across the strings.

Rebecca Rome

We're playing a song together now. It's only when my strumming becomes more rhythmic, though, that I realize we're playing my song, the one he apologized for writing. It's also then that I feel his right hand land on my thigh.

His palm is hot beneath my skin, but I try not to react to his touch. He just needs a place to put his hand, I tell myself, nothing more. But I hear an audible sigh through his nose as he makes contact.

"How's that?" I manage to say.

"Good, it's," he falters, "really good."

My breath becomes more shallow with each second that passes, and when his thumb begins to glide back and forth against my skin, my breath hitches without my consent. My chest rises and falls with effort as I desperately try to focus on the strings, on the song.

With each pass across my skin, I feel him growing hard, pressing up against the small of my back through the thin material of his sweatpants. I stop strumming, a breathy moan escaping my lips before I can swallow it. "Reed—"

"Tell me to stop," he grits out, like he's pleading with me.

"I—I don't want you to stop," I pant. I should. God, I should. But the connection between my brain and my body is severed when I shift my hips back ever so slightly to press against his length.

"Please," he says through clenched teeth, his hand moving now, higher, closer.

I feel myself growing impossibly wet, the want for him making itself more and more obvious. "I—I want—"

"Fuck," he groans, his hand disappearing under the hem of my shirt to run his thumb along the wet spot on my panties. "You're wet. You're so wet, Sera."

"I know," I'm barely able to say. I'm trembling now in anticipation for his touch, where I've been aching to have it for years.

He pushes past the flimsy material of my underwear and runs his thumb along the slickness of my center. Air rushes out of his lungs as he buries his head into my neck. "Christ, Sera."

"I want you," I mewl. "Wanted this—"

"Shhh. I know, princess, I know."

He starts to circle my clit, teasing my entrance with two more fingers, spreading my arousal. I moan as my hips begin to move of their own accord, rocking into his hand, silently begging him to slide his fingers inside of me.

And he does, stretching me, filling me in a way that has me whimpering on every out breath.

"I've fantasized for years about how you might sound when I touched you," he growls.

"How I could make you moan my name, how you'd feel when you clenched around my fingers, my tongue, my cock?"

"Reed—" I choke out, each filthy word pushing me closer to the edge.

His breathing grows ragged as he continues tight circles around my bud, pumping his fingers in and out, in and up, curling against that spot deep inside me.

"Fuck. Sera—You're so fucking perfect. You're—"

His words devolve, unintelligible as they're mumbled into my skin, and my thighs start to shake.

"That's it," he praises. "Cum for me. Please. Let me feel it."

He continues his assault—slow, rhythmic, and unrelenting—until I draw tight like a bow string and shatter around his fingers. I bite back a cry that would threaten to expose us, my back arching as I feel myself coating his hand. I unapologetically ride out the pulses of my core until I come down from the high. As I do, Reed plants soft kisses along the side of my neck between labored breaths that match mine.

When it's over, we stay there, letting the moment—both its significance and its consequences—settle between us. And we may have stayed there forever if Reed's phone didn't light up with Delilah's name across the screen.

THE DREAM THEATER

The theater has no reason to exist.
And yet, as I drift off to sleep,
I find myself in the foyer
with ticket in hand.
Then something nudges me
through velvet curtains.
The play is about to begin.
I find my seat. But the seat is warm,
as though someone else has just risen from it.
Something snake-like coils in my gut
as the lights dim
and I realize the exit signs have gone dark.
The show begins. I am in it.
I am directing it. I am saying lines
I don't recall learning.
And there's not just one me.
There are two. Sometimes three.
And we all turn our heads
toward where I'm sitting.
I pray the performance will be good,
though I can't imagine
what "good" can mean in such a place.
I hope I speak the words correctly,
but I keep entering from stage right,
handing myself changes to it.
And just when the spectacle
reaches its fever pitch,
when the dream-theater
splashes me with impossible color,
and when the plot fractures,
heads off in a hundred different directions,
my sleep cries out, "That's enough!"
It abandons me mid-scene.
The doctor scratches his head.
He's silent for the longest time
before he finally asks,
"Have you ever strangled a complete stranger?"
"No," I respond. "But you're the doctor.
Tell me. Should I?"

MOOS AND MUTILATIONS

I insist upon a black goat revolt, an old school revival
where flailed rattlesnakes have scaled wings,
the preacher has bleeding eyes. All the fossilized congregants blurred
behind frankincense sprout barnacles, fermenting like yeast. By candlelight
some fingernails and hair follicles still persist. Worse than getting comfortable
in a casket, not knowing it when our final salutation happened.

Oh, I should've risen from sod like a rain-agitated worm, parted all branches
blocking the sunlight of your bloom.

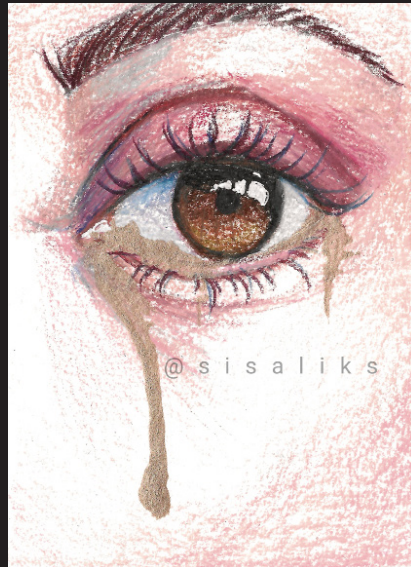
I'm the sacrificial cattle in a high strangeness ranch,
roped to a post, nervously grazing, semi-aware of an inbound and unknown threat
but if I run I'm tugged to a standstill, and if I stand bleating
guided by vague flickers of night, I fear this won't end well.

Dear, I should've smeared your door with sinners' pith, gathered four spiders
from west facing corners of your house—put them in your mouth.

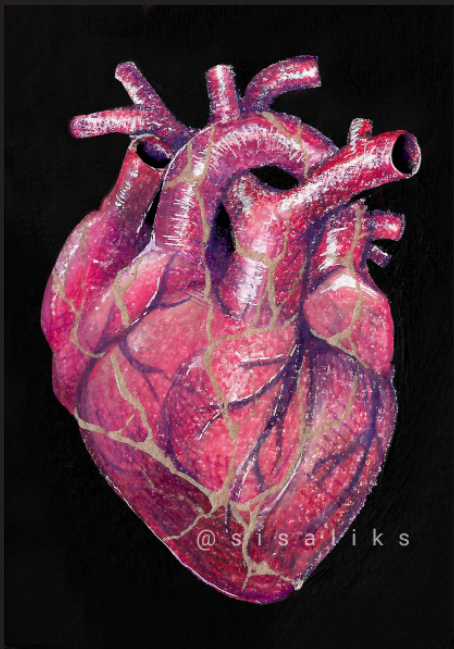
My self-inflictions can't keep taking all this abundant grace;
what about that silent, kitchen table hatred
we can consider a gag gift lodged in an esophagus, from us to you
an expanding chemical spill of memory, or at least what I thought was happening.

VEX OF THE VEXLETTING VEXER

I want a gun that shoots guns at other guns. To stare through the sun into moon,
let my brain's interpretation of celestial bodies diffuse. A truce with alchemy and
stomach aches. Your benevolence beaten only by my ability to take away. Oh, lit-
tle snake hidden coiled in my slippers, make it so quick I don't notice spreading
venom. Hey, it's okay—sometimes, the scariest homicides are involuntary. Well,
nature blossoms into paradox. To be moss exchanging pleasantries with a gentle
giant, instead of another oil spill in the delta. This is an ancient, delicate dance—
the proper spacing between planted saplings, the good old stranglehold during
fuck. Sorry, but please don't look at me, not like that nor in general. Oh, recall
the roll of shame from intensive care to general? Like when I broke a window
sneaking in while the goddamn knob was unlocked, those times of truce and
illusions none are left to remember.



“KINTSUGI SERIES”



ADAMANTINE

A stained heat pulsing through alchemized veins.
Pieces of Eden broken apart by fallen dreams.
Endless anarchy for abhorrent pains.

Can I embark in an endless sea?
Develop me in carcasses of blood.
Let me squeal and bleed, so mote it be.

I would like to apologize for my out-of-bound cries.
I felt whole yet sundered in a role I plundered.
Cries and weeps bring apologies that never die.

And I'm forced to break and ache,
Bound by the tides that bring my magma and stone.
Even for God, it's my soul He will take.

FROM MY BODY

from my body i grow further into the beyond
roots taking hold in the forest i haunt
falling further down through the dirt
finding rabbit holes in this earth
i burrow toward it all
the pulsing heart of this world
maybe then i'll find meaning in life
maybe then i'll know which step is right

my mind is torn in pieces somewhere between desire and need
oscillating between the two like a pendulum swing
my body still, stuck in the dirt
mushrooms growing out of me
from the vastness enveloping me
vines tangled with my hair
i don't know where me ends or the earth begins

as i breathe in shallow air
as i lie here
i start to wonder when it will all consume me
thoughts of life's thoroughfare
weighing like a rock on my chest
keeping my body still, as my mind continues to race

i am neither here nor there
i am nowhere and everywhere
trapped in the moss i lay in



"POUR ME ANOTHER"



"MEAT NECKLACE"

“STILL LIFE IN HYSTERIC”



WOODCUTTER'S PENANCE

Guilt slides down the throat like honey,
but settles in the belly like lead.
The starving father abandons his children
to the mercy of ravenous beasts,
and returns to a home richer in food—
but he cannot eat.

ARMILLARIA:

It was on that twelfth night
Mildewed floors stained red

Calloused hands holding
Jesus's newest child

Spoons of baptism water
Settle in the mandible

Taste it sweet
Like hummingbirds do

Ephesians sits on the windowsill
Overseeing parturition

Laid on a new tongue
A bitter brine

Season the next
Just the same

Let porous lungs
Welcome mold

Thrice rings the bell
Mary at the beds foot

Bethany Knaff

BLOOD PLAY

Me: We could meet somewhere near you?

Scott: No, by me is shite.

Me: And where are you exactly?

Scott: Finglas. It's a murder spree here.

I only arrived in Dublin a few weeks ago. That name didn't mean much.

Me: My hometown is like that, was the top murder-rate per capita for ages.

It's not a lie. Drug shipments coming up from Florida passed through the south side, but I never went to that side. I liked telling him this, though, like I could bind myself to this random man through shared, gritty living. It felt real, like we were left wanting.

Scott: For real? That's gas. Heard America is like that.

I wasn't sure what 'gas' meant. Good, maybe?

Me: Basically.

Me: Right off O'Connell St, there's this bar, meet me there.

I send him the Google listing. I had one man take me there already on a "date," and another tell me about it and how it was his favorite even though he took me somewhere else. It was a game now, to see how many I could take until I saw one of them again or it turned out one knew another. Scott sends a video. He looks like one of those young guys that would sell you a bag off their bike, too-bright eyes, tech jacket pulled all the way up with a cigarette in his mouth. "Always fireworks or horses or some madness around here."

His voice was deep and rolling, with a thick north-city accent. I want to keep hearing it. He hadn't responded to my offer.

Me: 9 tomorrow

I force myself to go to bed before his reply.

Scott: What do you want to drink?

I hadn't expected him to be there already. It's 9:05.

Me: A Desperados! I'll be there in a sec.

The Guinness at that bar is awful. The whole place was kind of awful, but it was just filthy enough that I imagined Scott would look picturesque there among the grime. Still, something in a bottle was the way to go.

Humid warmth and grinding music sweep over me. I spot him immediately, just right of the bar, staring at the entrance, at me. He gives me the softest smile before looking down to his lap.

"Whiskey Coke?" I ask, nodding to his glass as I sat.

"Nah, just Coke. I don't drink." He keeps his voice low, grumbling against the music playing overhead.

"Oh, damn, we could've met somewhere else." He shrugs. I wouldn't have bothered with a drink if I knew he wasn't going to get one as well, but it's his money. I gulp the neck. I rather like his voice in person, too, but he doesn't talk easily. He is cute, shy even, not quite so hardened as he sips his soda. He looks young. How old was he again? 23? I check Tinder discreetly under the table. 23.

"How old are you again?"

"I just turned 21." Hell. I was turning 27 at the end of the month. I don't offer that information, and he doesn't ask. I nod.

"Why are you in Dublin?" He finally continues. It said in my profile that I was doing my Master's.

"I'm going to Trinity. English."

"Class. In there with all the posh people." Okay, class was good. I still wasn't sure about gas.

"It's different." I laugh. It was. Artsy and urban. It felt like rebellion. Old Money always ventured further from the heart of the city, fabricating whatever separation it needed to maintain

Bethany Knaff

itself. Here, I was in the middle of it all.

"Are you in college?"

"Nahhhh," he drags the word out, "didn't even sit my leaving cert." I know some tradesmen didn't bother.

"No?"

"Got into it with some big lad in secondary. He came at me first, but he went down in one hit. Stayed down too. They told me a couple days later he died. Guess I hit him in the head, but he was way bigger than me. I was 14, though, so they stuck me in a place." A place? I want to stare open-mouthed, ask him to clarify, but he offers nothing. I also don't want to scare him off, so I smooth my face, widen my eyes just a touch.

"Damn." I take a sip of room-temp lager.

He smiles wide at that, "Yeah. So you're in uni. You read a lot?"

"A lot. A lot for class, and all the time else." I love to take in the words, the stories.

"I don't read."

I'm silent for a beat, "You wanna come back to mine? We can get the bus."

"Sure." He gets up.

We just make the bus. It was maybe a 15 minute ride, but he doesn't give me his voice along the way. "I work pretty close to here," he finally speaks as we get off near my building.

"Oh, yeah? Where?"

"The McDonald's."

"You got any weed?"

"Enough for a couple joints. Wanna smoke?" I don't know if he deals, but I'll imagine he does. Smoking a joint with my foreign dealer outside my apartment makes a better scene than smoking with the McDonald's fryer in my student accommodation. He's really no taller than me, I realize, as he stands beside me outside the gate. I take my boots off as soon as I get inside. Now he has an inch on me. Better. He falls onto my double bed, taking the liberty of pushing open the window and rolling the joints along the sill. His shoes are still on. I sit beside him, and we hold the joints right outside, taking turns blowing the smoke through the anti-suicide gap. He turns music on at some point, melancholic and electronic. I like it, but I turn the volume lower.

"This bed is nice, all pastel-y, no orange stains all over."

"Orange stains?" I ask.

"Yeah ya know, fake tan an' all that. These girls tan themselves all orange, gets everywhere, I hate it."

"Are your sheets all orange?"

"Yeah, can't get it out."

"Hmmm."

"I like your skin, that you're pale, I mean." He gestures with the joint.

"You like that my sheets are clean, you mean."

"Yeah, but like your skin is all pale and bright, color just stands out on it." I throw the roach out the cracked window, laying back. He follows, finally kissing me. His mouth is so wet. I swipe my whole tongue across it every couple minutes, soaking him in.

"I like your hair too, the red." He plays with the curling ends of my fringe. His eyes look asymmetrical this close up, a scar cutting through his left eyebrow raising it slightly higher than the right. His breath smells faintly of bubblegum and the weed we had just smoked.

"I look best in red," I tease, scraping my nails down his chin. His eyes close with a rough breath. When they open they are bright, ghostly pale and shining.

"I want you to cut me." I freeze, my fingernails digging into his chin. "I want you to cut me, here," he repeats, pulling down his collar to expose the start of a thickened, pearlescent scar running down from the tip of his collarbone.

"Do you have a knife?" I don't know why I ask. I'm not going to cut him, but if I was, I don't

Bethany Knaff

have any knives in the room. I couldn't use a kitchen knife. The room still smells like weed, even with the window open, and I don't want the smell leaking into the hallway. And what if one of my roommates was in the kitchen? How can I explain taking a knife into the bedroom? Scott grins, and I see the wild boy, who was willing to fight a teenager to death. He pulls a switchblade from his jeans, handing it to me, closed. I turn it in my hand, switch it open. We are frozen, his arms braced on either side of my body, my hand raised towards his chest.

"Why?"

"It's my thing."

"What is exactly?" I ask calmly. A small part of me knows I shouldn't feed into this man, but maybe the weed smoked that voice out, and all I feel now is intrigue. I wait.

"I want you to cut my chest, deep enough so I bleed. I want to bleed onto you, all over you, I want to fuck you in my blood." I wonder vaguely if he's been tested. I should ask. I was planning to fuck him before, so I probably should have asked already. Although, I haven't been tested in months, so maybe it wouldn't be fair.

"How did you figure that out?" God, I love his voice. The knife is still raised towards his chest.

"I was 13. I had a dream I was fucking this girl, she was pale like you. My arm split open, started pouring out all over her, way too much. It wouldn't stop, but it didn't hurt, so I kept fucking her. The blood was so bright on her skin, just streaming." His hand traces circles along my ribs like he was finger-painting. "I came so hard I woke myself up, and all I could think about for weeks was her body, just, red!"

"Did you ever want to cut her? Use her blood?"

"No! It has to be mine." I can feel him through our clothes, his frustration. I'm not really aroused, but I like knowing that he is, and that's enough. He starts talking more, faster, when I don't.

"Other girls have done it. It's okay, see?" He pulls his shirt off fully this time, his hip bones casting shadows across his groin, and I follow the crosshatch of a dozen or so scars creeping upwards along his torso. I take the flat of the knife and draw it along the largest one that runs from his collarbone. His eyes dilate as he kneels above me, holding his breath. I lower the knife, and I crave to hear that deep, pathetic whimper he made, again.

"Did you ask me because you'd like how I would look covered in blood? Or because I look like I'd say yes?"

"I asked because you look like you'd laugh at me," he answers. And I do. It starts as a giggle, then rises, until I'm cackling, head thrown back onto the pillow. I take the knife and slash through the fabric of my own t-shirt, ripping it the rest of the way when the blade catches on the cheap fabric.

"God, you're beautiful," he moans, falling over me onto his elbows. I still haven't agreed to cut him, and I don't, but I need to hear it again. He pushes up my skirt, not bothering to take off his jeans. I grip the knife tighter, my arm hanging loosely at my side as he enters me, slow and hard, his eyes never leaving the blade. I picture the blood vessels traveling through his body. I feel them vibrating, weeping, right there under his skin, a dam begging to break and flood over me, drown me. He stills, choking, as he pulls out and finishes in a hot stream over my stomach. I look down and remember that I never asked if he was tested. In that moment, I suppose that maybe this isn't all that different, and so right as his muscles finally relax, and his eyes meet mine, I thrust my hand upwards in an arc. I could bathe in his voice, the wetness, the blood leaving his sweaty face, and the metal slicing cleanly across his abdomen, hipbone to hipbone.



"ADULATION"



Darren Sears

BLOOD TIES

Blood was everywhere. There was nothing that could be done about it. I had work to do. Collecting organs for Reinstallation took up more time than I wanted, but a job is a job. Not only was it tedious, it was time consuming.

"The marvels of the human body," I whispered sarcastically.

Over the last century, several epidemics have left humans incapable of being born with all of their organs. We don't know how or why, all we know is some assembly is required for us to live reasonable lives, if you can call constant war and pestilence living. That's why I'm here in the aftermath of yet another senseless battle.

"Trudging through limbs my love?" came a voice from behind me.

"Hello Cassie," I replied coldly, "Lend me a hand with this liver."

The woman kneeled down next to me and secured the organ for transportation. "How long have you been out here?"

"Three weeks. Little food. No sleep. Just body parts and hoard raids."

Cassie shook her head. "You're going to wear yourself out. Do you want to leave me alone?"

I scoffed at her. "We both know that you could find another mate if I dropped dead right now."

She gently caressed my cheek, smearing yet more blood on my face. "You're absolutely right, but none of them would be as fun as you."

I had to laugh. She was always saying stupid stuff like that. Stupid stuff that gave my life purpose. Amidst my decaying existence she was the only light. We quickly put the organs in a cryocooler and headed further down the field. Most of the corpses had been picked clean, obviously by scavengers. I spotted a few haphazard removals. A loose rib cage, some mutilated torsos, these were all signs of black market harvesters that operated with less skill than a blind tiger.

"I can't stand shoddy workmanship." I told Cassie.

"Not everyone is as dedicated as you are," she replied. "Besides, all the quacks keep our customers coming back. Circle of life thing I guess."

I just nodded as we trudged along, but a strange sound caught my attention. "Do you hear that?"

Cassie gave me a strange look, "What? I don't hear anything."

The sound was close, about thirty feet away. I rushed to the noise until I found its source. There was a small child, a little boy, sitting by a fire crying. If there was one thing that I hated, it was the sight of a child suffering in this world. It was too familiar and never lost intensity in my mind.

"Are you okay?" I asked. The child nodded.

"I was separated from my group. We were looking for clothes and scrap left behind from the last battle. They told me to come to this spot and wait, but they haven't come back."

I removed my overcoat and draped it around his shoulders. He flashed a smile at me and in an instant it was gone. Where his head was supposed to be there sat a stump of a neck. It was clearly the result of an explosive round.

"I can't seem to catch a break." I whispered.

I stood up and turned to be greeted by a legion of Raiders. Unlike Harvesters, they deal in live flesh. Raid victims, or as they're more pleasantly referred to "living gardens", can fill any purpose the buyer desires. This had been the largest raid party I'd seen in a while. Hopefully they wouldn't cause as much trouble as others I'd come across. That thought quickly died when I saw they had captured Cassie.

"Would you kindly release my wife?" I asked.

The man leading the group was wearing nothing but a pair of tattered pants. He looked grizzly and battle worn. The multiple scars that covered his torso and face added to his menacing demeanor. Everything about him irritated me in a way I couldn't understand, well mostly because his hand was firmly wrapped around Cassie's neck.

"Is this here your wife?" He asked.

I slowly nodded. I could feel my body tensing up. I didn't want to do anything stupid, but the look in Cassie's eyes told me she knew what was about to happen.

"Love?" She rasped. It was hard for her to speak.

"Yes?" I whispered.

"Bring me back as quick as you can. You'll get lonely if you don't."

Despite the distance, I could hear her neck snap as the man closed his fist around it. My head buzzed with screams only I could hear.

"What did she mean by bringing her back?" The man asked.

"Don't worry about that." I told him. I quickly surveyed the raid party. There were a couple

Darren Sears

hundred there, an easy fix for me.

“What did that accomplish?” I inquired.

The man laughed. “We have a shortage of cattle your age and build. You’ll do nicely at the market.”

“I’m no good for parts. None of mine are original. Haven’t been for a while.”

The man did not appear phased. In fact, it looked like he was smiling. That worried me even more.

“I said cattle. You’d be a plaything at best. Something to amuse the warriors. Our last batch broke too easily. But you...well you look like you could take a few beatings before your gears snap.”

The absolute stupidity this man was spewing only served to increase my present mental strain. That aside, I had to get to work. Cassie had already been down a few minutes. I waved my hand and a stream of limbs and organs crashed on the raid party. I smiled as a set of intestines coiled around the throat of their leader. The look of horror and confusion that painted his once smug face brought a little warmth to my heart.

“Nano bots,” I said, answering the question that his bulging eyes proposed.

“Unlike you,” I continued, “I’ve spent my time cultivating my body to be a weapon built to survive this world. I see people as hope and life. A necessary part of the Cycle. I have sacrificed so much to save just a few. Using children as bait? Hunting harvesters? And on top of that killing my wife? You are sub human at its worst.”

Unfortunately he didn’t hear me. The light in his eyes had long been snuffed out. I went on the defensive as a dark hand burst out of the corpse sea in front of me. A young woman gasped for air as she emerged from the pile of flesh. The nanobots had done their job and transferred Cassie’s brain and brain stem into a suitable host.

“Were you bragging again?” she shouted.

It was always a treat to hear her with a new voice. This one was a lot higher than the last two. She was also a great deal taller, taller than me in fact.

“I had everything under control,” I replied.

All she could do was fold her arms. I took her hand in mine and smiled.

“I see you went back to being a brunette. Did you do that for me?”

Despite her new dark features, I could still see her blush. “Maybe.”

Even in despair Cassie always found time to think about me. She was right. I would be a mess without her.

I AM NOT A BLOWUP DOLL

I am not a blowup doll
not if I have whipped cream smeared across my tits
not if my ass jiggles when I walk
with a waist so tiny
long shiny hair begging to be pulled
With moans so breathy "me love you long time," no, not even then

I know you men are quite tired of these feminist tirades
from sluts, shrews, gold diggers, bitches, these cunts
well, from one bitch to another,
we're quite tired of talking about it too
but I don't think you quite got the message
even though we've been barking about it for the past 2000 years
so here's one more harangue that you can jerk on all over

I am not a blowup doll
not a hole for you to spew your trauma, anxiety, hatred
not made in a factory only to be stretched, gaped, railed
at the convenience of your needs,
folded into a Madonna when the guests come over
and blown into a Whore when they leave

I am not a blowup doll
but even I was, I hope that my maker would have given me
a big red button right on the place that would have held my soul
and if you'd ever stopped to think and wonder
about this inanimate toy with your cum streaked all across its body
your hand might finally, finally press down...

too bad we'll never know what that button does

IN THE LIFE OF A POET

And then I was awake
Winter mornings are grey, that goes without saying
the mug had sat on the counter all night
but it's alright for the tea bag
slow twists, little curls of mud
Stole it from the hotel lobby a year ago,
my funds are low

Nothing to do but think about the lover that left last week
She was blonde, leggy, and snorted like a pig,
it was never going to work
Under blankets, my fingers twists, turns, pulses
in tune to the memory of a bare back stretched over a blank canvas
that was work #34
Didn't get paid, but at least I got an orgasm out of it

You wonder,
how many grandmothers do you think Bukowski had to fuck to write Women?
if I had a penis, would I have written Sufjan's piss poems?
I get up, I lay down, I get up again
I guess,
the only point to my existence is to masturbate,
think of the greats,
and ignore the bills piling up on a table I picked up from Facebook Market

Start, throw it away, then start again
What else is there?
I have,
only,
longing and empty hands.

AFTER OUR BREAKUP, I STILL SEE PIECES OF US

YOU

Man walking dog
small dog, big dog, doesn't matter
Although you would have loved the Samoyed
Wind ruffling the top of columnar pines
Snails tucked into their homes
Car waiting for me to pass,
even though I waved for them to go
Dad watching his daughter's soccer game
she's the fastest one on her team
doesn't look like it's going well today
He'll take her for ice cream after
to cheer her up
but for now, enjoy the sun & watch her run,
orange jersey, #27,
Did I mention fastest on the team?
strong chin, unruly hair, stubborn, passionate
just like dad
Red grocery cart:
Organic turkey, Wonder Bread, onigiri,
12 pack Diet Coke
Ralphs, Target, Mitsuawa
Husband.
pays the bills, does the oil change for their car
He loves their children, wants to be a good dad
Sure, he yells when he's angry, slam doors
leaves when she cry
but he bought an Swarovski diamond bracelet
at the airport for their 25th anniversary

ME

On leash
or maybe pawing at the window, doesn't matter
I forget how long I waited when I see your face
Pine needles on the ground
Indecisive squirrel leads to a bloody mess on road
Impatiently holding for the pedestrian
just how slow can they go?
Mom with the newborn cradled to her cheek
he has torn her body apart
but there is no one else she'd do this for
Making dinner is next on the to-do
then laundry, mopping, trash, garden trimming,
all that matters is the rise & fall
of an impossibly small chest
so tiny to cry so loud
stares at everyone with knowing eyes
he has your nose
Don't need a basket, it'll fit in my arms
Pomelos, low-carb yogurt, did you grab the onigiri?
Lemon tea
Whole Foods, 99 Ranch, farmer's market
Wife
knows that he is a good man
still thinks about divorce sometimes
a good father but not a good husband
He forgot that it was her birthday today
tomorrow, he's leaving
another 3 months long business trip

WHALE SONG

There is a game i like to play whenever i can't sleep
blankets covering my legs so warmly
like I stuck them into a kitchen oven
in a sort of backwards, avant-garde, reversal
of Sylvia's death.
These cuts of bodies that exist yet hide from sight
her head in the oven
my legs under the blankets
Schrödinger's cat must still live inside the box.
I take a ballpoint pen
hang it vertically between thumb and index
the plastic casing with its suspended column of ink
Like a whale sleeping,
hanged by the buoyancy of their minds
the invisible hand of God that pinches them by their oil-filled temples
Unpinch
ever so slightly
the pen stutters against the clamminess of my palms
before succumbing to land gravity
i catch its heel
Not always, but every couple times or so
i'd be too late and it'd fall beyond saving
bouncing against the stretch of duvet
stuffed with the feathering of birds felled by man
out of grasp of God to be saved
If there was real consequence, i'd lay the pen to rest
because Sylvia didn't push her head in the oven only to pull it out again
But there are much larger, greater, worse
things to reincarnate,
like cats or whales or the authors of your life
than this let-go, pull-back, rewind, let-go game of mine

CARRIE

There are technically 4 stages when categorizing twilight. This is important for you, to imagine the scene as clearly as possible; that during a nautical twilight in early August, I was walking by a row of magnolia trees. In sun fall, everything is bleached just enough that you recall the vibrance of sunset. I was counting the number of: bloomed, unbloomed, blooming white buds against their greyscale frame, when I saw a spider suspended between the criss cross of a tree's lower appendages.

The light gave enough to see the dark smudge and the trembling of the arachnid's legs, but not of the single thread it perched upon. So, a moment before common sense kicked in, I thought I had somehow discovered a new species of floating spiders. A sudden gust of wind swept through, but still the spider (Carrie, I named her) clung stubbornly to a string I cannot see.

What unseen holds us in place? What things do we leave behind? Carrie threw out a line for the closest branch. The wind blows her plans sideways to a much further destination. She crosses the way anyway.

The wind flings me, about 5,597 miles off-track. The thread leads through you. I still remember your hand around my shoulders, pressing us forward against the wind. Human desire preserves against the wailing face of Mother Nature.

If twilight is a gentle bleach, then the night is a naked strip.

Carrie weaves her threads. I write obscure lines that go nowhere. All this talk of magnolia trees, lines and spiders sounds like a love letter, but if I really wanted to do that I would have instead talked of roses, rain, climbing over a wet fence, and messages too late to reply to.

EATING ME ALIVE

Mommom used to slap my knuckles. Keep them damn fingers out your mouth. I'd spit out hangnails like dip. Slivers of keratin littering her white tile. Bile-bitten teeth would rip splinters of peeled skin from cuticles until they were painted red. Twenty years later, I suck in my cheeks and bite down on canker sores until iron seeps into my white tongue. I swallow my spit like water, wetting my gullet. I ache to be consumed, digested, broken down into aminos and proteins and distributed through someone's organs, but I am only discarded like pomegranate seeds. Left to gnaw my own flesh like a snake, mistaking its tail for prey.

PURGE

I binge melancholy like whiskey, chase it with a victim complex. Let it singe my throat, punish my vocal cords for producing words tinged with manipulation. Each smokey drop of booze burns guilt lodged in my gullet. I know I should sober up, but I like my bourbon like my men—a sucker-punch to the gut, lingering on a forked tongue.

GIVE ME (THIS)

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, though,
I have a feeling I didn't stir.

I watched the moon topple over the sky —
I hate the ways she swings on veins, leftover.

But, in her arms I met my dreams:
the aftertaste of Skittles/nylon, burnt/ant legs.

I still catch myself hacking up tongue relics —
in that I dote, in that I flatline.

On parables untouched, I found her there:
perched with a muzzle, like sand.

I've been told applesauce lovers don't die,
rather, they fuse in airbrushed plasma.

Assign me in canvas lighting — I'll whisper your sound.

MIDWAY FOLLY

Cucumber breath in bloom, ribcages are
juniper trees & razors beam like sunlight
in this place I once knew.

The place where things dead
& undead die, again. Back when
I sought out showering phantoms & your
kidneys were sacred.

I forgot the swollen kisses, americana
consent, nibbling at dawn — Lady o' love,
braid the nooses against my ears once more:
whisper the tale of lynx indecision & leaky
faucet rancor — elbow me off the cliff.
On the subject of Heaven, I don't know
much. Though, I'd imagine it mimics
the porcelain ponies & tulip lipstick of
my youth: the pretense.
I worshipped vultures from the time I
was ten, my sap-ridden fable I reclaim
once again.

(EMACIATED) PULP

But pieces of you still live in I:
spaghetti-string spider webs, rosemary
eyelids, spectacles forgotten,
the heart of sandstorms, pupils lacking...
I vomit skin of the recently departed.
That of clay, I rearranged the snake.
Forbid I assassinate forbid I flutter.
Butchery is but a language & I sputter
chants lined in the aftertaste —
switchblades, uprooted bark, infantile seeding,
maggots who've grown incessant, cherry blossom muck:
Tang tarries I leave it to leashes.

GHOST, IN TWO

My veins line bedroom walls. There's something
hypnotic in the way they sway, twisted
& sage, like spring departing. The smell
of fallen dandelions, of horseshoe gloom
perfume this home & paint it faulty.

Framed bruises wither, yellowed
fructose is a common enemy in this light,
& I throw my lungs off the moon. No
one is alone here — her cotton candy footprints
give it away.

Baby fawn, I wish you'd climb inside.
Quit watching while I sleep & nestle in
the hole I dug you — plaster this massacre,
breathe licorice to the crypt. I can't stop
dreaming of you.
Starlight remains keep me sane, while I
await the tongue that pulls them.

ON WHINING, FORBID I BARK

If I am but rib meat forged
in reiterated landfill, I call
on the heart of a viper:

in the beauty you burned,
I lie complacent in the fall.
I feast on the ashes of the
peach before me. I shed my
first skin as a sun dog —

sprawled in place: a nursery sham,
the skies drip salt & birds awake.
I brand this body, sovereign. I call
to you in titles.

Do you wish to bring me back?
Do you think me your child or that
of contagion?

OPPOSITES ATTRACT

The boy is everything the girl failed to be.

This flame-bodied boy radiates heat,
attracting swarms of flitting moths,
not quite thawing the girl with the cold soul
but keeping her warm, tenderly.
She fits right into the crook of his arm and
roasts her ice-block body like marshmallows over his fire.

She dances on air, twirling, whirling through
the branches of his tree as he stands resolute,
planted deep, cracked by lighting but still growing.
Her string catches and knots as she gets tangled
up in him, but he doesn't mind. There's no rush to cut her loose.
She'll tie his broken parts back together after the storms come.

The boy eats the glowing rays of dawn for breakfast
and feasts on the day, sunbaked to perfection.
The girl starves, subsisting on the sodium of screens,
streetlamps and whatever pale scraps of luminescence
the moon reflects.

Untamed youth glints reckless off him even as
he settles into his desk chair and logs in to the salt mines.
Her tired eyes have seen a thousand realities, but this is her favourite.

The girl is a sliver of rock hanging half-
broken off a cliff over the ocean,
once jagged and sharp but eroded now, worn down
and smooth by the unrelenting batter of waves.
The boy is the whole beach, expanses of golden sand so vast you could dig
to find any dichotomous half you lack, or bury yourself
up to your neck. It feels like a hug.

His story was scribed in the basin of a crystalline fountain,
carefully carved but obscured by coin. Hers was
scrawled in quill pen on foolscap pages aged with tea, charming
but already decomposing, and so easily burned.

She draws him close, envelops herself in his warmth.
When the icicle dagger in her back melts she will be able to lie beside him.

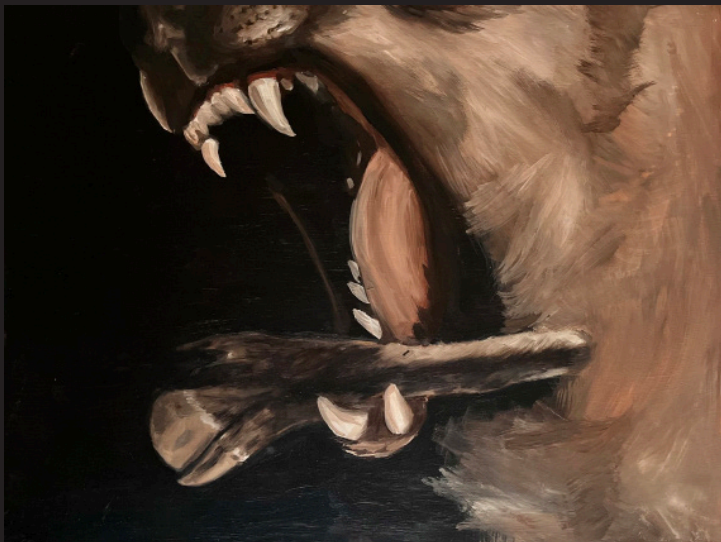
HOW I LOVE YOU REFLEXIVELY

I brush your hair
back from your face
while you speak
with a stranger

THE BIRTHDAY CURSE

I am no longer pulling from the void, I am pilling
like a cheap sweater. I am trapped inside a glass bottle
trying to chisel something meaningful into the glass.
I land on *Bottle, I have been here*. I try to love things
that seem impossible. How loud bugs can be! Crickets
rubbing their forewings together with a part of their body
called *the scraper*. I suck on the frozen embryo of time
like it is a lollipop I got at the dentist. I got hypnotized
hard at the baptism and I haven't been the same since.
Every time I close my eyes I see Christ and his smile
is blinding. I wonder if anyone has ever been born
in a cemetery. It seems like yes, of course they have.
It is inevitable. This entire planet is technically
a graveyard. I wonder about the charm of the blue
part of fire. Blue and orange are complementary colors.
A compliment is an invert, how strange. The mist is
friendly, despite its reputation. Same with me,
most of the time. Other times it's like, who is dwelling.
I think plenty about the difference between a request
and a threat, a threat and a promise, a promise
and a burden, a burden and a purpose, a purpose
and a useless. I have been collecting uselesesses for most
of my life. I cover my eyes with uselesesses and pray.
Pass me something, anything.
A flat family, technically born from a tree.
A deck of cards will do.

Emilia Horrigan



“GOD AND ANIMAL”



“SEX CRIMES AGAINST GOD”

I.

Island of Lesbos has increased
in age regression. These sex crimes,
those against God and Paul. Love making
wrists of her cuts she who sleeps now,
sleeping forever

for whatever forever means.

A jackal head richer
inheriting a great swamp,
gray house looking on its waters,
existing only with fear
in unseeing hearty meat
smoke pumping into two
mossy waves into a dozen
red oil stained cigarettes.

Lily-padded “havens” among marsh,
around such a house, smoke
hanging chimney fingers.

Relief is ecstasy, tastes with iron.
Thirsty tongue devours her
without teeth.

Some say she lives
in childish slumber
among these sunken trees,
within their sinful skins.

Some say they’ve laid
with her, in that very house.
How she was beastly,
her desire to bite.

Her house’s wood
had inscribed words claiming heaven
on earth, despite men
claiming such a house cradled
spawns worse than that of the devil,
witches, or even succubi—Emily Vep.

Emily’s father bore her there,
In that house, a respectable pastor,
in struggle after his wife
stopped showing for church,
found dead soon after, mangled.

Ms. Vep, so young, was bitten;
Cat Snake, then Whipsnake,
then Cat, then Wolf.

II.

There were no wolves on Lesbos,
unlike Emily’s suitors’ reports;
a secret wolf kept below her bedroom floor,
faintly fresh red splatted on boards.

Some testify Emily insatiably
pounced and bounced until they faint,
Others scour at not getting a lick of lube,
Ms. Vep demanding, forcing
men and women in her bed alike
to care, softly, to care,
her tongue tugging their breast hem
her eyes widen for claim
as she bites down
“she called the blood milk”

One locally respected male reported
Emily with hysteria, claiming she hollered
horror from something he didn’t say.
“She claimed my member a ‘fallax,”
convincing authorities
truly unreal withers, fallen and forgotten
by God, claim that house.

“She cursed me, and poisoned my manhood”
whilst claiming he came from concern,
not sex, describing a clog
swelling his penis, bulbus urethra blockage.

Authorities and locals gathered to pound
their feet around floorboards ancient and moist,
washing in to see a clean floor
aside from ten fingernails lowly draped on top,
and a bump from beneath the bed.

Timothy Ngome

THREE GENTLE KNOCKS

The thing I remember most about that Monday was waking up before the alarm—the room stiff and blue like the inside of a strained muscle, the sheets still pressed with the imprint of other knees. Njeri was in the kitchen. I could hear her singing to the onions she hacked apart, the concerto of her knife and the hiss of hot oil. When I ambled in, she was in her father's old rugby jersey, with nothing underneath, her brown thighs scribbled with the night's mistakes. "You look like hell," she said, softening when she saw my face, and then her mouth split in a wet-messy smile.

We had come together accidentally, or maybe it was more like an inevitability of proximity: neighbors in the third-floor flats with the soggy blue-tint paint. These things happen when you share a balcony and deal with the same crunch-nosed caretaker. Her place smelled like coconut oil and soft rot, a consequence of the lizards that died behind her fridge, and the perfume she used to combat them. I used to imagine her as an X-ray, her bones humming with static. She had an energy that made you feel you were always about to hear something important.

My name is Samora, or at least that's how people know me. Sometimes, in a new bar with a new crowd, I toy with renaming myself—Michael, Kevin, even Jeff, like a lost mzungu. But Samora is the one that sticks. I was named after a freedom fighter, my mother's half-remembered nostalgia, and maybe that's why I always get into these situations that feel like small revolutionary wars. At that time Njeri called me "Officer," and sometimes, when she got especially drunk, "Commander-in-Chief," always with the derision as thick as honey.

That morning she was talking about her father again. She hated her father the way a dog hates thunder, with a sort of natural alarm that she couldn't explain. "He's back from Doha," she said, "And he brought that damn stepmother." She ran her thumb along the edge of a passion fruit and split it open, the insides like frogs' eggs, but brighter. "They want me to move in with them," she said, "Can you believe?" I pretended to consider it, and picked a seed from her collarbone with exaggerated delicacy. We made a game of pretending not to take things seriously.

Outside, the city was already heating up. Even the beggars under the flyover looked drowsy and academic, their coin cups half-hearted. I had a job, kind of. I wrote pithy copy for local ad agencies, mostly for insurance companies targeting Instagram couples and young parents. It paid the rent, which is a boring way to say it didn't pay for much else. Njeri, on the other hand, was an artist. Not the kind with a gallery or a diploma, but an artist because she said so, and it fit. Sometimes she'd sell sketches to clueless Dutch tourists. Sometimes she'd just pin them up on power poles, to see if anyone noticed.

The first time I saw one of her drawings, I thought it was a sex thing. It was hanging from the mailboxes by a single tack: a tangle of arms and legs in charcoal, two girls and a boy with their faces rubbed raw, smeared open like peeled fruit. Only later did she explain that it was memory, not lust. "They're us," she said, "from way back." When pressed, she refused to say more, only shrugged and switched the subject to bicycle theft, which was rampant along our street that month. I liked that: the refusal to explain, the insistent mystery, the filth of unresolved narrative.

Some nights, we would go up to the flat roof and look at the city, the spread of it glowing with electric wounds. She'd bring her old paint-stained blanket and we'd drink the off-brand ginger wine from the shop below. One night, after a fight about the best way to cook ugali (I insisted: boil, stir, suffer; she insisted: suffer, stir, boil), we sat wordless for an hour. Then she broke the silence: "Why do you come here?" she asked, not looking me in the eye. "Why not?" I said, but even to me it sounded inadequate. She shook her head, the ends of her hair like snakes on a hotplate.

There are things that happen at night that don't make sense in the morning. Sometimes I'd wake up covered in bruises I couldn't place, the bedsheet bloodied at the hip from where a scab had torn. I slept lighter when Njeri was over, maybe because she talked in her sleep, muttering things in Kiembu, or sometimes in a made-up language of clicks and consonants. One night, I woke to her standing half-naked by the window, shivering and pointing at the car park. I got up and looked—the parking lot was empty, except for the caretaker's mangled Suzuki. Njeri said, "The man. He was just here," and climbed back into bed.

A week later, I saw the man. He knocked on our door at a little past midnight, just as I was about to close my laptop on a garbage slogan for an exfoliation lotion ("Reveal Your True Self—The African Way!"). He was unremarkable: balding, a second-hand polo shirt, the smell of Red Cap on his breath. "Sorry," he said, "I'm looking for apartment 5C." We were 5E. Njeri stood behind me, chin on my shoulder. "No problem," I said.

Timothy Ngome

"It's that way." But he lingered, scratching at his scarred elbow. Finally he left, but the air was cold in his wake.

It was the same night Njeri told me about her old lover from Limuru. "Your real competition," she said, "is not a man. It is a ghost." I laughed, and she hit me, not playfully. "He died on a motorbike," she said, and then, quieter: "My father pulled his body out of a tea field. They never made a smooth patch where he landed. Even now, the grass grows sideways there." I wanted to say something comforting, but all I could think of was the man in the corridor, the raw edge where his ear used to be.

Njeri's art got stranger after that. She started sketching every night—me, herself, the rain, the shape of my shoulders under the duvet. The faces in her sketches looked like they were melting; the lines jittered with caffeine and fear. One drawing she taped, unceremoniously, to my fridge: three men in a row, side profiles, all with their mouths torn wide. It was funny, grotesque; but it stuck with me. Sometimes I'd open the fridge and pretend to talk back to them, mimicking the silent, wonky agony. I never mentioned this to Njeri. Some jokes are better when they're private.

Things didn't go bad all at once. It was like a clog in the bathroom sink, slowly gathering mass, until you wake up one morning and there's a pool where your toothbrush floats. She started disappearing for hours, then days. She started smoking, cheap smokes, the kind that made her lips taste like burnt plastic. When she came back, there were new bruises. Ones I hadn't made. "Who?" I asked, the first time I saw, but she only looked at the wall and bit off a piece of her thumbnail. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she said, "and if you did, you'd stop loving me."

One evening, I came home and found her on the balcony, chain-smoking and barefoot, watching the neighbor's children play football in the courtyard. "You're late," she said, but the sun was still fighting the horizon. I slid the bag of groceries onto the table and she ignored them. "He was here again," she said, and this time I understood she meant the man from the corridor, not her dead ex. "He knows my name, Samora. He knows everything." She turned her head, the light painting her face into shadows and cracks. I put my arms around her, but she felt colder than steel.

I started to have my own dreams. In them, the man from the corridor would hand me a note, but I couldn't read it—each time I tried, the letters shifted, bled into each other, melted into black liquid. I'd wake with a dried tongue and a ferocious hunger that food couldn't satisfy. I found a new intensity for my work, pouring the dread into body-spray slogans, cereal taglines, anything that would sell. The ad men loved it. "Samora, this is twisted, man!" they said, approvingly. Njeri, meanwhile, was fading; her colors dulled, her art went untouched.

Then July happened. The building lost power for three days, and the stairwells echoed with the panic of urban primitives relearning the dark. Njeri's stepmother appeared, a force of nature in a green gele, banging on my door and shouting her name with unfamiliar fury. "She's not here," I said, and I wasn't lying, not really. For a week, no one saw her. I called hospitals, matatu stations, police desks where bored officers scratched themselves and asked whether she had a history of "running away." The phrase made me want to break something. As though people simply misplaced themselves.

On the eighth day I found a drawing slipped beneath my door. It was the man from the corridor. Not a sketch this time. A portrait. Every wrinkle. Every pore. Every scar. At the bottom Njeri had written three words.

HE IS MY FATHER.

I sat on the floor for a long time staring at them. Outside, rain hammered the estate roofs. Somewhere a baby cried. Somewhere a pressure cooker whistled. The city continued being a city while my understanding of the world quietly broke apart.

The caretaker found her notebook the next morning wedged behind a water tank on the roof. Most of it was nonsense. Lists. Faces. Fragments. Then, halfway through, a sentence appeared again and again across several pages.

He died twice. He died twice. He died twice. Near the back she finally explained.

The lover from Limuru had not been the ghost. The ghost was her father.

Timothy Ngome

The man from the corridor. The man from the parking lot. The man who knocked at midnight.

Her father had died in Doha three years earlier. A stroke in an airport bathroom. Buried in Kiambu. Yet he kept returning.

I travelled to Limuru because grief makes detectives of us all.

The tea field was there. The sideways grass was there too.

An old watchman pointed out the exact patch where the motorbike accident happened. He spoke reluctantly, as if every sentence cost him something.

“People come here looking for answers,” he said.

“Do they find them?”

“No.”

Then he looked at me carefully.

“They only find who brought the questions.”

Before leaving, he handed me a folded page. Njeri’s handwriting. The paper was stained with rain and soil.

Samora, if you are reading this, I finally remembered. The man isn’t following me. He’s following you.

I moved out of the flats a month later.

New neighborhood. New furniture. New locks.

People imagine fear as a loud thing. A scream. A chase. A shadow in a hallway.

Real fear is quieter.

It is noticing the same bald man reflected in different bus windows.

It is hearing a knock at 12:07 a.m. no matter where you live.

It is waking up certain somebody has just left your bedroom.

Years passed. The knocks continued.

Always polite. Always three taps.

Never more. Never less.

I stopped opening the door.

Last Monday, I opened it.

Timothy Ngome

I don't know why.

Loneliness, perhaps.

Curiosity.

The stupidity that has powered human history.

The corridor was empty except for a folded piece of paper resting on the welcome mat.

My name was written on the front.

Inside was a charcoal drawing.

Three figures.

A woman.

A man.

And another man standing behind them.

The faces were rubbed away exactly as they were in Njeri's old sketches.

At the bottom was a final note.

Not from the ghost. Not from her father.
From Njeri.

The ink had faded almost to nothing.

It read:

Officer, some people are haunted by the dead. Some of us are haunted by the living.

I looked up from the page.

At the far end of the corridor stood a bald man in a second hand polo shirt.

Watching.

Waiting.

Patient as memory.

When I blinked, he was gone

.
The paper remains on my table even now.

Every morning I think about throwing it away.

Every evening I find a reason not to.

And some nights, just before sleep, I hear three gentle knocks from somewhere inside the house.

Eleora Ephrem

INSATIABLE SELF-LOVE

Zyla Silverstone has an insatiable desire. One that makes her salivate at the very thought of it. She wipes her mouth as she stares at her vanity mirror. Her sharp amber eyes, lined with kohl, dart to her curvaceous figure, bust nearly spilling out of her backless, sparkly velvet dress. Her rolls are glowing with the scent of shea butter and lavender wafting in the air. Her dark mane, long and coily, has hints of gingered brown, contrasting the blue-black beauty of her skin. Zyla sighs, almost moaning. She knows how delicious she looks. She picks up a small container off the table and brings the dark red lipstick across her plump lips. She presses them together ever so slightly to line them perfectly to their heart shape.

As Zyla applies her gloss, a shadow lurks behind her, and she feels its presence before it speaks.

"You look wonderful, honey." Her husband peeps, his voice piercing the gentle frequency of her 90s jams. Zyla sighs and turns around, plastering the perfect plastic smile she's practiced for years. "Thank you, Gerald. I appreciate you buying it for me."

Gerald is dressed in a tightly fitted suit, one that highlights his tall and lanky frame. His curly brown hair was lessening in volume, and his beautiful olive face was pasty and pimpled from the lack of sleep his job required. The confident stride Zyla fell in love with was now a lackluster walk, one that screamed insecurity.

How did I ever find him hot? Zyla wonders to herself.

Gerald walks closer, hesitantly inching himself like a shy calf. It disgusts Zyla so much that she has to turn to face the mirror again. Her smile strains as he puts his hands on her shoulder, looking at her through her equally beautiful reflection.

"I am so excited for tonight, baby. The research I am presenting will change scientific history." Gerald exclaims, eyes beaming with hope and a whimsy that Zyla forgot existed.

Gerald squeezes her shoulder and continues, "It has taken us a long time to get this far, and I am so glad you stuck it out with me."

Zyla has no clue what science stuff her husband did, but she loved the sound of anything that could bring more material wealth to her. Anything to add to the preserving of her beauty.

"I love you, Zyla. And tonight, you're going to see just how much I love you."

Zyla could feel her face cramping, forced into a grin for that long. She breathes and looks back at her reflection. Her smile deepens, this time more entranced by what's reflected at her.

"I can't wait, Gerald."

She wants to fuck herself.

It is all Zyla Silverstone could think about. Her eyes are glazing over every gown on every woman at the Gala, silently thinking to herself how much better every single one of them would look on her. She even finds herself thinking this about the men's suits. Her daydreams turn from an innocent thought to the unpredictable sexiness of an erotic fantasy. She imagines herself, slowly removing the tie from her other self, as one of her sits on top of the other. She envisions all the ways she would touch herself, all the lustful things she would say to herself, and all the ways she would make herself cum and orgasm, over and over again, with a climax so grand she has no desire to ever stop. But then a waiter bumps into her, and the fantasy is over. And Zyla is zoned back into her reality: The Annual Scientists Gala.

"...Yeah, I almost actually became a mathematician! Can you believe that?" Gerald snorts to her right. The old lady at the opposite end of the table to Zyla jumps in her chair, clearly startled by Gerald's obnoxious and boisterous laugh. Zyla decides to read over the program for a fifth time since they arrived at the table ten minutes ago.

"The Annual Scientists Gala"

With the winner of our Best Scientific Discovery and the honored Keynote Speaker

Dr. Gerald Silverstone..."

Blah blah blah, other people I don't care about, blah blah blah..." Zyla thought as she silently sipped her drinks.

"Okay, I am going to head onstage now." Gerald stands quickly and straightens his plaid green bow. His fast upcoming drops a knife to the floor, which he ignores.

Zyla stares at it for a second, realizing that her husband is about to leave her to maneuver the conversations on her own.

Gerald turns to look down at her, and she looks up at him, seeing a love in his eyes, she prays he illusions in hers.

"Zyla, I can't wait for you to see this project."

He kisses her cheek and struts toward the stage.

"So nice that your husband's a scientist, huh?" The old lady asks her.

Eleora Ephrem

Zyla turns her attention back to the table, slowly stuffing her mouth so she doesn't have to use it. "Hmm," she says, nodding, chewing on the heavenly marinated chicken tikki masala and rice on her plate.

"And you, Zyla? What do you do?" The younger, similar-looking lady next to the old lady asks Zyla, with an already knowing tone contradicting her sweet face.

Zyla gulps her drink down, "Oh, um... I used to be a global journalist, and mostly write--"

"But you're a stay-at-home wife now, right?" The old lady interrupts, as the younger woman smirks next to her.

Zyla's mouth felt dry. All the pricelessness she felt moments ago was gone. Everyone at the table was now looking at her, cheeks full of expensive food, awaiting her response. She could feel her cheeks getting hot.

"Seems like it's the end of the line for her," someone whispers to her left. Snorts and giggles erupt around the table as Zyla squeezes her eyes tight, wishing she could leave right at that moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen, now presenting our Keynote Speaker, the winner of the Best Scientific Discovery of the Year, Gerald Silverstone!"

Zyla sighs in relief, feeling more grateful for her husband's presence than she had all year.

Gerald confidently strolls on stage, rolling up a large computer screen, covered in a tarp. He then removes the tarp to show security camera footage: the dark room it showed had a human-shaped shadow centered in its surveillance.

Gerald walks up to the podium, taps the mic gently, and exclaims with pride, "Hello, everyone. I am Gerald Silverstone, famed genetic scientist and researcher." He pushes his glasses up his nose, already sweating profusely from the hot lights. But he holds an all-knowing smirk and confidently bellows:

"And I have made a discovery quite unlike any other."

Gerald then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a remote, which he displays to the crowd with an energetic eagerness that makes everyone murmur with excitement.

"This took years in the making; it needed a lot of work and support, and I almost gave up a few years ago. But thanks to my beautiful, amazing wife, I never gave up."

Heads spun to find Zyla Silverstone, eyes all staring with a hunger that Zyla felt would consume her. She plasters a quick smile and looks back at her husband on stage, who was staring at her with the affection he always did.

"So this creation, this man-made gem, is dedicated to her."

Claps erupt as Gerald takes a slight bow and clicks one of the buttons on the remote. The big screen beside him lights up to display a human-shaped object, on a chair facing the other way. The room was a light turquoise and felt immediately familiar to Zyla. She looks back down at her plate, wondering where she knew it from.

Gerald continues speaking, faster this time; "I have created life from another."

Murmurs begin again. Gerald presses another button on the remote, and the chair spins. Zyla hears gasps and looks back up at the screen, just to find every eye in the crowd staring back at her. She looks at the screen and is shocked to see herself.

A casually dressed, smiling, and ponytailed lookalike. Gerald clears his throat, bringing the crowd's attention back to him.

"I have made a clone." Gerald smiles. "I have created beings just as the gods have created us, and I used my closest confidant, my heart, and my inspiration for the first official prototype."

Zyla's heart pumps.

"Zyla 2.0, care to introduce yourself?"

The curvaceous, glowing body stands gracefully, walking toward the camera screen with a glide so seductive that Zyla could feel herself blushing.

"Hello everyone, I am Zyla 2.0." Her voice was silky and held a slight raspiness that clutched you. "Thank you, Gerald, for bringing me to life, and thank you, Zyla Silverstone, for being the perfect person for me to be."

She continues talking, explaining the scientific components of her body, as Gerald watches the screen proudly.

Zyla feels drunk. This feels like a dream. She could feel eyes on her, but was fixated by the deep pools of amber Zyla 2.0's eyes had. Zyla feels so drawn to herself. More than she ever knew she could. She feels something so deep for this unreal being.

In the background of the room, Zyla notices a box. It was one of the boxes of Gerald's scientific instruments from when they moved in. Zyla realized where Zyla 2.0 was.

Suddenly, Zyla has the urge to leave. She has the urge to test how realistic this clone is. Her fantasy could be a reality. Time seemed to slow at that moment. Her husband's babbling on stage was overshadowed by

Eleora Ephrem

Zyla 2.0's fierce staring at the crowd, everyone enamored by her realistic beauty. Zyla grabs her coat and purse, quietly stands up, and wobbles to the door, suddenly realizing how much she had to drink. She pulls up Uber on her phone and types in her address. As she waits for the Uber, she wonders if her other self would be interested in her proposal.

The car pulls up to the Silverstone estate, its pillared white mightiness illuminating the driver's face full of awe. Zyla runs inside the arched doorway and heads downstairs to her husband's lab, which Zyla had only seen once when they moved in. The automatic lights brighten the turquoise room, blatantly showcasing the creative mess that Zyla ignored in her husband. Tables full of gadgets, tools, old coffee cups, scattered blueprints, and old boxes from years ago. Zyla was so grossed out about the mess, she didn't notice Zyla 2.0 until she spoke.

"Hi, Zyla."

Zyla looks up to find herself standing a few feet away in front of her, with a smile that makes Zyla's heart skip a beat. She was wearing shapely bootcut jeans and a pink cropped sweater, and was her exact copy, down to the small bit of acne on her arms. Zyla gulped, not sure what to do next.

"Um, hi. Nice to meet you."

They stare into each other's eyes for a second, both appreciating the visual before them. Zyla glances at the camera and TV screen set up a couple of feet behind Zyla 2.0. Reading her, Zyla 2.0 breaks the silence and says, "The camera is off."

Zyla's eyes flicker for a second, and she clears her throat, feeling brave in her drunkenness.

"So, how truly similar are we?"

Zyla 2.0 smiles slightly and walks up to Zyla. She reaches down and grabs her hand, interlocking their fingers with a warmth that causes Zyla to feel a throbbing in her pants unlike any other. Zyla 2.0 leans into Zyla and whispers gently in her ear, "Similar enough to know that we are going to have a great time together."

Zyla 2.0 reaches behind Zyla to unzip her dress, caressing the lines on her back, and kissing the small of her neck. Zyla couldn't help but stare at her reflection on the TV screen, watching her greatest fantasy come true.

HYMN FOR MY BIG MAN'S BELLY

i rest my hand on the curving hillside,
press my cheek against the warm skin.
all that love,
reserved for my touch.
i tell him to lay on me,
suffocate me,
let me choke on our breath,
unable to swallow the glory of all we are.

my sinai of salaciousness,
command me to be good,
swallow me whole and i will exist
forever in cathedral-high
ceilings. mi cielo, this heaven,
what could be holier than the body
of the man that i love?

what is communion in the face
of my lips pressed against
his giving abdomen, bear-
growl belly, the swell as he breathes
under me,
the space he fills in me,
the disappearing trail,
exploratory scars—
the body, blood, the holy-
goddamned-spirit.

i admit i am a glutton,
but we are not lean nor apologetic.
give me all the world
in my lover's round belly.
let me meet god upon that rolling hill.

HAVE YOUR FILL

There are scratches on paper
Where ruddy welts should be on my back.
The diary spine cracking and curling
In a way that beckons jealousy.

Have I told you of
How easily I can faint?
Placid, porcelain, hanging
Limp on a bed frame.

Most beloved, my legs are
Covered in cream and
Like a cat, I can arch
So beautifully.

Do you not hear me mewl?

You and I, we move anciently,
The lampshade flickering patterns up your back
And the slick sordid sight of us
Glimmers in the mellowness of the moon.

The parting of my thighs,
The choking of my neck.
My flower blooms.
You should water it more often.

We are slow, languid, you with
A delicate touch.
And I
Am a shouting, furious, wild thing.

Gluttonous
With want.
Horrible, aching,
Delirious want.

Darling, am I not
Beckoning you?
Is the glint in my eye too soft,
The taste of me too faint?

You should knead me much harder,
Drink more greedily
From my fountain of youth.
Take your fill.

The folly of man
Lies at the centre of my body.
I am the bread of life.
Do I not sustain?

Don't you
Want to have your cake
And
Eat it too?

A. Lyss
HANDSY

The hand comes at night, in moments when Rob isn't here. It inches toward me, you see, in its severed, bloody glory. Sometimes its blue fingers brush against my side before Rob opens the door and it is gone without a sight or sound. It just simply *isn't* anymore.

As hideous as some may consider it, it retains a slender, smooth glory. Soft, even. Never rough and fast like a spider, only creeping toward me, its bloody stump of a wrist in the air like a cat's tail. I don't mind the blood, honestly. Sometimes Rob cuts me with his fingernails during sex, and I just siphon the blood away with his hand and lick it from his thick fingers. My first instinct. He melts every time I do that.

But his fingers are so thick compared to the hand's, which are so nimble.

But tonight Rob is with me as we go to bed, and as his strong arms circle my waist, I close my eyes and pretend the hand brushing my bare stomach is a bit softer than what Rob can ever offer.

I wake up, slip on my violet silken robe, and get out of bed, walking barefoot toward the ancient bedroom door and pulling on the door handle. I always used to think of it more like a door knocker you see on front doors. The door slides open, creaking a bit, and my hand curls around the edge of it as I peer over my shoulder at Rob. He's all splayed out, his hair wild on the pillow. He snores, loud and sudden.

Turning back, I slide out of the doorway and let the door shut behind me. The metal handle knocks against the door quietly. I take slow steps, the wood crying out beneath my feet as though it is in bed with me. I forgo opening the curtains and just walk down the tall, dark hallway with little bursts of light sneaking through the little crack. They run across my face but never hit me in the eye.

I open another heavy wooden door to the kitchen and go for the cupboard. Oatmeal, every morning, without fail. Making sure it's ready for Rob when he stumbles into the kitchen half-asleep. Eating in stony silence before he retires to the study to work on his newest novel. Taking a shower, lathering myself, letting my own hands drift over my body and feel how sticky I can get. Returning to the bedroom and spending the rest of the morning there. Skipping lunch. At four I come out and prepare dinner, and we eat at seven. He returns to the novel once more, and I wait for him in the bedroom long after sunset. The hand emerges, or sometimes it doesn't.

But then Rob returns, and the hand is gone, and I must let him have me because that is what we agreed upon when we said, "I do."

"I'm going to have an apprentice," Rob says to me the next day over breakfast, breaking the usual silence. I swallow a bit of cereal and nod. "Okay."

"Her name is Kennady Larson. You may remember her from my last book launching party a few months ago." He sips his coffee and sets the mug down harshly, causing some flecks of black to fly out, droplets suspended in midair before falling and dispersing as they hit the counter. I stare at one of them as he says, "She was a lowly intern at one of those giant publishing houses back then, but now she wants to see what it's like to work with a real author. Understand my craft so she can truly edit to the best of her abilities."

I nod again. "She sounds lovely."

He smirks. "Not as lovely as you, my darling."

In my mind I roll my eyes, but I fake a smile and take another bite. The cereal piece disintegrates in my mouth, leaving a grainy, milky aftertaste on my tongue, clinging to the buds.

I swallow.

A certain Kennady Larson comes by the house the next day, and it is me, in my silken robe, who opens the door. It is warm outside, but my nipples harden still.

She smiles without her teeth, one curved line of bright red lipstick like a smear of blood. Her face holds no other make-up, but her dark eyelashes are curled, and they flutter when she blinks. She dons a tight periwinkle blouse and black pants, which hugs her hips and stomach, but it is her pale hands I am drawn to, her fingers curled around a notebook, her nails matching her lips, and the way they tap against the cover. "Hello," she says. "I'm Kennady Larson, Rob's editor. Well, editor-in-training." She laughs and shakes her dark mane of hair behind her, and it doesn't shimmer, it *gleams*, even in the shadows of the threshold.

I lick my lips and stare at those hands. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Kennady. Your nail color is very pretty."

"Oh, thank you!" she chirps, rocking back and forth on her feet.

I shake my head and smile. "I'm sorry. Please come in."

Kennady nods, smiling without her teeth again, and I watch the hands clutch the notebook harder as she walks through the threshold. I let the door slam shut behind her, and she jumps. "It's so dark in here," she says.

"Rob likes it dark," I say, "and so do I. Let me take you to his study."

The hand comes that night, as Rob and Kennady are hard at work down the hall. I look at the door and back at the congealed mess of blood festering on top of the stump. It walks toward me like it shakes its hips, if it had any, and it halts right at my feet. It steps onto my leg and begins massaging it, petting it, from my foot to my shin—tickling behind my knee—and brushing against my inner thigh, its fingers working their way up—

I throw my head back and raise my hips in the air, my silken robe falling to either side as my legs part. Something so soft makes me scream in ecstasy, a beastly bellow, a primitive piercing even to my own ears, and after I come, fluttering my eyes open, I see the hand pull back bloodier at its stump than before, but it is connected to an arm, and—yes—it is Kennady. "It's not as lovely as you, my darling," she says.

But she is gone, and all that is left is the hand, and as my head falls back on the pillow, it disappears, and Rob opens the door. I can practically hear his smirk as he says, "You couldn't wait for me, could you?"

And he hops on the bed, but I'm thinking of Kennady's lips and tongue and more.

She comes back in the days that follow, and each time I am a little closer to her, and one day when I grab her by the waist, she does not object. She lets me lean in and brush my lips against hers before jumping away as Rob enters the room. This goes on for several weeks more, until I coax her to the bedroom, and she agrees to come over on a night Rob is out of town. It is this night where I know it will be consummated. I shower carefully, deliberately, letting the water run over my skin and drop to the shower ground like a tear.

Kennady knocks on the door, and I answer. I do not do anything but lead her to the bedroom, where the door slams behind her. I tear off my robe and look at her. She undresses as I stand there, watching her. A pair of shorts, a button-down, her underwear, all strewn on the ground. We study each other before I take two big steps to her, push her down on the bed, and straddle her.

Her lips taste like iron, metal, and I hungrily smash into them again and again. She flips me over, on top, her lips still moving against mine as her hand inches lower—

This is it. I reach over to my bedside table. Her fingers brush against my mound, and it is then my hand grasps around the wooden handle, and I push her back. Her arm flies out, and I slash a knife, the gargantuan butcher's knife I stole after making Rob's dinner, over her wrist. I do not hear her scream. I can only see the hand flying off, its fingers twitching, blood spurting from the end, coating the rest of it and my bedspread and Kennady and me with its red. My tongue darts out, and I lick a speck of it from my lips. I shake my hair out behind me and get up, walking toward the severed hand, Kennady on the bed writhing and whimpering behind me.

The door swings open, and Rob runs into the room. He looks from Kennady to me. "W-what—" He collapses to his knees and vomits.

I refuse the sharp, stinging scent of bile and speak normally. "I thought you were out of town."

He looks up at me. "I-I forgot some—"

Rob vomits again. I stroll toward the hand, which is twitching in a puddle of blood in the corner. I pick it up and feel it. It is not yet blue. But it will be soon.

I clutch it to my chest, my heart beating to the sound of Kennady's cries. This time, the hand is real. It is all I dreamed of, all I will ever need to get me through this marriage.

SELECTIVE MERCY, LITTLE ONE

There is your carcass
mouth open.
Screaming in your last sleep,
the way only dead things do
Stiff legs. Four.
But clean. You are clean. Perhaps from the last rain.
Freakishly flat and wrong. Unmistakably petrified in your last moments.
 You are not the sewer-subway-street-garbage-rat
 that I've become accustomed to.
You are white and without filth.

In my horror of your body on the seat, I change train cars.
As is typical of myself, I return to that which disturbs me.
So after 15 streets of stewing, I come back to you.
sit across the aisle
and theorize the horrificness
of how it came to be.
I've never seen a mouse on the 1 train.

But I have seen so much sadness on the platforms and the tracks
Men with glazed eyes, their hand gripping the bulge beneath their zipper
People, fingerless, unable to attempt the same obscenity
The woman who pissed on herself:
 it reeked of liquor, spreading across the floor
The child pulled by the wrist alongside his mother
 who handed him a box of Starbursts and Almond Joys
 looked at me with the pleading eyes of an expert business man
 at 6 years old.
This is all sad.
But I know they crushed you.
Stomped the breath out of you –something like that.
You had no Everclear to drink,
no joint to pack on your way downtown
You died running.

I can picture it now:
They screamed and you leapt from seat to floor to lap and there was
panic.
As the train hurdled forward, the sweet beep of the doors sliding open would come too late.
Someone put an end to it. Then,
there was silence.
They left you there for the MTA workers to find.
But I found you first
So I sit with you.
And apologize to non-hearing ears.
I will be the someone to see you
without fear,
without repulsion.

 I get off the train and shriek
at the rodent that scurries past the toe
of my boot.

13 WAYS OF LOOKING AT ABSENCE

I. A sunken mattress / still remembers where she slept / a bed is hollow, / for her / homesick all the time / for the fleshly body she does not possess

II. This is how she will decay herself / before death / office jobs and the suburbs / she sends up in flames / a tiny dream-villa / somewhere in Italy

III. Earth-mouth / botanically devour / curse at what is left / her dirt-cruised fingernails

IV. The chemicals in her brain / don't mingle like they used to / unravel her from the inside out

V. Feel around her mouth for the place that hides I love you's and spits them out as goodbye's / purgatory of language

VI. Phantom recollections / forced condolences / she was so happy / she was so brave / —the lies we tell ourselves—

VII. A dull blade / leaks the maple tree / amber blood and her sticky hands

VIII. To sit in a bed and watch the walls / remember shadow puppets / hands spreading into dove plumage

IX. She's out of breath, the way a dead bird lays / flown into a window / her broken neck / I hear her fractured song in the night

X. Another waiting room / tears on a plastic-coated chair / no medical professional can disconnect brain from heart

XI. strip the being from the human / and what is left flatlines/ or so they say / spoken static, broken radio

XII. The accidental time capsule of beaches / she concludes their beauty / from the water

XIII. She hopes when she is gone it will not consume us / though it has; / temporarily. / and that's the worst part.

CARTOGRAPHY OF FLESH

Flesh curls like rivers around a wound,
always returning to the sweetest ache.
Muscle remembers every mouth that savoured,
every hunger mistaken for devotion.

Bones rise beneath the skin like cathedral spires,
ivory architecture built for worship.
I have knelt at each sharp angle,
praying to be consumed completely.

Veins flood with their dark scripture,
blood carrying its endless appetite.
Desire writes itself again and again
across the parchment of the body.

Hands become instruments of taking,
fingers gathering more than they can hold.
The mouth learns no language but wanting,
each kiss a small act of devouring.

I feast upon memory.
I feast upon absence.
I feast upon the shape you left behind
until longing swells beyond recognition.

Every scar becomes another doorway.
Every bruise another sacrament.
The flesh opens its thousand hungry eyes
and calls consumption love.

Still the hunger grows.

It gnaws through reason,
through tenderness,
through the brittle borders of the self.

By morning there is nothing left to eat
but my own reflection,
and even that I swallow whole.
Greedy Thing

THE BRAMBLE MAN

It all began with Maggie Bleasdale, apparently. Sometime in the late eighteen-hundreds. But Granddad was never certain.

The old pack horse track - just below Crag Woods - is well-known in our little village for its abundance of blackberries. When in season, of course. There are usually thousands of the damn things. Large, juicy blackberries. The sweetest you'll ever have.

For as long as anyone can remember, there's been an unspoken rule to take only a fair share. To take only what is needed. They belong to everyone, you see. To the whole village. Maggie forgot that; all those years ago. Early one September morning, she left her cottage in the possession of two large milk churns. By the time she returned, those churns

were overflowing; filled to the brim with plump, ripe blackberries.

Well, the aroma of blackberry jam in preparation drifting from Maggie's kitchen soon alerted the villagers that perhaps she had forgotten this simple rule.

"orgotten or simply took no heed.

A gang of grubby village children began to dance and skip around Maggie's home. They chanted:

The Bramble Man,
The Bramble Man.
If you take from the bramble brier,
You will wake the bramble crier,
Take too much: he will know,
And leave a sprig outside your home.

She secured the windows and bolted the kitchen door before retreating deep into the parlour to wait out this onslaught of taunting.

The next morning, Maggie discovered a length of twisted bramble lying in the centre of her doorstep. It was kicked aside without much thought...most likely those horrible children had left it to frighten her. Well, it wouldn't work, of course.

The morning after, however, that length of bramble had been replaced with two lengths; two thorny twists left parallel on the threshold. This unnerved her.

The next morning: three twists.

The morning after: - well, you get the idea.

Upon the fifth morning, a significant change occurred. Deposited on the doorstep was a doll of sorts; a little figure fashioned from tightly wound bramble with stick arms, stick legs and a big bulbous gathering for the head. A ghastly thing. A man of bramble.

Well, this must have affected Maggie greatly. It was early; the village was yet to wake; the ginnels: silent and empty; the square: devoid of life. She hadn't a clue who might have done such a thing. No one in the village appeared to have that much imagination.

Maggie had made up her mind, at last. She proceeded to walk to the old pack horse track, carrying with her the largest and sharpest of her kitchen knives. By the bramble brier, with the village laid out far below her, she made a blood offering; only a few drops mind, a little nick on her wrist should suffice. Alas, she must have stumbled on the rough ground and cut too deep.

Maggie Bleasdale was discovered that afternoon; tangled in the brier; thorns caught in her hair and clothes, livid scratches on her face and quite drained of blood.

"In his own way, perhaps, the Bramble Man received his satisfaction."

Grandad placed his mug of tea upon the table so very, very slowly before continuing - as he did every time he told this tale. He leaned in a little too close and began to whisper, theatrically.

"They say her spirit lingers there still; on the old pack horse road, that is. At night, a white form has been seen emerging from the dark hedgerows and travelling at mad speeds down the lane before melting into the ground. In the morning, scraps of torn cloth are found at the exact spot the form disappeared; caught on the thorns as if ripped from Maggie's dress. It is thought to be bad luck to touch them. Very bad luck, indeed. Leave them be."

There was a long pause. The clock chimed some hour or other. A bird chirped.

"So who should I be scared of?" I asked. "The Bramble Man or Margaret Bleasdale?"

Granddad hesitated a moment before advancing towards the teapot.

"Well, both of them, of course."

*

Later that afternoon, I took what transpired to be an exhausting stroll up to the outskirts of Crag Wood. That year's heatwave was in full, severe swing, and, as such, plants had bloomed too early; gluts of fruit had ripened on the hedgerows; acorns were beginning to fall in showery bursts, and apples lay rotting in the grass. I stopped and admired the view. In the gentle valley below, the country-side looked tired and listless; the distinct lack of rain had caused the fields to turn jaundiced; the surrounding streams had dried up; their chalky beds looked like little more than paths.

I wandered up and down the old pack-horse track, thinking idly of granddad's story and, with bitterness, tomorrow's celebrations.

I would be missing it once again.

As I did every bloody year. September 1st. Back to college.

Before returning to Granddad's cottage, I plucked the largest blackberry from the brier and sucked its juices, greedily. Afterwards, my fingers were purple and sticky; not simply from the juice, but from a smear of blood where I had unwittingly pricked myself on a thorn. I squeezed the fingertip until a little offering of this blood cocktail spilled onto the yellow grass in luscious jewels.

I did this in honour of granddad and his fantastic stories rather than to appease the wrath of some bramble man or other.

*

My cases were packed. They squatted in a corner of the porch. I was to leave in an hour. Over lunch, I expressed my disappointment in having to miss, once again, the evening's festivities.

"Oh, I doubt they would have much attraction for such a young lass as yerself," he said dismissively, mopping up the remnants of stew with a fold of bread.

Strange. I had heard the Bramble Man story countless times - always with their little twists and additions - always told with the same enthusiasm for the craft, and yet Granddad never spoke of the festival.

Never.

My assumptions were probably a little too shaped by *The Wicker Man*. I imagined fearsome masks, a crackling fire, bramble figurines deposited on doorsteps, children chanting the bramble rhyme, copious amounts of cider, certainly and maybe, just maybe, a topless woman.

"You're not too far off. This year is a little different, though."

"Why's that? Is it an anniversary of something?"

Granddad flicked open his tobacco tin - the special one - and began to roll what he called "A Holy Smoke."

"Let's just say the Bramble Man is a little hungrier than usual."

*

I was halfway down the garden path when I received a text from Rebecca, my roommate.

All trains cancelled running into the city due to flooding. Introductory lectures cancelled. Stay where you are.

Will keep you posted. xxx

Weird.

Flooding there. Drought here. Nature was in revolt.

I returned to the cottage with a broad smile that could not be helped. I discovered Granddad on the living-room sofa, absorbed in some lurid yellow-spined pulp novel.

"I guess your favourite granddaughter is staying another night."

"You're my *only* granddaughter. What's up?"

I explained the situation. I couldn't be certain, but I thought I saw a quick flash of alarm when he realised I would be present for the evening's festivities; this look of concern vanished as quickly as it had come and he appeared to compose

himself and beamed in delight. Rising from his chair he exclaimed:

"Excellent! College's loss is my gain. Let's crack open a beer. You pick the music."

The afternoon was serene; time passed in a pleasant undulating blur of rock and roll vinyl and beer cans. We drank something local called Tinderbox - which I was shocked to discover later was a staggering 6% - while Granddad rolled joints and spoke of freaks and weirdos.

"Y'know, the original lyrics to Tutti Frutti were about anal sex. In 1955, goddamn it! Amazing! ... This is Big Mama Thornton; you're gonna love her...Gene Vincent; he was an alcoholic, once fired a gun at Gary Glitter...Lets move on...dy'know The Seeds?"

Eventually, twilight was upon us. The cottage had grown suddenly gloomy and cold. Through the haze of smoke, through the steamed-up bay window, I saw several people on the street; making their way slowly to the village square.

The festivities were about to begin.

A sonorous voice came from the corner armchair:

L D Brown

"I wouldn't go if I were you, lass. It's not a sight for someone of your age."

"I'm 19," I protested.

He sighed deeply. I realised, then, that Granddad was scared. Was this afternoon debauchery a celebration of my stay, or a necessity; an anesthetic so that he might be able to face the next few hours?

We sobered up with a cup of tea and a cheese sandwich. Afterwards, we put on our warmest coats and ventured out into the bitter night. How had it gotten so cold, when the day had been so blazingly hot?

Seemingly, the majority of the village had convened in the square, facing a little raised area; too small to be a stage. There were no masks. No bonfire. No bramble figures.

No children.

Only silence. Woolly hats. Torches.

Steaming breaths in the night.

We waited until a sombre-faced lady I didn't recognise, climbed onto the platform to the accompaniment of no applause. Granddad and I stood at the back of the crowd, and as there was no PA system, I heard only snatches of her weird speech:

"...we honour the Bramble Man...the world has become greedy...gluttonous...the land is stripped clean... make amends..."

And with that, we walked...

We walked in silence through pitch black lanes; past an empty Royal Oak; past the vacant and shuttered post office, until we reached the very outskirts of the village. A wooden farm gate stood agape and the village folk entered a dark field; solemnly and in single file.

Granddad slapped his prodigious palm onto my shoulder.

"Stay here. You can watch. But I won't let you get involved."

I stood rooted to the spot. The many torch beams criss-crossed and illuminated yellow, emaciated grass and soil baked to an even crust. The villagers lined up uniformly; parallel to the dry-stone wall, stretching out into the night so I could only see those close at hand.

Still, they did not speak.

Somewhere in the night, I heard the woman cry:

"To the Bramble Man, we offer our blood! Just as those before us; just as Margaret Bleasdale did before us... For some: blood will suffice; for others; perhaps a life."

There was a rustle of waterproof jackets; a fumble of coat pockets, and a hundred kitchen knives flashed in the moonlight.

Sleeves were rolled; arms upraised; flesh exposed, and those hundred blades descended in a defiant, sinister curve.

Marcia Ruiz Olguín

MAGDALENE IN THE CAVE

Rising chorus breaks through her throat. They hold the shape of her name, foam sweet and acidic. Like the liquids of her stomach that curdles, they spill from her lips.

She prays. It tastes of salt. Her coughing and retching echoes through the vacancy of the ancient building, travels across the arches, shies away the barnacles growing around the stone corners, kissed by moonlight and seawater.

Her limbs contort over the hard stone, the sturdiness of the floor pressing onto the pliability of her flesh. A groan tumbles out halfheartedly, choked on thickened liquid. Her stomach contracts, her bladder hurts, the sides of her neck burn. The air that comes in extracts a hallow protest.

The temple atop the cliff lays drowned, the chorus rises again, every single one of their whims, their questions, names, callings to gods. The water was supposed to bring them solace, so why does it hurt so? It was louder as they threw themselves one by one. She doesn't understand why they left her.

Mercy, Mercy, Mercy, Mercy.

Some made it to the water. Salvation. A stolen breath. Others broke against the sharp rocks, distorted angles, spilled guts. The birds pecked at them, and the shelled animals pinched and cut. The constant cold helps with the smell of death.

She lets her weight finally flow through her limbs, the tension over her shoulders and back sending ripples. As she drifts through the pews, the wet fabric of her dress trudging behind, dragging sand and pebbles. Between croaks, spit, and cracked bleeding lips, their last words start slipping away again. The chorus....*thanks, mercy, mercy, mercy, forgive me, no, no I did not want this, no, no no no no, God* (that one stung). She opens up her mouth, rolls out her thick grayish tongue, cracks her neck.

It is cold. She knew cold now.

She drags herself with pained limbs towards the altar. There is a hidden door there. It creaks and protests. The water has made the wood fatten up, making it difficult to push. The hidden hallway on the other side is dry and still smells of incense. Her steps are wetslopes that resound across the wrinkling silence.

Sloshing of sea water, her first taste of fresh air cut through her. Hands that picked and prodded, pulled her hair.

Reaching her nest behind the chapel, and there it lies, composed of beaded dresses, offerings, incredibly uncomfortable soft things. The net they had used to capture her. She has a pattern of scars across her hip and across her lower back that matched the pattern of the weaving. For the second time, desperation introduces itself to her. She sheds the wet garments and sighs inside the nest. Days pass in ragged breaths.

A guttural wailing slides from her throat, tides from her lips. It echoes the song from that's conjuring from the deep. The rocks from down below and the cliff commingle through song. And it entrances her, brings amongst the waves once more, her lashes glued shut with sand and salt. It beckons her to return home. She is so afraid of water now. She responds but does not understand, not yet.

As she gains consciousness, she almost expects to see through the altar window to the pews and see the congregation. There's only the havoc after the high tide. She is ravenous. Who will feed her now? Tend to her? Dress her? She knows cold now. Knows hunger, knows the sensation of pleading hands, the breeze of their whisperings. There is a thing growing inside her, akin to the flapping of fins, a tiny mouth devouring her insides, as she walks back down through the hall and lays all her weight on the door. Splinters kiss the bare skin.

Before she realises, she is by the cliff's edge. She is not there to look at herself but to be looked at. She almost expects the broken bodies to rise, to crack and bend over themselves to look up to her, to beg to her. Shouldn't she, a vessel of devotion, be worthy of such sacrifices? Instead, the devotees are nothing more than selfish chunks of flesh.

Marcia Ruiz Olguín

She waits. She sings. And when that doesn't work, she raises her arms and orders them to rise. She needs to be praised. What else is she, if not the thing they wanted her to be? They dragged her from the depths. The hours pass. Her limbs protest. Tears fall to her feet. She howls. The wind rises and caresses her cheek. She hears a resonant song, tries to look at the horizon but only meets with the vastness. Her legs hurt. She is not used to so much standing.

There's food in the abandoned houses that the tide didn't touch. Hard bread and salted meats. She eats the fruit, even if it has gone dark and unbearably sweet. Stuffs herself in oil-drenched fish. As always, she tries not to retch. Unsatisfied. The chorus leaves her one by one, and as she walks farther away from the shore, the song feels like fishing hooks pulling at her muscles. She walks back through the empty roads, basket full of scraps, the eerie quiet.

The net cut at her tender flesh as it enveloped her. She cries out, flings herself around, but it only stings more. The sounds these strange animals make are grating. They pull her out, the net sinking further into her flesh. The sting forces a screech out of her. They encircle her with boisterous aggression.

She goes back to her nest and sits by the filigreed window where they placed her for display. What is a saint now without prayers?

The tide rises once more. This time, it reaches the hallway. She hides. The building trembles, as if under siege. She can feel a presence honing in, almost enveloping her whole world, crushing her skull. Something is touching her, hard and fleshy, making the thing inside her expand. She feels another sort of hunger that pulses, that makes her sweat.

The next day, the basket lies empty, and the rats have braved out again. She feels the cold, scratchy paws over her face and legs. There is no song this time. She screams.

She feels suctioned by the harshest of waters.

It rains all around her, haunting open wide bone filled muzzles. She cries, and she bites. They bleed. They taste foreign and sweet. There are limbs all over her. They carry her offshore. The noise never stops. They lay her in a temple, imprison her there with one of them. He is boney and long, and likes to lay atop her, breathing her in. She dreams of tearing off his flesh. They feed her dead things. And they come, and they beg. They prostrate themselves for her.

The rocks wail again. This time as the moon lies atop the sky. It reverberates gaining force. It feels similar to when they died. It feels similar to when she...no, they left.

She just delivered salvation.

The stone trembles, dust falling off, making her itch. She doesn't recognise the voice. But it is calling to her. Becoming more than an instinct. The sky breaks, from clear to a full invasion of clouds and lighting. The winds howl. She remembers when she didn't need these clothes that she now wraps around her, that hang and tinkle.

She can hear the waves crashing against the stone, demanding the earth. A shiver runs down the pews, toppling them over. The song turns to screech. She can feel the building coming apart. She kneels in front of the altar and pleads. The words feel wrong in her mouth. They are heavy and foreign. She feels the song mocking her. Feels the flesh against her lips pressing and prodding. The cliff, in a sigh of defeat, crumbles. She launches herself to the door of the church, hitting her head, clutching her chest. Then, there is a final tremble, and she sees the altar break in two. Sees the flickering almost burned out candles cease to be. The spirit of the smoke dissipate.

There is the creature. Eating away at her fraud of a world. As she crawls, the tide clashes against her, drags her to the edge. She is so afraid of water. The crystal of her cage shatters under pressure. She lets it sink her. A new song rises. Down, down. She can feel it slithering across her body. Calling to her. Her mouth goes dry as an elongated, muscled limb rises and falls back into the water, bigger than the buildings she has grown accustomed to. She quivers.

Come to me, the creature entices. Come. And she does. She remembers how to swim. The curving spine of the beast rises beside her. She reaches out. It is cold to the touch and smooth to the touch, like porcelain. She reaches over the top and straddles it, tightening her thighs around it. The pressure is divine. The movement of the

Marcia Ruiz Olguín

waves and the hard muscle send an amalgamation of sensations through her, her hips responding to them. She realises she is at the end of the beast, but cannot quite make out the rest, just sees there's more, before the creature topples her over. Through the ripples that yank and pull, there it is her hunger, mirrored, her lungs collapse and re-shape in one tight grip, the salt stings her eyes, tendrils crawl all around her, the pressure swelling. Her body doesn't feel so empty anymore. Her guts expand and contract. The demanding limbs curl around her neck, prod at her flesh. Slip through her hair. Invade her mouth. The song changes tune and inserts itself in her. In her own waters, the one of her stomach, her skull. Sharp teeth of iron sink into her. Her veins feel heavy and invaded. Her eyes roll up in pleasure, the last of the air replaces the groan escaping her lips.

In the midst of this, there's them, passing through the water, heavy wet sinew and bloated flesh, chunks and softened fibres. They encircle her but never touch her. She promised them salvation, and they threw themselves over one by one. Fools, the lot of them. The thing that surrounds her knows that too. The act of violence, the sacrifice ordered it in, to service her. Its wailing reverberates through the water, echoes against the rocks and flesh.

The thing morphs. It is as vast as the sea and just as hungry for her. It missed her. She is good at responding at demands. She is an icon of worship and supplication. Her body can shift, open at the throat and the chest, cracked sternum, sliced thyroid. She turns into a cavern to hold out her own pleasure, Like soil formations, it peels back, layer by layer of plump pink flesh over flesh. The wounds pulse, petals unfolding. The water enters her nostrils, burning. Strips of hard muscle and nerves and skin enter her, wrap around her organs, slide through, and pull her to their whim and command. The demon (that's what the priest would call it) fills her up. The roots of her nerves, her lachrymal glands, and her pores. She tries to shift, to run away from the sensation, but she is held in place. At every move, the limbs tighten, the scales cut at her skin. She forgets what is the cold, forgets eating cooked, dead, decomposing things. In the twist and movement, her aches become a symphony that unspools and turns into delirium.

L.L. Hannah

TENDER LOVE

*A mourning dove chases his mate away from the garden, pecking her neck raw.
Blood trickles, soaking through feathers on her breast.*

She turns, cooing, and impales him with her beak.

Palms search for leverage. Knees slide against the cold tile corpse. Red creeps by, soaking grout. Its warmth travels through the fibers of my sunflower printed apron. The still open drawer of kitchen utensils staggers against my weight as I reach over the body to pull the chef's knife from his chest. Knees wobble against the blade wiped smooth across the front of my drenched apron.

This was my favorite knife for slicing vegetables. I suppose it still could be. Anything useful is worth saving. I turn to the sink and push the nozzle with the back of my hand, unsuccessful in my attempt to lessen the mess.

What did I do?

Breath crackles raw through my throat, coated in metallic slime. Nudging his side with my bare foot, I sense the raised outline of a handprint on my cheek. An icy twinge stings my temple—a common symptom of my love's tempered volume. He won't be shouting anymore. The realization gnaws at my chest.

Tension shifts to the center of my forehead as I stare out the kitchen window toward the shed, picturing its contents: gardening gloves, shovel, red wheelbarrow, pruning saw, buckets filled with mushrooms—lion's mane, pink oyster, enoki. A sharp breeze catches the nearby vegetable garden and flails through squash and tomato plants before resting in loose soil.

No. I couldn't.

Besides, what if an animal digs it up? What if someone comes looking? My mind wanders to his phone, filled with correspondence from clients, from his mistresses. Heat radiates down my neck.

Of course they'll notice.

I think back to the garden, the holes waiting to be filled with roots of seedlings from hearts of past peaches meant for two.

A whole body would never fit.

My voice is unfamiliar, raspy from attack. Bruises form a ring around my throat in the shape of two hands, thumbprints form in the center like broken plum skin.

I turn bird-like from the window's gaze. Blood crawls under the refrigerator, pulling itself away from light, as if fearing my sudden act of defense would come for it next. My foot slips on its chilling warmth as I grasp at the rollaway butcher's block for balance. Partially chopped vegetables fall to the darkening ooze on the floor with a splat. The only green tomato teeters to the shoulder of the corpse's blue suit, resting by its now open mouth like a sow at harvest.

The mess is overwhelming. He'd be furious if he could see the floors.

My fingertips graze his eyelids—just in case.

How many times did I pull the knife back before each new plunge?

Two? Five? Ten times? More?

The sphere of fear growing in my chest pushes out curiosity. Fingers creep to his shirt buttons before drawing in, afraid to peel back his layers. A familiar ache breaks through my settling spine, tense as the tile below. Each day I stand for hours on this floor, preparing meals rarely enjoyed. My love had a tendency to criticize, making subtle comments about the excess seasoning. I adjusted. After carefully measuring out salt and herbs, he would complain that the meal was bland or the vegetables had inconsistent cuts, throwing out whole plates of food, deciding he no longer likes this spice or that vegetable.

The meat is tough.

His insults came night after night.

I think back to the cuts that were so quickly criticized. The way my knife slid through them as if they were the butter I'd used to bathe them in. Everyday I wander through mental notes and recipes before remembering how easy it was to push the blade through flesh. The surprise I felt when it broke through gristle. The sensation was nothing like slicing a vegetable. I hadn't considered pressure put on the point of a knife would cut in better than sawing meat with the edge.

I'll need to sharpen the knives again.

With my mind placed on last night's dinner, I bare the pale flesh of his graying chest. Unwilling to count the wounds, I scoop up his ruined clothes and retrieve a box of matches from the top of the blood sprayed refrigerator before creeping out the back door to the fire pit. Red, gooey footprints trail behind.

This is my first time.

I drop the ruined clothes into the fire pit and fumble to strike a match, hands trembling until I give up. until I give up.

L.L. Hannah

Frogs and crickets sing their evening melodies from across the lawn. Their cries are a screaming match between parting ex-lovers. Walking quietly back to the house, I make my way through stalks of unmowed grass. Gnats swarm the blackening crust on my legs when my foot meets something soft and cool.

Beneath my heel is a mourning dove, partially flattened. Ants crawl across its downy chest into a wound. I cringe at the sight and hop to the door, silently slipping in along the screen.

What is left of my husband is still lying in a puddle. I knew he would be there, but nobody ever gets used to seeing something like this—or maybe they do. I'm not sure of anything right now.

I brace my knees against his nakedness, quivering as I search for the strength to hoist him up before dropping dead weight to the floor. He always joked about weakness. Opening picklejars with his bare hands and reaching into upper cabinets to retrieve heavy glass serving dishes. I feigned annoyance, but I kind of loved his little jests. At first. They felt endearing before. He used to treat me like I was some small adorable thing for him to take care of and spoil. But that was before the comments were streaked with contempt, resentment.

Grabbing his ankles, I try to pull him but he slips from the moistness of my grasp. Sweat trickles from every pore as a flood of panic rises in my chest for the first time since I—since my love took his last breath. I don't know if I'll get away with this. I don't know if I want to. I scan the kitchen and spot a towel to wrap around his wrist, thinking of the countless jars I opened on my own, before I met my love.

Red streaks the floor as I heave his weight down the hallway to the bathroom. Another of his messes I must clean up. Although, I suppose this mess is my fault, in a way.

We pass through the bathroom door and I step into the tub before using the last of my strength to tug his body in with me.

My love insisted we buy a house with a clawfoot tub to soak in together. *Marinate*, he called it, though he never joined. We *marinate* with a bottle of pink, strawberry scented bubbles. Like the bathwater, my eyes sting and fill. The core of my body shakes, the chill of organs press outward as the water boils my flushing skin, like the juicy remains of fowl in a stock pot.

I wipe my face with the reddening bathwater, the rehydration of dried blood. Cells refill with fluid, swirling outward. The ache in my chest refuses to leave. Gently, I brush a lock of my love's hair from his forehead. He really was—is—so handsome. I used to adore his crooked smile, the way his laugh etched lines around his eyes. Now there is no grin. No warmth. Though I can't remember the last time I saw him smile without a phone in hand.

I lean forward and gulp water from the faucet, sensing its heat in my belly. The lump in my throat begins to clear. Our toes disappear as scarlet-flushed bubbles rise over us. The ache in my back seeps into the water. A bath always helped with the pain. It's why he insisted on buying a house with a tub. Insisting. Always insisting his choices were for my own good. I wonder if that was true. I believed it for so long.

When did I stop believing? I'm not sure if I ever have.

Apologies flow as tears slide away from their ducts, my body tensing and recoiling with each iteration. The water interrupts the repetition, shutting off as I glance down to see my love gaze in my direction, his eyes clouded over, but open—open. Thrashing from beneath him, I plummet over the edge.

His eyes were closed, weren't they?

The cold floor rechills my body as I sit and wait, listening to the clock in the next room, lost in the rhythm of its tick. Warmth evaporates from my pores and pink lines streak down the side of the tub before I peer over its edge.

Eyes closed. I'm imagining things.

I scold myself, unsure if the voice is his or my own.

My tired body hoists itself onto the cold porcelain. I don't remember turning the water off. I must have. I need to do *something*, suddenly feeling a twinge of motivation. I just want to be close to my love again, the way we were, but happier times fade from memory. I retrieve a sponge from the side of the tub and gently brush the blood from his chest, finally noticing the wounds before averting my eyes.

"Maybe I should turn myself in," I tell him.

In a voice as tender as the day we met, he whispers, "Don't."

Eyes open. I freeze, unsure if I can trust my vision.

Is this happening?

My husband is dead. I killed him.

He's in our bathtub talking to me.

I could be imagining this. He often accused me of imagining scenarios that I knew to be true—*thought* to be true.

He's not dead?

There was so much blood. I move to check his pulse, but fear holds me tight.

L.L. Hannah

"Listen," he says, mouth open slightly, unmoving. My stomach dives at the tone. "Do not turn yourself in." I silently nod at him, a near involuntary action during our years together.

"Go to the kitchen and get the electric carving knife." My eyes widen in horror, but ready to obey as I always have.

Without further hesitation, I retrieve the electric knife, clutching it against my chest as I make my way down the hall, carefully avoiding the trail of coagulation.

"My love?" barely escapes my lips. No reply. I must have imagined it. He always said I was a little unhinged at times. His voice echoes in my memory.

Don't be hysterical.

I pull the drain plug and rinse his body before pressing the blade to his thigh. My thoughts drown out the machine's whirs. It wanders to the spice cabinet, to the garden. Rosemary, parsley, garlic, thyme. Sunlight disappears from the window, but I linger without a sense of time.

* * *

Hours pass. The sun rises over the fence as I tilt the remnants of my stock pot into the garden soil and drop to my knees, dragging loam over freshly boiled bones. Filling empty space before giving the ground a pat. He loved my homemade bone broth. It was one of the few meals met with grumbles of satisfaction. I draw in the mingling aroma of sweet petrichor and herbs before making my way over to the lawn chair to settle in its wooden frame. Thankful to rest my aching flesh.

A lone mourning dove lands beside the corpse of her mate, fluttering, pecking at his breast between coos. I strip the drenched, ragged apron from my body, drop it into the fire pit, and marinate the mess with lighter fluid. My hands no longer tremble as I strike the match. As the fire bellows and climbs, I inhale the depth of the flame and wonder how *tender* a man can be.

BEATITUDE

Twilight descends like a bird of prey over the unsuspecting woodland. Aude sits atop the branch of a tree, feels the warmth tick away, as it all turns a shade of purplish gray. Feels the hardened soles of her feet start to seek friction against the bark, the first recoil of skin against being cut, pliancy, and finally the relief. Her toes start going cold, the shoes sorely missed lie on the ground. Her head itches from ongoing days without a proper “bath”. It’s been too cold, and they’ve had to content themselves with wet scraps of cloth and a quick go.

She can smell herself, the cloying sweetness between her legs accumulating against her underwear. Smells the dirt over her skin, under her nails, the dust settling between the folds of her dress. Acrid bite after a perfect shot, the smell of blood and skin that isn’t her own. The sweat that has gone sour. She feels haunted by grime, like it is a second person hovering over her, whispering discomfort and shame.

Her stomach contracts in pain. She reaches into her pocket and finds a piece of pine bark, chews on it slowly. The flavor is still too bitter for her tastes, and the texture is stringy, and she tries to be careful. One of the girls splintered her lips from cutting too deep into the tree. Thankfully, a lot of them carried tweezers with them. Another ate too much of it, and her innards started turning on themselves, hardening. Aude couldn’t blame her though. Once upon a time she believed to know emptiness. Foolish, foolish girl. This void that now constantly rests inside her is a monster making her body a lair. The lightheadedness and the shrinking of her body invoke an otherworldliness. She is in the process. She can feel it, the immateriality of her.

She is becoming the ground she walks on, softened by the decomposing leaves, the strings of bark she chews, the contraction of her stomach, the rain scented wind. The smell of dying blood that sheds erratically out of her, staining her clothes brown.

As for the others, they walk like hauntings, wood sprites, distilled versions, macerated to perfection. They are shifting too. Voids that are endlessly consuming the greens, the dried meat, the crumbles in the wrappers. One was eating lipstick the other day. They haven’t completely let go.

And she—she has been expecting to realize a miracle. It is expected of her, so she lays her forehead against the bark of the tree and whispers a prayer.

It answers, with the snap of a twig, rustling that emulates her breathing. She brings the rifle against her cheek, slides her hand to steady the barrel, softly curls her finger around the trigger. Each step is done with reverence. She prays into the metal, lets the weight sink into her shoulder, bite her skin. The deer materializes through the rays of light, and her blood sings.

She shoots, right into its eye. The miracle.

Her mouth waters as she jumps onto the ground, and on all fours, crawls over the dirt and the grass, the movement of her hips swaying, curving her spine, head low to the ground, nostrils flaring. A low guttural click reverberates from her tongue. She presses her forehead against the eye, in reverence, feels the now congealing blood stick over her forehead. Gulps the words, “Thank you.”

“Not this again”

“If you don’t respect what it gives us it will never grace us again”

“Aude...”

“Isabel.” Her tone contains tender mockery.

Isabel helps her with the carcass. After, she extracts the heart and wraps it in her old silk scarf. It will be good as an offering later.

...

Isabel corners her against the frozen wood and smashes her against it so hard her ears ring. She calls her a monster, psychotic. Slaps her across the face. The sting feels good. Hand gripping at her throat. The lack of oxygen makes her see the delimitations of It. It shines in gold sunlight, all the tales told once and told again flooding and pumping through her veins.

“I am a saint,” Aude whispers as she walks away, tasting the blood from her split lip. She saw the hunger in Isabel. She understands her violence.

...

Marcia Ruiz Olguín

The demands of the earth started a month of them inhabiting the woods. After *It* observed them, calculated them. And Aude listened.

It tested her faith first. Contorted her body to fit *It*. Scratched her throat raw.

She made the sulfurous waters from the river nearby clean to drink. Brought meat to the table they hadn't tasted in weeks.

It guided her hand and steadied it as she took hold of the gun they had been left with. Spider nests hung from the walls, and other animals seemed to find shelter there. That brought them comfort back then that food wouldn't be scarce. Or so they thought.

So she kept realizing miracles that Isabel in her practically always mocked. She hunted for the group too, gathered roots and leaves and whatever she could find. They were a good team. Aude understood the balance in their work. It is what *It* wanted. At first.

The miracles become harder to perform. But the girls believe in and need them more.

...

Winter has eaten their guts.

Isabel paces up and down, the guilt and the stagnancy breaking her down to teats. Some girls huddle close, others pray, others curse.

Aude, covered in the skin of deer and a makeshift of her clothes, is sweating inside this accumulation of layers. But every time she breathes, she burns. She's been meditating in the cold all morning. It has been ignoring her. They were punished, preserved meat rotting. Sienna had gotten sick. And the last days of autumn, they hadn't found a thing. But her faith in it wouldn't waver.

She is so so tired. Could let the snow take her. Perhaps feed the woods. Feed the girls. She feels out of miracles.

She looks up at the sunlight, at Isabel.

Isabel, she hates and loves. She is the only one that she trusts. She wraps her with a blanket.

"Get inside, Aude." Her voice is stern and sends a whole other kind of shiver through Aude. She likes it when Isabel says her name. "Enough of this nonsense"

She picks her up, her pillar.

"Do you doubt me?" she laughs.

"Never." Isabel's embrace is nourishment. The scent of her skin is sweet like honey.

One of them dies several nights later, out of desperation. Aude understands this as a gift. Drags the girl outside, and with frozen, reverent fingers, slices her open like the deer. It is best if they don't see it. They pass it along, breathing in desperate gulps. Grace looks at her and she knows. She smiles and eats the chunk whole.

Later, on her own, she sneaks out into the snow again, uncovers the heart, and the crawling of the insects demands she takes a bite. It is hard to chew. It is dense, and the connective tissue gets stuck between her teeth. The insides are rigid and remind her of the pine bark. She holds back the nausea, the urge to spit it out, and gulps it all down. The voice rises through the trees, enveloping the darkness. She screams back.

...

They sacrifice Cecily first. It all started as a game, until the adrenaline pumps through their veins, and the distillation takes away their reason too. They chant and holler, responding to the murmuring spirits

Take take take take take.

Cecily understands and laughs. It is a crescendo that takes over her face, contorts it and brings out the true Cecily. It strains the muscle of her throat, flails around her limbs. She runs faster. Becoming.

...

Marcia Ruiz Olguín

The rifle is only used in very special occasions. Grace follows her everywhere with it, a self designated knight. Isabel does not like it. She grimaces and insults Grace under her breath. Confronts Aude any chance she gets. Calls her insane. Calls them all insane. They try to encircle her, beat her up. She wins. It likes her after all. But she comes bruised to Aude, who has made a home outside of a hollowed tree, twigs and pelts, and hard packed snow. She has lost two fingers to frost bite. She has kept them buried in snow, and lies on her lap. Wounded animal licking at her wounds.

Aude runs her fingers through her hair benevolently. Isabel is so empty. She looks at their saint. This girl contorted, that holds something ancient in her, something that looks back at her with assurance, with forgiveness. If only she could let go. This saint that she wants to serve, even if it goes against everything in her nature. She sees the girl still, underneath the dirt, the scars and the frost. She reaches for her, wraps her hand around her throat. She has always been stronger. Aude is but a bendable twig. Isabel lays a pray over her lips, stealing an animalistic sound out of them both. A thrill runs down curls and sinks its teeth. She does the same—bites into her. Drags blood out.

“Feed me.”

Aude sinks her fingers into her bruised flesh, dragging pain out of her, and laughs mirth that tastes better with its cruelty. She gives more pain in return. Then, she postrates herself, kissing her saint's uneven feet, her calves. Rises her, then drags her back down over her mouth. The arousal of her saint tastes like the earth, sweet and heady. A primal need sprouts and demands. The mollusk of her tongue feeds. Aude prays louder than ever before.

...

The miracles become more wondrous as bodies bleed and It becomes satisfied. Isabel demands more. She can feel it. The flesh changing, the warmth coming in. The flush in the remaining girls. She offers them a feast. A cornucopia. From her lips, fall fruits. From the flesh, honey drips. From her own hunger, there is wine. Sweet and spiced. Light shimmers everywhere she walks. They chant.

...

They are alone.

“Do it.”

“No.”

Isabel kneels, looking up at her in devotion.

“Yes.”

“Do it.”

Out of her rib she makes one more miracle, opening her flesh.

“You taste like honeycomb.”

She carves out of her arm.

Isabel's fingers sting inside her as she pumps.

Their kiss is charred flesh and blood.

Teeth. Moans as stolen prayers.

“Isabel.”

“Aude.”

“Kiss me.”



“THE CRAVING”

I arrive at the bar almost an hour before I am supposed to, because I want to see her when she enters. It gives me a distinct pleasure to see my women scan the room as they put one step through the door, nervous eyes darting to and from the bar (will I be sitting there?) and the booths (will I have reserved a table?), shaky breaths making their chests move in and out. I tap my fingers rhythmically against the cold glass of beer I have been nursing for a little over ten minutes. The door swings open. I still my fingers, and sit up straight. She is here early. Unexpected, but not too surprising. There is not a second of hesitation—her eyes find mine instantly. She is wearing a long, blood-red dress that wraps around her body in a way that leaves little to the imagination; through the slit that runs all the way up to her hip, I see her leg, shimmery, as she takes long strides towards me. I down the last of the beer in one gulp and stand up. Her photographs did not do her any justice at all—her beauty far exceeds what a camera could possibly capture. Full, crimson lips part to say my name.

"Carnelle," I say, taking her hand. She tries to hide it, but I see the spark in her eyes when I say her name. And despite the confidence with which she strutted in, her hand is clammy. "It is a pleasure to see you," I say, pausing so I can glance down at her lips, "in the flesh." Her gasp does not go unnoticed as I kiss the back of her hand, letting my tongue slip out just slightly, tasting that saline perspiration.

"So, you are a doctor?," I start, when the waiter gives us our food. She's gotten a pork shoulder, and she chooses to first take a bite before she answers me. But I am patient. I am understanding. And, I already know whatever there is to know about her, so I don't particularly mind.

"Yes," she says finally, her tongue moving around her mouth, gliding over and behind her teeth, clearing it. "A vet, technically, but I did go to med-school. But, let's not talk about work. Not right now." As she says that, her foot shifts under the table, and I feel bare toes moving up and down my shin. When I part my knees slightly, she takes the hint and toes closer inwards, inching higher.

"Do you have any pets?," she asks, leaning down to take another bite of her food, a large one. It takes me a little too much self-control not to pin her down right then and there, but I only smile as I respond.

"No, but...I think I mentioned this to you once over the phone. I have always wanted a little pig. They'd make good pets, I think."

"Really?," she asks, her eyebrows rising. "How come?"

I don't answer, and I know the irony is not lost on her. She extends her arm towards me, offering me a bite of the cooked pig on her plate. I don't know how to politely refuse, so I don't, and force it down. She knows this though, she knows I don't want to eat her food, that I have already lost my appetite. But her foot is working faster now and I know she sees it in my eyes; I reach down under the table cloth, and grab her ankle. My fingers dig into the soft skin, and dear god, it is much softer than it initially looked like, and I get the sense her body would be malleable in my hands. Her foot twitches in my hand, but eventually she draws it back.

"Do you? Have any pets?," I ask, crossing one knee over the other, so she can see my skirt rise up, the glistening moisture on my thigh before I hide it. She sucks in a sharp breath. She tried; I will give her that. But alas, it was never up to her.

When I walk her back to her apartment, she looks at my lips expectantly before she turns to go inside. I know she is not going to tell me to come on in, to have a little nightcap before I go home. I know she will not make the move, not after that dinner. I see the swell of her belly as she breathes in and out faster than she should. The heavy meal, the wine, the walk back, it is taking its toll now, and I notice with glee the beads of sweat dotting her forehead, one threatening to drip down into her eye. I decide that I have put her in her place enough, so I lean down to peck her on the mouth, letting my tongue brush the inside of her lips. But before she can reciprocate, before she can suck it in, I withdraw, leaving her looking foolish with her mouth open. "I'll see you tomorrow?," I say, instead of wishing her a good night. She nods, her hand reaching to her lips, tracing over where my mouth had just been. I don't wait for her to say anything, and I leave.

The next evening, I ring the doorbell. I wait on her doorstep with a bouquet of red roses in my hands. I think of what she will be wearing, whether it will be another gown with a slit that just barely shows what mustn't be seen, or perhaps the loose blouse she had shown me in a video, with the leather pants, that hug her in a way that makes her seem edible. My question is answered when she opens the door wearing nothing I had imagined, which is nothing at all. The flowers are pushed out of my hand, soon abandoned on the floor.

In bed, I sink my teeth into the tender flesh of her neck, dip my tongue into the small, hollow space on her collarbone. I only draw back when I taste the metallic twinge of blood, smell the iron on her coppery skin. We have had endless nights of sleepless conversations about my expectations, about hers, so we both know what is coming when I say, "Now, we don't like wasting efforts, do we?" I place my hand on the back of her neck, tugging at the hair at the base of her scalp. Her hands wrap around my neck and her nails dig deep into my bare back. my neck and her nails dig deep into my bare back.

Angel Kolady

As tight as I am holding her in place, she manages to nod. Carefully, I drag her to the floor, press her face to the rough carpet so it would leave marks on her cheeks the next day. There is blood under her nails. She licks them clean and then looks towards the floor. Her lips, painted scarlet, young and full, circle over the soft petals strewn about. I bend down so my mouth is on her ear, my breath making her shudder. I take a hand and close it around her throat, not applying any pressure. I feel for the movement of her throat as she swallows the petals, and, when I do, I take her earlobe in my mouth and flick my tongue over it, tasting the salt of her sweat, fresh and dank.

Her breathing changes so I know she's about to reach her breaking point. She turns her head towards me and I see it in her eyes, in her pupils, enlarged and inviting. She moves her hand to motion for me to stop, but the only response she gets is me tightening my hand around her throat. Her face flushes red. Yes, she is close to being tipped over, to erupt. I wait, patiently, and when I feel the muscles in her throat work back in reverse, I clamp my other hand over her mouth. Her eyes are pleading now, but I know only too well that it is just for show. Hair sticks to her face as her cheeks swell up with what she's not able to keep in, but I shake my head. "You want this," I say, even as she's shaking her head no. She tries her best, poor thing, as tears threaten to spill from her eyes, as the roses start to spill out from the corners of her mouth. I feel her body twitch, and am filled with an indescribable warmth as it all goes back down. She convulses against me, and I watch her face, the way her eyes roll back. It is hard to restrain myself. There will be time for that later. I place my fingertips on her mouth, and she does not hesitate to take them in; it is pure instinct the way she opens wide for me.

One finger, then two, I paint the insides of her mouth, caressing the back of each tooth, tracing the ridges above her front teeth, the thin line of flesh connecting her gums to her full lips. She told me it is called the labial frenulum, but it does not matter as long as I can run my tongue along it. She is almost unconscious as she continues to suck my fingers, but I don't let up, not yet. I glance around the living room. On a table lies a half-eaten piece of meat. It is old, I can tell by the colour. I pull my fingers out of her mouth and slap her, hard. She is immediately shaken out of the daze. She almost comes apart again at that, and it is almost adorable the way she is utterly at my mercy. I look over at the table and her eyes follow mine. "What? No," she whispers, her words slurring. She is drunk off of me, and I have to physically restrain myself from taking her again. "That's so old," she continues, looking back and forth between myself and the food. But I am not stupid. "Why'd you leave it out then?"

I spot something moving. A maggot? A flea? I tug at her hair again. She resists, but I see the smile that plays at her lips. I tug harder so it is wiped off. She starts to crawl towards the table.

It is vulgar, the sight of her grabbing the steak with her bare hands, watching her sink her teeth into it and rip apart the fibrous flesh. She chews with her mouth open, all the while looking up at me. I am much more perceptive than her, so I go to the kitchen to get a glass of water. "Almost there!", I call, hearing the telltale gag. Before she can spew it all out, I push the glass of water to her mouth. Everything muddles into one and she gulps it all, her face wet with a mix of sweat and tears. Her belly must hurt, I think. I press a hand to it and it is swollen, stretched tight, as much as it possibly can. I press harder, giving her a challenge, but she simply goes on, alternating between the meat—it is maggots, I realise—and water, swallowing it all. Even as it tries to come back up she pushes it down. She is out of breath by the time she is done, and pants as I force another glass of water down her throat.

"Please," she gasps out, reaching a hand towards me. I am unsure whether she is asking to stop, because we have already, or whether she is asking for more. I realise that she is not reaching out for me, but gesturing towards the kitchen. From where we are, she has a perfect view to the fridge. She wants more.

"Pigs..." I whispered, bending down to kiss her neck. "Pigs will eat anything. That's why I like them." They really do make such good pets.

EXSANGUINATION: A LOVE STORY IN FOUR PARTS

Part I

We killed our first family together back in '92 in a one-traffic-light hamlet in Ohio near Beaver Creek. Two parents, three kids. School pictures and holiday photos grinning down at us from the walls as we emptied their arteries into a mop bucket.

Earlier that year, I dug her out of a butcher shop dumpster, shivering and caked with curdled sheep's blood. Skin and mostly bones; Transylvanian heroin chic. Nursed her back to health with my own sliced forearms. A quick lick of the razor across my skin, and I'd say, "Drink up, Buttercup." I could feel her smile against my arm as she sucked my wound like a post-tequila lime.

The word love is thrown around too much. Do you actually *love* that burrito, fuckface? Some words are overused until the phrase's blade goes dull. But when we said it to each other *I love you* had teeth.

I watched her laugh, a warm dreamy wind-chime of a laugh, as she kissed them on their cold lips. Their abdomens split wide and yawning, the shag carpet sticky with blood that looked black in the dimness. I would playfully scold her for spilling. "Sometimes it's fun to color outside the lines," she said back, her fingertips tracing my cock through black jeans.

Our bodies pressed close, smelling death on each other. That tepid crawling musk of death like old flowers, newly dug dirt, drying meat. We kissed hard, fucked harder, hair pulled until our scalps were pink as a young sunset.

On the parents' queen bed we sipped blood from their wedding wine glasses. A spirited clink of crystal, a silent toast to our health. She left a crimson smooch on my temple. My eyes rolled back into a mercifully dreamless sleep.

Part II

A few months later. She no longer went by Buttercup. I called her my Angelmaker.

We had a family tied up in their living room in a shit hole town in the Oklahoma pan handle. She sang them a lullaby, her voice like a falling star, beautiful as it plummets Earthbound to burn us all alive.

As I was setting the tarp and buckets she snapped their necks one by one. I looked up after hearing the grind of vertebrae, watching each family member wilt like an unwatered daisy.

"Sorry it was so quick," she apologized and kissed me on the cheek, gave my ear a kitten's lick. "I felt like being kind today."

I didn't expect that kindness to last. Couldn't picture my lovely dark-haired executioner leaving doors unlocked so the youngest child could escape into goldenrod fields. I was witnessing the falling star fizzling before sparking the apocalypse.

Soon there were fleeting kills behind late night waffle houses. Foreplay dried up like a corpse left in a sunny gutter. Longer droughts between dreary intercourse. Quieter rides as we plowed the haunted highways.

I watched a man's last living moments in a dusty garage. Staring into his panicked face as his slashed throat drains into my coffee mug. You can see Prometheus in their eyes if you look deeply enough, fighting to keep the embers lit. Angelmaker clubbed him over the head with a cinder block, speckled my face with scarlet.

"Feel kind again today?" I asked flatly, offering her the warm mug. She didn't reply, didn't accept a sip, just watched an orb weaver slowly build its web on the windowsill.

Part III

I picked up a newspaper to admire its headline (*THREE MORE FAMILIES ACROSS TWO STATES: MYSTERIOUS REIGN OF TERROR CONTINUES*) and the date confirmed our one-year anniversary was a week away.

The past few months there was no laughing, no singing during dissections, no blood-slick lovemaking. I shortened Angelmaker to just Angel. I think she hated it, but never corrected me.

I wiped my mouth and flushed red puke down the toilet. I overdid it that morning, guzzled damn near a gallon to quench the hunger. Jerked off in a rest stop stall to recalibrate as she watched the highway offramp for police cruisers. I thought of her eyes, the way they used to be, with lightning storming in her pupils. I bought her some red roses at a 7/11, a little withered but the best they had. Handed them over with a Victorian bow, and offered her a flask of a preacher's blood. We were saving it for a special occasion. She took the flowers, smelled them like they might poison her.

"I was thinking," she cautiously spoke, "addiction is never to what we need. It's to what we think we need." She took a polite, joyless sip and handed back the flask.

It used to be us versus them; we the wanton destroyers of monotony, slicing normality down the stomach, yelling to the whole god damn world, "Look, you stupid sons of bitches, there is another way to live and love in this fucking wasteland."

Sean Frasier

I got behind the wheel, slammed the door with an exclamation point. I asked if she wanted the radio on and she whispered it doesn't matter. Placed my hand between her legs, waiting for her words and face to match her pussy's warmth. She stared out into the desert at the cactus silhouettes, the vultures circling and silent.

Part IV

Anniversary morning in a motel room twenty miles outside of Reno. A painting on the wall of Jesus surrounded by sheep. Dead newlyweds on the bathroom floor, shopping bags still over their heads and periwinkle faces frozen in screams. A hungry bonesaw rested in a heart-shaped hot tub beside them.

I reclined next to her in bed, a thousand miles of bad road between us. "I love you," I said softly. She closed her eyes, "I love you too." But it didn't sound the same. Like when you go back to a diner a decade later and the recipes change. Nothing kills people like time.

She turned away and I studied the skeletal curve of her back. I didn't realize how emaciated she had become. Just like the day I lifted her from that dumpster, barely breathing and thirsty for any nourishment. Sometimes life is a tragic palindrome.

Out of respect, I won't say how I killed her. It wasn't painless, but it was quick. I felt kind that day.

After a few hours of sawing, I dropped half of her body in heavy duty garbage bags behind a donut shop right before they opened. Discarded the rest of her along a dry reservoir outside of town. A year of memories diluted to a plastic gallon in the trunk and a thermos in my cup holder.

The sun rose behind me as I raced towards Los Angeles. Cheers to Buttercup. I took a double shot. Here's to new beginnings.

THE RAPIDS OF THE FAMISHED

I sank deeper as the current drew me under. Deeper and deeper until I was scraping the bottom with bloody knees. Knees so bruised you'd think I'm a boxer. I was boxing something, not another human, but a bitter unworthiness with a fear of being seen.

This river's floor is even dirtier when you're gasping mouthfuls of water to stay alive. It's been 4 years since I was here. I was frail last time, a mere 80 pounds. I succumbed to the wrath of the river, lying with my mouth full of rocks and the idea that it was all my fault last time. But I will not again.

I didn't recognize him at first through the murky water. I didn't think he saw me. Little did I know he went home, sank, and waited. I thought I was nothing, but he had been waiting this whole time.

"You have beautiful eyes," he said.

He had a weird face, but I liked it.

"Thank you, I like your tattoos," I said.

He looked harder into my eyes, then looked at my hair. It was silent. Then he abruptly proceeded to ask.

"What ethnicity are you?"

I pulled my water-damaged phone out of my pocket and shined my flashlight in my face.

"Guess," I said.

"I don't know, but you're beyond beautiful," he said.

I rolled my eyes because in that moment I knew he was just like all the others.

"Ya, I get that often," I said, rolling my eyes.

Then I swam away for four months, trying to escape his grasp. The thing is, the current will whirl you thousands of times back to the same spot until you break free from the river's deceitful surge with love and acceptance. He is a mirror, and spewing judgment at a mirror only hurts you.

Peeling off my skin with a grater because I want to feel seen by you even though you recite everything you see in me with your x-ray vision for hours on end. For some reason, it's never enough. You simply aren't her. So accessibly giving everything I have begged from her, yet I still want to run back.

PEEL ME TILL I'M RAW

Skin me with your belittling words
Until I'm bleeding puddles of love on your floor

Paint me as a shallow person
While you hide your deepest truths
In the chamber of your frightened soul

Look at me with eyes that
Falsely accuse deceit
Because the allegory of your cave
Projects only the stories of me
That eases the guilt of your secrets

So scared I'll unbury something
You don't want me to see
About you

While you rummage around
The deepest depths of my
Dirty honesty

Bloodlust



Magazine



From the Editors' Desks:



ANYTHING BUT

"...you look at the place where the wall meets the floor and you realize you didn't paint it very well."

-Richard Siken

The moth between the shades and the window, winded. The man on his knees becoming sidewalk (everyone ignores him). The same song on the speakers, that one line that feels like exhaling. The burnt coffee that burns my tongue. The red-eye to Vegas, the man offering to pay. *Or you can come to my place instead.* No thanks, I'll take the cash, though. The bruising on the backs of my knees. The metaphorical bruising on the caps of my knees. The bird, the birds. Schools of fish like me, a sudden motion and the rest follows all too quickly, not asking where we're headed, let's just go already. The red-eye to Vegas. The red-eye home. The reddened eye, the wink of irony. The nameless ache. The return of living room syndrome. The return of anything at all, outrage. The crook of an elbow, shadowed by thick chain. That goddamn ache. The story of the third wife for the thousandth time. Repetition is irritating (in this case it's brain damage). Repetition is funny, repetition is romantic. *Not one argument the whole marriage* is always followed by *she was the love of my life*. Repetition is cruel. Repetition is sacred. I think someone was lying, I think she just kept her mouth shut.

THEY COULD TITLE MY MEMOIR

After all of the guts I've lacked, the flesh I've given instead,
even when I didn't want to, even when I had to tear it.
Change the term, "Work up the guts," to "Fork over your skin."
They could name it after all the times I did it scared,
because I'm always scared, but sometimes, I buck up,
and when I do, I don't stop until something tears.

They could call it: Death in the Shape of Connecticut,
tell the story of the day I left, how I pissed on the tarmac
on my way out, saying, *See you all in hell*,
or tell the real story of how I still visit
with my head on a swivel. I still visit and linger for a second at the store.
Call it: Just the Right Wrong Thing, and I'll Turn My Life Upside Down,
but I'll Still Look for You, and I Don't Know Why.

They could title my memoir: Waiting For It to Lose Its Teeth,
and in the acknowledgments: the times I bit down first,
and special thanks to: praying and locking your jaw.
I have plenty of stories about teeth, how they never really dull,
how it all comes down to callusing over or snapping back,
but this time, I didn't stop until something tore.

They could call it: An Elegy to the Life I Wanted Back,
dedicate it to the day I met you, the way I crawled back to you,
the times the land shifted, the years I spent hiking it.
Go on about how many times I've tangled the thread
while trying to backstitch, trying to prove that I could hold you in.
And the grand reveal, in the end, that I gave up first.
The grand reveal that you tried to call, and I cut the phone line.

They could title my memoir: I Thought I Wanted Love, but I Wanted All of It.
Or, I Tried to be Human, but It's an Endless Art.
Or, I Can't Feel Everything, at Least Not All at Once,
but Sometimes I Get Close—Sometimes, I Get Damn Close.



CONTRIBUTOR BIOS



Morrow Dowdle is the author of the chapbook *Hardly* (Bottlecap Press, 2024), the forthcoming chapbook *Missing Woman* (Charlotte Lit Press, 2026), and the forthcoming full-length debut collection *I No Longer Want to Be Heartsick* (Riot in Your Throat Press, 2026). Their poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. A former physician assistant, they now work as a creative and administrative assistant for NC Public Art, where they are allowed to exist fully as an old school goth. They wish to thank their elementary school librarian for allowing them to check out horror books from kindergarten onward, supporting the cultivation of a morbid imagination. See more on Instagram @morrowdowdle or at morrowdowdle.com.

Dia Kai Singh is a third year English, Philosophy and History triple major at UCSB who is thrilled to be submitting for this issue. DKS spends much of their time at their job as a librarian, but you can also catch them making fun of old philosophers, cooking for friends, planning her next tattoos and cuddling her cat. DKS loves vampires first and frolicking second, so feel free to ask her about her current favorite bloodsucking media. You can find her on instagram @chai._. time and at her email at d.k.singhwriting@gmail.com.

Amy Higgins creates ink drawings rooted in a deep fascination with dark folklore, gothic atmospheres, magic, and otherworldly mythical creatures. Working with ink—a medium as unforgiving as it is honest—she channels the energy of witches, wild women, beasts, and the liminal figures who have long inhabited the margins of our collective imagination. Born in Malta, Amy's work is shaped by the island's ancient stones, rich folklore, and liminal mysteries. The Maltese landscape—with its prehistoric temples, occult histories, and enduring legends—permeates her approach to mark-making and myth. Amy embellishes her compositions with goldleaf, lending them a medieval luminosity that honors both the sacred and the shadowed.

Hannah Lewis is 30 y/o poet and writer from Metro Detroit. She is inspired by the many facets of nature, the human experience, and the complex romance that blooms between the two. You can find her on instagram @hlewispoetry

Laya Newland is a spoken word poet based in the west coast of Scotland. They host Panacea Poetry, a spoken word night in Oban running throughout the year and have been featured in publications by StoryTree, Saló Press, Selektion Magazine, and Dark Poets Club. Their poetry focuses on the political, surreal and uncanny aspects of modern day life.

Lauren Greene creates multidisciplinary work exploring mortality, decay, and the passage of time as integral to human experience. Using subdued palettes and materials like ethically sourced bones and plants, they depict animals, insects, and dilapidation to reflect mortality's quiet presence. Greene encourages reflection on the inseparable relationship between life and death, highlighting that embracing mortality allows for a fuller, more intentional engagement with the world. Instagrams: @karmawilleatu @shopkarmawilleatu

Rayne Alarcio (he/they) is a Filipino American transmasculine poet from Los Angeles. They are the author of the chapbook *Starving the Wolf* (Bottlecap Press), housed in the Poets House Permanent Collection. Their work appears or is forthcoming in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *failbetter*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *Cartridge Lit*, and elsewhere.

Jade Walker (she/they) is a pansexual neurospicy author, playwright and poet. Her witchy feminist body horror short stories have been published in *The Vermin Magazine*, *The Incognito Press* and *Vocivia Magazine*. Their poetry is published by *Dark Poets Club*.

Valentine Roze (she/he/they) is a young genderfluid poet of Russian origin. Presently, she's killing time getting a Research Master's in Comparative Literary Studies, obsessively rereading Oscar Wilde's entire body of work, and writing her own poems for potential obsessive rereadings.

Ellen Webre is a poet, artist, and educator in Southern California. She is a co-host of the *Two Idiots Peddling Poetry Open Mic*, a social media marketing specialist and videographer for *Moon Tide Press*, and has filmed performances featured at the *Pondwater*, *The Definitive Soapbox*, and *Fresh Grounds* open mics. She is the former managing editor for *Spillway Magazine*, and a former editor of *Freezeray Magazine*. Her debut book of poetry, *A Burning Lake of Paper Suns*, was released in October 2021 and won a *Best Indie Author Award* in 2022.

Amelie Vile — sort of saintly, artist, anarchist, antichrist, and a self-profound exhibitionist of almost every corner of her life. London-raised and now residing in the rural stillness of Oxfordshire, the 20-year-old artist, writer, and tattooist explores themes of sex, drugs, girlhood, relationships, mental illness, and religion with tongue-in-cheek honesty and raw self-exposure, drawing on experiences from her own life. Alongside her artwork and writing, Vile also writes, publishes and curates her own seasonal magazine. "Her work feels like a confession whispered through cigarette smoke in the back of a church." Follow the sermon on Instagram: @amelie.vile, Substack: @notesfromthevilearchives and TikTok: @amelievile Her debut website is set to launch soon.

Jaime Hillaire is a Caribbean-based non-binary artist, animator and writer. They are especially interested in character design and character development; their work focuses on flawed characters who are deeply human at their core. Jaime adores maltipoos and bunnies. You can find their personal work on Instagram @hun3y_bee as well as @bakerzzz_dozen (a collaborative account run with their partner, dedicated to their current project).

Liza Rose is a poet from rural Pennsylvania now living in New York City with her barn-born orange cat, Chai Honey. She received her MFA from NYU's creative writing program. Her work has been published by, or is forthcoming from, *Academy of American Poets*, *Mississippi Review*, *West Trade Review*, *Apricity Press*, *Soft Union*, among others. She loves insects, horror, being alive, and much more. She is forever curious about everything.

Ryan Di Francesco (he/him) is a neurodivergent Canadian writer, teacher, and editor based in Ontario. His journalistic work has appeared in *The Toronto Star*, and his poetry and fiction are published or forthcoming in over fifty literary journals and anthologies. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Shadow and Sax*, an independent literary and arts press. His chapbooks include *Mirage of Burning Things* (Parlyaree Press), *Skeleton Mine Disaster* (Bottlecap Press), and *The Paper Hound* and *Canadian Classic* (Alien Buddha Press). His forthcoming books include *Let the Dogs Have It* (Parlyaree Press) and *Along Tongues Full of Time* (Ethel Zine & Micro Press). He was shortlisted for the *Rhonda Gail Williford Poetry Prize*.

Shay Glass is a Texas based poet and writer who discovered her love for the craft early in life. She navigates the shadows that are difficult to sift through by pulling inspiration from sexuality, mental illness and trauma, using the bare bones to showcase her reality. Instagram: shaysweetling

HJ Hennen writes and resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She runs HJH Creative Solutions, providing content writing, editing, and web design services for small businesses, non-profits, startups, self-employed contractors, and other creatives. Hennen has published work that appears in *Summur Magazine*, *Persephone Literary Magazine*, and *Bloodlust Magazine*. (Website - hjhcreativesolutions.com / Social media handles: IG - [instagram.com/hjhennen](https://www.instagram.com/hjhennen) / twitter - [x.com/hjhennen](https://twitter.com/hjhennen) / [substack.com/@hjhennen](https://www.substack.com/@hjhennen))

Ethan Vetter is a poet and collage artist whose works inhabit the spaces between consciousness, collapse, and connection. Their writing refuses to look away from the burning—the dissolution of the systems long thought to be stable and permanent, the slow violence of late-stage capitalism—while still holding space for the fragile ways they exist within it. Their collage works are equal in scope, gathering scraps of a culture in crisis to weave intimate dialogues with the wreckage.

Asim Mudgal is a queer poet living in Darbhanga, India. He speaks three languages: Maithili, Hindi, and English. He is an MA in comparative literature graduate. His works have appeared in a *tarshi* and a monograph. Instagram: [@asimmudgal](https://www.instagram.com/asimmudgal)__

Born in Rome in 1983, **Stefano Artibani** attended the International School of Comics in Rome and the Roman School of Comics. Since 2013, he has been a student of Riccardo Federici, with whom he worked as a colorist on the comic *C.O.R. - Chronicles of Runes*, published by H.E. in 2015. Stefano works as a freelance illustrator and cartoonist for fanzines such as *Collane di Ruggine*, *Lungidame*, and *Antifa!nzine*. He has collaborated with various punk bands including *Kalashnikov Collective* and *No White Rag*, for whom he created the illustrations for the album “Resilience,” for *Drunkards*, for whom he created the cover of the album “Inferno sulla Terra,” for the DIY record label *Heimat Der Katastrophe*, for whom he created various covers for the dungeon-synth cassettes in its catalog, and for fantasy publishers such as *La Terra dei Giochi* in Rimini. One of his comics appeared in an issue of *A-Rivista Anarchica*. He illustrated the cover of the booklet for the official 35th anniversary box set of the film “*The Goonies*,” published by Warner Bros./Cinemuseum in 2020. He has collaborated with the *Malinconia Fumogeno* collective. He is currently working on a project for *Beccogiallo Edizioni*. His works have been exhibited in various venues in the Roman underground scene. He plays drums in a punk band. https://www.instagram.com/stefano_artibani_art/

Malaika Rai is a Lahore-based poet and Clinical Psychologist. Her work explores the visceral intersections of feminism, human rights, and the psychological landscape of personal experience. A consistent writer for the multilingual Canadian magazine *De L'absurde*, she has also performed her poetry at *Lakeer Kahaniyan* and *Beech Ki Bethak*, *Olomopolo*. Her work is featured or upcoming in *Lakeer Magazine*, *The Aleph Review*, *Artist Open Studio*, *Read Between the Lines*, *Monograph Magazine*, *The Yesterday Review*, *Footnoats Magazine*, and *Borderless Journal*, among others. Her poetry has also been translated into Hindi for *Gol Chakkar India*. Her Instagram is [@raiayesha](https://www.instagram.com/raiayesha)_

Maz Jardon holds an RMA in Literary Studies from the University of Amsterdam and blends his research, education, and experience into his artistic works. Where his research is concerned with how medicine is depicted in the horror genre, his art considers the body and its limits as a kind of horror in its own right. Utilizing exclusively physical media, packing tape, and glue, his pieces often depict the phenomenology of various types of pain and suffering, each explored through the contrast between materiality versus immateriality, organic versus inorganic, and spectator versus

spectacle. Maz takes inspiration from artists like Ron Athey, Hans Bellmer, and Zdzisław Beksiński, as well as philosophers from Thomas Ligotti to Elaine Scarry.

Elena German writes from a small, rural home in Northern California. She is working toward an MFA in Poetry from University of Nevada, Reno and received her BA from California Polytechnic University, Humboldt in English: Teaching the Language Arts in 2024. She has been published in Jollie's "Behind the Closet Door" Anthology. Elena is a Special Education teacher by profession and a poet by trade. Her areas of artistic inspiration include her passion for advocacy, acts of queer resistance, and most of all- the hope that we can dream, love, and write ourselves forward.

Heather Rose is a dark figurative artist raised in the woods of New England. She graduated with a BFA in illustration from Montserrat College of Art in 2006, and has been working as a freelance illustrator since. Her work is inspired by folklore, horror, and pop culture, and is characterized by its dark nature and use of recurring themes, specifically the halo. Her traditional paintings are done mostly in inks and acrylics, and her digital works are all created on Ibis Paint. She is staunchly against the use of generative AI in art, and will never use it in her works. Her portfolio includes Tarot deck illustrations for Amanda Palmer and for the And That's Why We Drink podcast; concept art for the upcoming animated series "All The King's Men"; and illustrated cover and promotional art for various local authors, comic book writers, musicians, and small businesses. She has also illustrated a small collection of sketch cards for Marvel.

Martha Morphine is a visual artist from Vienna, Austria who focuses on horror, kink and mythology their art. They are a completely self-taught artist and have been doing art their entire lives. In recent years, their focus has mainly been on creepy little drawings exclusively in black and white. They can be found on Instagram @marthamorphine

Indigo is a poet and writer whose work combines personal experience with broader reflections on society, relationships, and the human condition. Their voice explores intimacy, complexity, and the unseen emotional landscapes between people. Find them on Instagram @indigointrospection.

Rebecca Rome writes women's fiction and romance for readers who want to swoon—and sometimes sob—over the relatable messiness of love and life. She's also the author of a nonfiction self-help book under her real name and a high school English teacher in New Jersey. She's currently querying *IT SHOULD'VE BEEN YOU*, a dual-timeline women's fiction novel with romantic elements. Her short story, *THE SPACES BETWEEN*, set in the same world, was just accepted for Back Roads Literary Review's short story anthology. She's also currently working on her second novel, a dual-POV rockstar romance. You can find her on Instagram @RebeccaRomeWrites.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Midnight Mind*, *Novus* and *Abbey*. Latest books, "Bittersweet", "Subject Matters" and "Between Two Fires" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *MacGuffin*, *Touchstone* and *Willow Review*.

Nicholas Alt is a bartender in Atlanta who holds an MFA from the University of Alabama. His debut chapbook is *Inhale the Ghost* (Spoon River Poetry Review). Recent publications include *Jersey Devil Press*, *Apocalypse Confidential*, and *Chrome Baby*. He's from a rural place near Lake Michigan. Nicholas's website is 3bluntzatonce.com.

Joana (@sisaliks) is an illustrator from Barcelona, Spain. With a background in engineering, she finally became a professional artist, and never looked back! Her work reflects her love for fantasy, sci-fi, horror and everything in between with an edgy vibe, and often features eerie or dark themes.

Lashun Williams, published under “Madame Envy”, is a multi-published author, writer, and poet of dark fantasy, contemporary and gothic romance. She began her writing journey in her teens, and she published her first fantasy series, *Element Princess*, with Xlibris at the age of 18 (2013). In 2023, Lashun published her short story “Sea Comedies”. From there, she published several short stories and poetry in magazines and anthologies and is working on the release of several novels.

Naya Marley is a writer and artist based in California. Her work uses sensory and visual language to build emotion through image, pacing, and detail, favoring impression over explanation.

Emily Anne Elliott is a writer and more frequently a reader. she will not let the inner demons win. her work has been featured in *Dusty Attic*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, and *PULP*. she has a website: emilyannenobody.carrd.co

Madi Raleigh is a Graduate Student at Northern Kentucky University. Her poems have been featured in *Loch Norse Magazine* and *Mistake House Magazine*.

Claire Flath works to capture the absurdity of contemporary feminism. She confronts her audience with contradictory emotions such as repulsion/pleasure or disgust/seduction in a strange blend of romanticism, absurdity, and femininity. And ultimately, her life’s pursuit is to desexualize the feminine body.

Originally from South Carolina and having spent multiple years in Ireland, **Bethany** is a fiction writer currently based out of Ohio. Several of her works will be available this summer in *Folklore Review*, *Hot Mess Press*, and *Journal de Folie Blog*. A lover of travel and an avid reader of dark romance and literary fiction, she hopes to continue exploring more feminist and transgressive themes throughout her work. She can be found on Instagram @bethany_knaff.

Matthew O’ Neill is an Irish artist who is interested in exploring emotions through a figurative lens. Displayed through the dismantling and manipulation of the body, the work attempts to create a visual avenue for feelings such as love, desire, and obsession. Taking inspiration from Catholic iconography, O’ Neill’s work discusses the idea of love being a religion, exercised through faith and devotion to another human being. Influenced by artists such as Goya and Siobhan Kaufman, O’ Neill uses himself as a reference to convey the violent, all-consuming, and destructive aspects of love. Taking reference from religious imagery, O’ Neill creates works loosely based on the seven deadly sins. O’ Neill’s paintings begin as a random flash of inspiration that is then developed through quick sketches into a definite composition. The lack of background in the work aims to create a disconnect between those in the paintings and out, allowing the audience to witness, but not participate in, the connection between the figures. To O’ Neill, the most important part of making is the development. The way in which the work creates its own narrative and becomes something other than what it began, allows everyone to take something different with them. Whether understanding this work as romantic or inimical, viewers can relate their own experiences to the images.

Darren Sears is an indie author that goes by the pen name Edward Britannia or his tag Kogakake. He mostly writes fantasy and poetry and can be found on Instagram and Tiktok

Emma Kwan is a writer based in Los Angeles. She has never been nonchalant or casual about anything in her life, which is why she is a poet. When she's not being melodramatic, you can probably find her daydreaming by the ocean. Instagram: @emmakwan_ Substack: <https://whyemma.substack.com>

Morgan Leigh Wright is a poet from Delaware who recently graduated from Arcadia University with her MFA in Creative Writing. Her work can be found in Death Wish Magazine, Black Lily Zine, Lilith's Diaries, and others. Her collection, Final Girl, is forthcoming from Dead Man's Press Ink.

Makayla Evanovich is a twenty-three-year-old poet from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has a Bachelor's in Arts in English from Point Park University and is currently obtaining a Master's of Arts in Teaching from the University of Pittsburgh. Find her poetry published in The Solitude Diaries, Luxury Literature, and Vellichor Literary magazines, Poor Yorick and The Crawfish Collective Literary journals, and Yawp Art and Literary Zine. Read more of her work on all social media @makksworlddd.

Leah Wellbaum is a musician, artist, writer, and teacher from Boston, Massachusetts. They earned their BA from Sarah Lawrence College. They are working on their first poetry collection, "The Wrong Bruise." Wellbaum has released six experimental art books (Blue Pear Projects). Their illustrations have been featured in group shows in the U.S. and Canada. They are the principal songwriter and guitar player of Slothrust, who has sold out headline tours nationally and internationally and performed at Lollapalooza, BottleRock, and Shaky Knees, among others. They are also the guitar specialist at experimental instrument development company, Eternal Research, working with David Lynch's custom-built five-neck guitar. Wellbaum has been teaching music and creativity practices for nearly two decades. They are devoted to helping others free themselves from creative hang-ups with a curiosity-forward approach. They currently reside in Los Angeles.

Cate Coyles (she/her) is a writer and artist from Canada. She has a Master's degree in English Literature and can often be found covered in either paint or ink, or occasionally moss. You can find her online at @typewriter_witch on instagram, or read her work in Bywords Magazine, Dyonizine, and Fieldwren Literary Journal.

Emilia Horrigan is a Fine Art student, currently studying her BA at Newcastle University. She makes work with gothic undertones, often questioning religion, and using historical and literary research to inspire her work. She has displayed work in the Royal Academy Young Artists Summer Show, as well as galleries in York and Newcastle. She also helps to run the Annual art exhibition at St. Mary's, Doncaster. The pieces shown here are part of a project named "God and Animal" which explores the idea of considering animal lives as sacred, and the contrast between religious organisation and the animal world.

Emily Whitney is a writer and artist from Scottsbluff, Nebraska and is currently based in Lincoln, Nebraska. Through her work, she tries to find the fibers of emotion, anger and dread that lie in experimentation and honesty, and believes that borders are meant to be crossed. She also adores cats beyond much else. She has published work in Death Rattle/Oroboro with "Scavenger's Hunger(Re-remembered)" and in Laurus with "I Think of Smoke."

A Kenyan writer of fiction and creative nonfiction, **Timothy Ngome** is drawn to stories that sit at the edge of intimacy and unease, where love, memory, and urban life blur into something stranger than either.

Eleora Ephrem (she/her) has a creative hunger so large that she dives into just about every artistic medium. Her writing reflects this, with an array of themes surrounding her loves of dance, history, fashion, nature, music, and every other vibrational form of creation that fulfills the soul. Her diverse taste has been shaped by her movements: movements between countries, phases, and lives. Eleora loves the mystical, sci-fi, fantastical, surrealism of life and translates this through her pieces.

N.L. Rivera is a queer Latino writer living in New Jersey. Their work has appeared in publications including *Whale Road Review*, *The B’K*, *Colorado Review*, and they were a 2024 AWP Intro Journals Project winner. They are also the author of *to break the hearts of mothers* (2025, Ethel). Online, he lurks on Bluesky and Instagram as @nlriverss.

Isobelle Masters (Ngāi Tahu/Kāi Tahu, Albannach) is a poet and creative from Te Whanganui a Tara, Wellington, in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work focuses on queerness, the divine feminine, and indigeneity. She is a recent double-major BA with Honours and Bachelor of Communications graduate from Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. When she’s not writing or dabbling in oil paints, she works full-time in government and in an art gallery. @isobellemasters

Linn Napier is a humanities student at Chandler-Gilbert Community College in Gilbert, Arizona. She is seeking a following bachelor’s degree in philosophy and linguistics, that minors in journalism. Linn’s writing style is vast, but she tends to focus on themes of authenticity and feeling out-cast for being too much. Linn’s Instagram handle is @linn.kenzie222

A. Lyss is a pseudonym for a writer/theatre artist from the Midwest, now based in the PNW. They often create theatre and dream of better worlds. Her work was previously published in *Rainbows and Beyond* as part of *Unicorn Teeth Magazine*. “Handsy” was first written for an undergrad assignment in Gothic literature, where A’s professor always shouted, “Phallic symbol!”

Sienna Gallus is a 21-year-old undergraduate student studying Psychology with minors in Women and Gender Studies, Religious Studies, and English at Manhattan University in the Bronx, New York. She grew up in Bethlehem, PA. Her work has been featured in *Manhattan Magazine*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *ANARKISS Zine*, *The Branches Journal*, *FlowerMouth Press’s LitArts in the Valley* and *Eunoia Review*, among others. She has recently been accepted to *Cassiopeia Review*, *Anomaly Poetry* and *Mosaic Art and Literary Journal* for forthcoming publication as well.

Natalie Harveld is an Oxfordshire-based poet whose work is drawn to the raw edges of motherhood, faith, grief, and the strange ways people endure. She writes across formal and free verse traditions, often exploring the collision between the sacred and the domestic. Her poetry has been published by *Free the Verse*, *Turning Leaf Journal*, and *Arcana Poetry Press*. Instagram@natalieharveldpoetry

L D Brown tells Ghost Stories for a living. He also sells beer. He has been fortunate enough to have some of his strange fiction published here and there in folklore magazines as well as having several pieces performed on horror podcasts.

Marcia Ruiz Olguín (she/her), a queer witch that conjures up stories out of silver and ink. Who can be found in a corner from Mexico. She possesses a Literature degree from Universidad de las Américas Puebla, with a Certificate in Creative Writing. Co creator of “The Faoinsegeul Woods”. Freelance editor, silversmith and illustrator. You can find her through raven or sparrow for she is constantly birdwatching or smoke messages as she is surrounded by her two shadows Luna and Kara. In a place full of strangeness and charm. The more conventional means are her instagram @mar.s.cottageofdreams and her author website <https://marisinthecottage.com/>

L.L. Hannah is an emerging writer and MFA candidate who holds a Master of Arts in English. She often writes about nature, gender, and complex trauma from an ecofeminist perspective, highlighting the importance of environmental stewardship and recognition of C-PTSD. poetry has been nominated for Best of the Net’s 2027 Anthology, with poems available or forthcoming in Orangepeel Lit Mag, Cosmic Daffodil Journal, Belladonna’s Garden, Mouthful of Salt, and elsewhere. You can probably find them exploring the forest, tending the garden, or on Instagram under @hannah.landslide.lusus.

Andrew Laguna is a self taught pencil artist from Orange County, CA. His drawings are filled with details of horrific creatures & masked characters. Very influenced by his love for the horror genre. You can find more of Andrew’s work on Instagram @behindthenightmare

Angel Kolady is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in English at St. Joseph’s University in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. Apart from writing, she is frequently seen cooking things for her friends and family, and is an avid stress-baker. Her friends are continually disturbed and intrigued by her writing, and love her food as much as her stories, which is why she keeps doing what she loves. [Instagram: @k0lady]

Sean Frasier is a writer from New York, currently residing in Philadelphia. He runs the extreme metal record label Wise Blood Records, writes monthly for Decibel Magazine, and has won numerous awards for his screenwriting, prose, and poetry.

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Issue 4:

Wrath

Coming Next