

TIPPING THE SCALES

Literary & Arts Journal

Issue 3



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ADESINA BROWN



Adesina Brown (they/them) is a queer writer from Los Angeles, California. Their first poetry collection "SOUND: Audible and Inaudible" is available on Gumroad. Their work has been featured in Exposition Review, Serendipity Literary Magazine, Rigorous Magazine, and Detour Ahead, as well as in the essay anthology "Postcolonial Star Wars." They are currently working on a novel. www.adesinabrown.com

INDULGENCE

and so i have indulged myself:
in you,
in me,

and then in us, together. even the thought
thrills me—
so i wait, again, for your appearance.
i fill the time.

ALICE HANCOCK



Alice Hancock (she/her) is a 33-year-old woman living on the South Coast of the UK. She began writing three years ago as a way to get through a difficult time in her life, and often explores themes around recovery and healing in her work. When not sat in front of a keyboard, Alice can usually be found at work fixing computers or in bed sleeping.

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SANCTUARY

It has taken me almost two hours to get here, a voyage across land and water trailed by the incessant radiance of the sun. But the ache in my legs from walking, every small drop of sweat beading its way down my forehead, they are an insignificant price to pay for experiencing the beauty of this place. Because here, the tree line that surrounds the island upon which I stand breaks to reveal an entire world beyond it. I am able to – *invited* to, even – approach the water, with its waves lazily breaking on a tiny patch of sand no bigger than the kitchen of my cramped apartment. And this small spot, this serene eye of a hurricane of chaos, is the place I come to find peace. It is my sanctuary.

It hasn't always been so. Behind me lie the brick outlines of what were once cottages, a small village that long-gone inhabitants called home. The island bears the scars of war, and though the residents had been evacuated long before the bombs dropped, I still feel a flash of melancholy that they could never return. But from devastation grew tranquillity, the effects of evil actions mitigated by those who wanted to see kindness rise again. In place of the people who lived here, nature has risen, and the island is now home to a variety of flora and fauna that attract people from across the globe..

It's the peace rather than the history that has brought me here, however. I love the contradiction of looking across the harbour at a bustling town, huge ships being loaded with containers in the port and crowds milling about the quayside, while I'm alone with just the sound of the sea breeze for company. It's like a toy city from this far; I can block out buildings with a single finger held in front of my face, and one eye closed can remove the town completely from view. Were I there, a blanket of sound would surround me – people talking, cars and buses driving past, music blasting out from busy shops. But here, there is only the noise of the wind blowing, the low whisper of waves crashing on the shore and the eagerly singing birds in the trees.

I come here when I need to find space from life, a respite from the parade of thoughts in my mind. My presence here doesn't solve anything by itself, but that isn't why I make the journey. Just being able to be somewhere so peaceful, so far removed from the relentless buzz of urban life, makes the world of difference to me. I can see problems from a new perspective, give myself a distance that allows me to think without being in the centre of the storm, and it helps. I've agonized over decisions, plunged myself into regrets and 'what ifs', and found myself feeling that it's all too much; but taking the time out to come here, to enjoy a few hours in the most peaceful place I'll ever find, it makes it easier.

Though I've been here in all weathers, from the rainy, overcast afternoons of autumn to the frosty, bright April days, it's summer that truly makes the island perfect. When the sky above is a deep blue, cloudless canopy, and the sun glistens off the ripples of the water, the natural beauty is highlighted at its best. From thick forests, trees creaking in the light breeze and the floor dappled with sunlight, to the windy shorelines with waves ebbing and flowing, I have always thought of this as the nearest one could get to Heaven on Earth.

And that is how I find it on this late July day, as I sit on a solitary bench in front of the former cottages, my eyes falling upon the dirt-scattered concrete at my feet. It has been a difficult year, and I've been planning to make this journey for weeks to have just a couple of hours where I can have a break from a life that feels increasingly beyond my control. It helped, as it knew it would, from the second I arrived. The moment I stepped off the boat I could feel my shoulders fall and my stomach un-knot, as though the mere contact between my foot and the landing pier had instantly eradicated the tension I'd been holding inside for so long.

The year had started with so much promise, January being seen in beside the love of my life. She wasn't the most mundane of people, always had her head in the clouds and a unique outlook on the world, but I liked that about her. Though I personally strove for normality, the goal of a suburban semi and two point four children being an ideal life for me, she set her sights on bigger things. "I'm going to change the world," she said to me once, and I didn't doubt that for a second. Her passion was engineering, and she had never once wavered from her dream of using that talent to bring profound change to the world.

I supported her with everything I had, I truly did, but the fact became ever more apparent that it was a one-way street. Everything fell to me as she lost herself in her work, and I became trapped in a life I no longer recognised. We no longer faced the world side by side, didn't feel the same sense of oneness that had comforted us during the previous five years. Instead, we had simply become people who lived in the same house, going about our own separate lives and occasionally engaging in stilted conversations that only proved how far we had drifted.

People told me I'd made a mistake, that I just needed to work harder and spend more time with her, but they didn't – they *couldn't* – know what it was like for me. They had no idea

how it feels to have someone choose work over you at almost every opportunity, yet still maintain the illusion of love; they would never understand the strain of being in a situation where you're desperate for the proof that someone wants you the way you want them. But the truth you try to hide from yourself is that all you're doing is waiting, holding on for the moment when you can no longer maintain the fiction that you're the happy couple everyone believes you to be.

But despite the past that still weighs heavy, the choppy harbour waters don't judge me, the rush of wind through the trees doesn't want me to wallow in my regrets. This is not a place to be held down in the past. Like the island, I bear the scars of a painful history, remnants of a life now sadly gone. But equally, I look around at the natural magnificence that has replaced it, the trees both that cover the land in a carpet of greenery, the deer that roam free and birds that soundtrack life here, and I am inspired. I, too, can let immense beauty spring forth from the ruins and be something better than that which came before.

I rise from the bench, a couple of dry twigs crackling under my feet as I navigate the short distance to the sand. No longer under the protection of the thick forest, I am buffeted by the full force of the wind, my hair now a broken curtain across my eyes. But I stand fast, feeling the sheer power of the air rushing around me and not yielding to it or letting it throw me off-balance. It inspires me with a determination that I will not allow myself to be brought down by negativity, that I will remain equally as resilient in the face of difficult times and a world that sometimes seems to delight in challenging me. I know that I cannot stay here forever and that I must return to the stresses and trials of life, but I will do so with a new-found peace.

I come to realise that there are places of sanctuary not only here on this island, but inside myself too; I can always retreat to a space where what is going on around me cannot reach. Though it's not a permanent place to be – after all, everything must be faced one day – I can let myself take a breath and look at the world from another angle. And from that new viewpoint, I will be able to find a path forward through the fear and uncertainty. Because I know that no matter the trials that life will put me through, I can always find some measure of peace and, from it, hope and determination for my future.

ALLISON FRADKIN



Allison Fradkin is a Sapphic scribe with Thespian tendencies who serves as Co-Artistic Director and Literary Manager of Violet Surprise, a lesbian theatre company, and as Editor for Bold Strokes Books, a lesbian publishing company. Unsurprisingly, she has a gay old time in all of these endeavours.

Link: allisonfradkin.blogspot.com

“The Dyke-claration of Lesbi-independence”

It all started during a vacation from marriage.

Not mine—Lucy Ricardo’s.

Naturally, Ethel takes a hiatus

from her husband too,

and Lucy moves in with

—though not in on—

her gal pal.

But all hope is not lost,

least of all when Lucy lets loose

with this loaded remark: *I hope you boys*

are going to have as gay an evening

as we are.

(You know, they really were pioneer women, those two,
what with all the accidental advocating they did
for marriage equality.)

Okay, so maybe that remark really wasn’t so gay,

given the time period in which it was uttered,

but I chose to take it the right way:

as permission to

define,

refine,

and redefine
my sexuality.
I could do more than identify
as a member
of the GLBT community.
I could ident-defy
as
Glorious,
Liberated,
Bodacious,
and Tenacious.

Seeing this revelation
as cause for celebration,
I went singin' in the rainbow
that I prefer dolls to guys.
Mama said there'll be gays like this:
those who embrace their sexuality straight away,
not only because they've figured out
that the bloom is off the heteros;
but also because,
in the words of mid-century chanteuse Dinah Washington,
What a difference a gay makes
(or, you know, something a little more fifties-friendly).

“Miss Cued”

The first time we kiss, we are
wearing playbill-patterned pyjamas,
blaring the soundtrack to *Starlight Express*,
and swearing off guys,
all of whom we've never cast an eyeball at
in the first place.

We've been too busy making eyes
at each other:
root beer float-brown
gazing at gumball-green.
Except now we're looking
at each other
just enough but not too much,

like actresses cheating out
to deliver dialogue.
Only we've both
gone up on our lines.
Or maybe we just haven't
learned them yet.

Eventually, we pick up our LGBT-cues
and the distance between us
starts to dwindle,
until your sugared grapefruit scent
and piggybank-pink pucker
are kiss-ably close—
closer than a checker on a square.

I just can't wait to be kinged.
So I don't.
I lean in and latch on.
When it comes to kissing you,
there's no business like
slow business.
Everything about it is appealing:
the overture
that relevés into the opening number,
with its thoroughly modern melody;
the up-tempo standard
that grapevines into
the introspective piece,
rendered with restrained longing.

And when the power ballad pivots
into the emotional climax,
with its harmonically-held high notes,
one singularly sensational
kick line
starts inside my heart.

From the stereo, the cast launches into
"A Lotta Locomotion,"
and even though it's not
the locomotion,
we are definitely doing
a brand new dance now:
experiencing

something wonderful,
loverly,
and truly scrumptious.

Afterwards, we huddle in a cuddle
of ingénue giggles,
stage whispers,
and bass clef-style smiles.
We share the lyrical sentiments
that inspired our introductory intimacy:
I'm the bravest individual I have ever met,
Sweet Charity contributed.
I'd be surprisingly good for you,
evoked Evita.
I think I'm gonna like it here,
Annie averred.

"We're gay
and thespian,"
you remind me,
threading your fuchsia-frosted fingers
through my theatre curtain-colored ones.
"So what she really warbled was:
I think I'm gonna like it queer."

I try to reply, but the intermission
between our first kiss
and our second kiss
has ended on a high note.
The skate-shod *Starlight* singers
may be on a roll,
but this lip-locked lesbian is in a role:
your leading lady.

ANNA PULLEY



Anna Pulley (annapulley.com) is the author of *The Lesbian Sex Haiku Book (with Cats!)*, which Tegan and Sara said was "an adorable and hilarious way to start the day," Cheryl Strayed called a "must-read," and actress Jennifer Tilly said was "thoroughly charming." She writes a weekly sex and dating advice column for *The Chicago Tribune* and been published in *New York magazine*, *Mother Jones*, *The Washington Post*, *San Francisco magazine* (the issue she contributed to won a National Magazine Award), *Vice*, *Salon*, *BuzzFeed*, and many others. She was also named a Top LGBTQ Writer on Medium. Her writing was excerpted/quoted in Esther Perel's recent book, *The State of Affairs*. She's been a repeat guest on Dan Savage's pod-cast, *Savage Love*, on Daniel Lavery's "Dear Prudence" pod-cast, and most recently on the popular 99% Invisible pod-cast. Instagram: @lezbianna Twitter: @annapulley

REVERENCE

I keep forgetting and remembering that my grandmother died. And my father one month later.

How the news came in as we sat on the couch, your legs tucked underneath you, your hair up and then down and then up again as we talked, the arches of your feet softly curling like wood shavings in the waning light.

I took your hand and led you to the bed, a line from Jack Gilbert sifting its way through me like light through a keyhole in a door no one has opened in years.

"We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight."

You touched me and grief fell to its knees. You touched me and grief no longer had a season. Because the reverence in your eyes obliterated everything but delight, as you looked into my ribs and pronounced me beautiful.

How strange and lovely to get so near to the music of your body, that birdsong furrow, the staccato of your hips, the catch of your breath, and your heartbeat hammering against my tongue, swiftly sighing

we're alive

we're alive

we're alive.

LOVE POEM TO MYSELF

Don't worry. The stars may be aloof but that doesn't make them dim.

You can keep searching for the midnight of her body, but don't be surprised when dawn exits instead.

Don't be surprised that your love is so quiet they called it tomorrow. Because somewhere your mother was praying.

You held my wrist and it was too small for my apologies but too big for our tenderness.

But don't be afraid. When she refuses you it's only because
you've offered her water and she is already rain.

SOME THINGS I WISH I COULD FORGET

Our sweat beaded like honey, mouths ragged with
pleasure, my body twisted to fit your every moan

Even now, I feel the pulse of you within me so
sturdy I could walk it like a plank

You are bound to me, sinew to scar, soul to cell,
wave to collapse

I will go on, tangled in the knot and swim of some

imagined eternity—my hands a forest reaching
for your sky

your name in my mouth like the hiss of a tire deflating

EVERY GIRL I SEE IS YOU

You don't live in Oakland but every girl with lavender hair I see is you.

(Is your hair still lavender?)

The more desperate I am to see you the more non-yous appear. My heart fat as a fruit each time, until recognition deflates it. Not you. Not you. Not you.

The way an exquisite meal is lost on a starving man, so too does life wither in my throat. I can't hold it, can't hold anything but hope—this blind and dumb longing—that nourishes as it strangles.

I call for help but your name tumbles out instead, your name a verb, reds and whites and yellows filling the letters, your name which holds my own inside it perfectly. Like a hug. Or a coffin.

But I can't keep mourning you as if you were dead. You're not gone. Just gone enough.

Still I'll go on searching for you in every girl with lavender laughter and wonder if you got my postcard or if my words failed to find you as I have failed to find you on the streets of Oakland,

nose hunting for your colours and trying trying trying to remember that one goodbye doesn't make the rest of our love into a graveyard.

CITIES WE DIDN'T LIVE IN, III

Your breath as you slept in my arms

that yellow afternoon in Palo Alto—

it came out ragged, strange, a tumult of secrets
preening in your ribs.

I dared not move nor trespass
for fear of ruining all the
beautiful ways I'd never know you.

CITIES WE DIDN'T LIVE IN, V

That photo of us (every photo of us)
our bodies blurred by devouring
our bodies containing every meanwhile.

A part of me will always be in that hotel room with you

examining the fever of us like a fossil,
its hardened remains my only proof
that our love was ever still.

B. PICK



B. Pick is a poet and creative non-fiction author located in small town Canada. She is a student at Western University, and her literary work focuses primarily on the queer and disabled experiences. When she's not writing, b. works as a Copy Editor for the *Western Gazette*. She has recently been featured in SAPPIC and Grubstreet Journal. You can find her on Twitter at @_bpick, or Instagram at @b__pick.

2:51 a.m.

This is not the kind of love
Born from fairy tales or harlequin,
Nor one that I might have simply stumbled upon by chance.
Instead, the gentle warmth of friendship burnt out and burst into
A messy entanglement of pasty and oversized limbs,
Your hands gently squeezing finger shaped bruises into the excess skin on my hips.
I am enveloped by an aura of tenderness and
Caught against your gentle curvature as my eyes flutter open once more.
Covered in fleece and cotton and the scent of cheap whiskey,
Born again in morning dew.

BARNEY HARPER



Barney Harper is a London based poet and essayist. She was short-listed for the Hysteria Writing Prize and has been published in Token Magazine, Ekphrastic Review, Huffington Post, The Mighty, and the anthology Everything I Need to Know About Love I Learned from Pop Songs. She has had various other pieces published in books, magazines and the web (sometimes under different names) and her writing has been translated into other languages. She tweets a 17 syllable daily micro-poem that reflects a snapshot of her external or internal world that day, on @msbarneyharper.

Find her at www.msbarneyharper.com and @msbarneyharper on Twitter. If you find her on Facebook and ask to be her friend, she'll probably say yes.

5 SNAPSHOT MICRO POEMS

I saw a woman
lock eyes with a just met girl.
Love story, scene one.

A girl (a spy) squints
points her plastic peg (her gun)
"BANG! BANG!" say her lips...

A fox's white throat
exposed as she scratched in bliss
while my train went past.

In the woods alone
I stood like the trees: silent.
I was one of them.

The too tall girl stoops,
wills herself invisible.
She hides in plain sight.

BRIONY HUGHES



Briony Hughes is a AHRC funded doctoral researcher and visiting tutor based at Royal Holloway. She is interested in kinetic movement in language, water bodies, the archive, and site-specific writing. Briony's publications include *Dorothy* (Broken Sleep Books) and *Microsporidial* (Sampson Low). She is a founding member of the Crested Tit Collective, and editor of *Rewilding: An Ecopoetic Anthology*. Briony currently lives in Surrey with her girlfriend (Laura) and house rabbits (Honey and Bumble).

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SEA GRAMMAR 5: SWIFTING

Consider these cavities of Portland stone or beams or
reinforced to open your mouth and let out a sigh or
silence punctuated or printed two years ago:
matte – I hold them – waiting for a redaction
or reduction of the surface or instead bend towards
the current. They say let sleeping dogs lie but
turning or negotiating or the conceptual
is a fine line to walk or I can swim further without
hesitation of breath or the edges may move or
supplement the direction of this meander a step
never taken but the prints or negatives have remained

present: the subject or foreground blurs but look
to our bodies or markings or notes on craft or shape
of the hand in relation to its environment remember
or ruminate on the possibilities of the self – plunging –
not bathing or skinny dipping any other leisure activity
instead, you feel or measure or exaggerate the depth
with your toe or the drift with your hair and yes,
do get carried away.

SEA GRAMMAR 6: KNEALE TO

Elated: leaving the hospital or the gel remains dampening
my jeans or jumper or underwear until I learn to sit with it all.
I won't hear from the GP until next week so I'm listening
or dropping into the voices or discussions two tables over or
behind my body they say your name or an utterance – besides –
it could be any name or sound or word or reverberation or
discourse everything is in transit but that's exactly my point
or I try to look for patterns or movements repeated from one
week to another but this year is characterised by shock or the
unexpected. Today, I posted 120 saplings across the country
or from my bedroom and decided that the personal cannot be
distinguished.

SEA GRAMMAR 7: SURGES

It's important to mention that
we danced or performed or evoked
or emptied the fall or ruin of Hallsands
to our mothers or an open space taking the
precarious position of an actor cliff-edged
or spotted between Start Point or shingles
those waves or cloth strips stretched across
or alighting the hall staged to the left
clay lighthouses or rock pools or crabs
clad with machine washable paint a testament
or witness to a power or exploitation of coast
– naturally, sourcing or dredging was a mistake:
those easterly gales or audio clippings tripping
the line until – finally – all but one remained.
So, here's to Elizabeth Prettejohn who,
with 37 homes entering or returning or
replacing the margin, collects rainfall in a bucket.

CAROL MCCONNELL-THEOBALD



Carol has been a piano teacher for many years, teaching both privately at home and in local primary schools.

In January 2012, she started a ladies choir called "Upbeat!". Rehearsals started in her living room, with about twelve ladies and over the years, numbers have steadily grown to 60! The choir has held many concerts over the years, and so far, it has raised £20,000 for several charities.

Throughout this time, Carol has enjoyed writing little anecdotes for fun. During lockdown, she has had more time to do this and her poetic repertoire has grown!

She has discovered that writing poems is relaxing and she enjoys the challenges that her friends and family set

for her: Writing poems on any subject, from fruit to pandemics and for any occasion!

FRACTURE CLINIC DURING COVID!

Uh oh! here comes another,
who looks in so much pain!
He broke his leg just a few months ago
and here he comes again!

For crying out loud! You people!
Please can't you stay at home?
Or at least don't move another inch,
To spare us more broken bones!

The skiing trips are cancelled so what are you doing, we ask?
Pirouetting on the dining room table?
Or skating on puddles like glass?

Your children, they are being home-schooled,
Don't let them get too bored!
The number of trampoline cases!
Well these have bloody soared!!

We didn't expect to be busy,
with endless queues of pain

And complaining, moaning patients, who keep coming back AGAIN!!

So, spare a thought for the doctors, the nurses and admin team!
Their dreams right now are to soak up the sun
And get away from these x-ray machines!!

AN ODE TO SUPERMARKET STAFF

As we trundle up and down the aisles,
pushing our wonky trolleys,
Don't get mad at the staff working hard,
Instead, be friendly and jolly!

It's not their fault the loo roll left,
isn't your favourite choice.
Instead, take what's there,
your bum won't notice - it doesn't have a voice!

It may make other ruder noises!
But that's the least of your woes,
Just thank the staff who work tirelessly for you,
So hard, they're almost wiped off their toes.

One lady from my favourite shop,
Brought out my click and collect.
She told me she was working 50 hours a week!
In COVID times she'll never forget!

So next time you go to buy your food,
For goodness sake wear your mask!
We just need to see your lovely eyes, (not your nose)!
It's not a difficult task!

Be kind towards all the supermarket staff
They work to make sure that we eat.
Don't yell if the shop has run out of your usuals
Buy something else! Consider it a treat!

DIANA YBARRA



Diana Ybarra is from Highland, California, a small city nestled along the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains. Her parents raised her and her two sisters there. Upon graduating from high school, Diana earned an English degree in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Two teaching credentials and a Master's degree later, she found herself in education, teaching middle school English to eighth graders-- a passion that both fascinates and bewilders her. When she's not writing or teaching, she enjoys spending time with family and friends, especially with her wife and young son.

35TH

It's an early winter morning in the San Jacinto Mountains.

It's the morning of my thirty-fifth birthday.

My first movements out of the tent are heavy
but mostly due to a restless night rather than age.

I can see the previous night's bitterness crystallized
on the outer bark of the unused fire wood.

The first round of coffee, already seeping in the press.

The second bubbling in the pot.

The sound of my son rousing, swooshing sleeping bags, and my wife's whispers,
all gently float into the near stillness of the morning
warming whatever frigid limbs the coffee hasn't yet.
Cut loose from the tent, he's giggling and bouncing.

His laughter, an engine revving to start.

He sees the lake and is eager to “go! go! go!”

Lake Hemet shows signs of the dry winter.

Its shoreline recedes from the tree lined embankment towards its centre.

Even in the grey hardened landscape, its beauty is visible.

The sun hanging in the east emphasizes this

by brushing hues of reds, yellows, and browns

across the newness of the sky

and reflecting on the water’s surface.

As we walk, our strides break up the frozen mud

and let off a sound like shuffling feet over gravel.

I think about birthdays before this one.

The industrial buildings with their exposed brick bathrooms

the sticky floors and toilets that wouldn’t flush.

The strobing of light fixtures reflecting on empty glass and bar dance floors.

The emptiness that lingered like a fog

regardless of what the body was pumped full of.

Nothing worse than the stomach-churning sweetness

that hugged tightly to the tongue the morning after.

The need to brush and shower as soon as motivation ignited the limbs.

But this morning,

with my son running ahead

picking up loose branches
and practising his wizardry,
I see the light of the sun
cascading over the sky's greys and blues.
I feel the newness of life
and the warmth of winter passing.
For thirty-four years, I've waited for it.
And now I know spring is here.

DEPARTED

the night you departed
our home swelled
with lonely sobs sidling
beneath the gaps
of our closed bedroom doors

—a soft sorrowful buzz reverberating
through the bones of the house

we were not yet awake
when our footsteps
joined the cadence
of our broken breathing
that led us to the family room
where we became an ocean

of seabed currents
forging abyssal storms within us

a single house light
hung overhead
in the upstairs hallway
like a descending sun
a single house light
that could not curb
the overwhelming darkness
that would consume us
for the next two years

BURIED

dreaming -- you are deep
within the earth
engaging with rhizomes
and pushing daisies
toward the surface
in time for spring's sun

annoyance -- the expression you wear
contorting lines on your face
the view from below
the landscape

...grass you cannot tend
...greenery like tiny
fingers spreading toward the sky

...except...
there are no dreams
beneath the surface
of the earth
just buried vessels
rotting like iron cars
in an old junk yard

GOD'S FORGOTTEN

He took the light
from your eyes
and placed it in a sepulcher
lost to time
its linear pen and range
smudged out life
like all life...eventually...
and buried it beyond
earth and minerals
deep enough to illuminate
sulphur and iron
and fossilized creatures

blasted by meteorites

--You--

stripped from the knowing of mankind

ELIZABETH SWIFT



Elizabeth Swift is a nature connection facilitator, Forest School trainer, natural voice leader and early years specialist. In 2011, she co-founded huathe to reconnect adults and children to nature, to each other and to themselves.

Huathe combines teaching in nature connection, a deep understanding of child development and an ability to manage complex group dynamics to deliver courses and workshops across the world. Her outdoor singing groups are also about both internal and external connection.

Inspired equally by a love of nature, the child-led parenting ethos of indigenous cultures, the research of Penny Greenland, and the writing of Jay Griffiths; her main interests are in children's holistic development through play and the positive effects of nature connection. Her MA, and subsequent research projects, explore traditional and innovative attitudes to children's learning and children's instinctive play and development.

www.huathe.org

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WINTER NETTLES

Stop. No. Not now.

Put away those pretty leaves, the tiny frill of green

breaking forth in a sea of mud.

It is not your time.

Now is not the east for you.

Not your moment to show abundance on its way,

Nor lead us in gasps of joy with your lime-coloured light of new growth.

It is not the dawning of spring.

Now is your north.

Your sleep.

Your night.

You are the earth now.

The earth stood hard as iron.

Your time will come but it is not now.

You rob us of anticipation.

Don't make me close my eyes and concentrate and will you back into the ground.

Don't creep into my vision.

I will not notice you.

And don't remind me how we have stolen the turning wheel of your life; your peaceful turning of the year.

I can't turn the climate tide alone.

Your innocence unhinges me.

I spent autumn willing the leaves off the trees.

I spend winter willing you to wait your turn.

Stay in the ground.

Let the land sleep.

May the temperatures fall,
The frosts form and the waters freeze.
Give me one more year where you turn up at your appointed time
and let me gasp at your beauty.

KINTSUGI

(the Japanese art of embracing the mending of porcelain to make it stronger and more beautiful)

Dankest of dank days.
Made of drear. Of drab. Of dark.
The rain, whilst not unceasing, is yet to cease.
Grey-brown sky merging with brown-grey winter stems.

I do not want to go out. Torpor holds my body.
Dragging my slouching spirit into the pour, I am bowed by the stinging assault.
Grey-brown leaves flap at my face.
Mud spatters by my gaze-less step.
Puddles edge to edge on the path.

Then the flash of blue. One small flash of exiting kingfisher down the rain-drenched stream
Into this broken day
And I am repaired.
Bright.

PAUSE

With nervous tread I return to this moment:
A static – time held still.

Comfortable room, comfortable sofa,
Comfortable life.
A sense of completeness.
Everything joined up.

Then, David Attenborough, doing his thing on an island way out in the Pacific,
Where these finches live.

This is the only place they live.
Far, far away from people.
This is the only place they live.
And their evolution is a beautiful thing.
They live for themselves.
As they have always, since the dawn of finches, lived for themselves.

This moment then.
A silent shattering.
The fast, uncatchable, unravelling of a rich – oh, such a richly
Coloured – oh, that kaleidoscope of colour
Cultured – oh, – with a sob from my guts – the gorgeous complexity and
Texture – oh, the depth and breadth of that textured
Tapestry of my life.
Scales falling from my eyes.
All I once held dear, built my life upon.

And I am atop a bare mountain,
Abandoned, and yet filled with overwhelming, unbounded, exhilaration, as I cry out,
'THERE IS NO GOD'.

EMMA BERNSTEIN



Emma is a soon-to-be graduate of Cornell University and a poet. She has been published in Marginalia Review, Spires Intercollegiate Literary Magazine, Kitsch Magazine, and Black Heart Magazine, and won the Dorothy Sugarman Poetry Prize and Robert Chasen Memorial Prize for poetry in 2020. Instagram: @emma.lourdes
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A CURSE OF WATER

Wet hair twisted in a t-shirt, I feel unrisen,
my yeastlessness a daffodil trembling naked
by the window where I wait to bloom. Basil
dies in its bowl again so I add water,
think of my mother: her hair once curled
and sweated to the nape of a Spanish
summer. In another kitchen, my mother
hop-scotches chequered tiles, bringing water
to a boil like my hands bring water to a boil,
an undying curse of water on my women—
even bouilloned, too thin to bind us,
empty, as it is, of blood.

AN APPALACIAN SNOWSTORM

We boil water for our
sleeping bags. My hair
is shorn and frozen
in three directions.
Street Jesus lies
about trains, carves
his name into waterlogged
wood. My jaw works waxen
from his pipe. Frost
under my sleeping bag.
Chimes from the deep.
If this is the dark I think
it is, let me unclench
my ligaments and rest
easy, my memory streaked
eternal with this last
freeze, this fragility
of untied light.

IN WHICH I FIND A PHOTO OF MYSELF WITH SOMEONE I HAVEN'T SEEN SINCE '06

sallow blonde—I startle at a photograph.

hands, I remember

at the carousel, pinched

in the crease of my armpits.

you trace chills down the slip

of my night-gowned back;

elbows, too:

you tap mine thrice,

push them from

the table to my lap.

mable, mable,

if you're able—

still, your cheek:

papered against my pursed

lips, tasting of softball

and bud light

and legs:

pinstriped, splitting

the front door's daylight. I want
to wrap around your exposed
ankle, a pendulum of dead

weight, but your eyes:

obscured in photographs,
as in memory, by the curved
bill of a company hat.

MY MOTHER'S JACKET

Preparing to move again, I find, slotted
between crates of misprints and stripped
sneakers, the jacket my mother gave me
when I was seventeen. Sooted leather,
sun-stained under my thumb. My mother
and I shared lemon cake at a Kearny
diner, the city of my childhood crackling
behind the frosted glass. My mother looked
better. She had a gift for me. She wanted me
to come home. Out the window, a pot-bellied child
ambled down Kearny, glazed and wandering under

the gentle steer of her mother's hand. I could
make myself in the shape of that child, lay a hand
on my own shoulder, rub calamine onto the bites
on my own shins. I thanked my mother
for the jacket. On the train, I zipped myself
into the stiff leather and was sorry, though
I did not yet know for what. Now I am almost
the age she was when she had me. Preparing
to move again, the jacket gives way under my careful
fingers, as soft as her forearms, as lush.

GEORGIA RUSHTON

Georgia is a 34-year-old single mother and only lesbian-in-the-village in the east of England. Georgia has spent the past twenty years diligently denying that she has ever written anything, and has spent lockdown convincing herself that her work might be good enough to send out. When not writing, Georgia can be found reading, gardening and looking after her young son.









GERRY STEWART



Gerry Stewart is a poet, creative writing tutor and editor based in Finland. Her poetry collection *Post-Holiday Blues* was published by Flambard Press, UK. *Totems* is to be published by Hedgehog Poetry Press in 2021. Her writing blog can be found at <http://thistlewren.blogspot.fi/> and @grimalkingerry on Twitter.

SILHOUETTE AND SEPIA

The mirror and window,
unarranged,
throw gold in light and shade.

Their sunset flatters me,
casting a youth's casual beauty,
locks falling loose, collar askew,
but around my eyes
age etches its true shadows.

A stolen languid minute,
stepping back
to reacquaint myself,
gather up the details
lost by in the morning rush,
meals and school runs.

Revealed, all layers and labels
removed, captured between
reflection and illumination.

A flicker in the sun,
a memory of when I last was real,
last stopped in the silence.

LAST DAY, BARCELONA

Aching heels, but I kept rambling,
hobbling on determined
to soak up Spain.

Sharp white wine
and a long literary lunch,
drifting between my notebook and novel.
I struggled to capture the words,
the perfect days,
their raw edges
not quite complete.

No other place to be.

I grounded myself:
octopus salad,
Catalan sausages and white beans.
Bite of salt and oil,
crunchy bread crusts,
scents from salsa gently heated.

Leather seat creaking,
the tug and shove
of the hours forgotten.
Crockery clatter
and lulling voices swallow me.

Longing comes with English tea,
red teapot, steam curling
on the May breeze.

No other place I wanted to be.

The truth is I want both worlds -
the child chaos of home
and a slow holiday
of words and lonely writing.
Total submersion into myself,
warm spice and sloppy kisses.
I miss their little faces,
the white-washed truth.

On days when I cannot face
making yet another meal
I want that insistent sun
crisping my shoulders
and when my children will not listen
I want Picasso's bright lines
sketching my dreams.

There cannot be both.

NINE YEARS ON, SUBMERGED

The house stills,
heel-thuds, whispered voices stop.
The cats curl in their regular spots
and I in mine, limbs tangled,
mind unwinding.

Through open curtains
the summer dusk creeps in, slow,
until a palpable blue dark fills the room.
Time has passed in the same way
and this overwhelming,
unexpected present startles me.

Sleeping children
and a lack of options tether,
but I wrap my nights around me,
knitting with deliberation
a new comfort.

HIBERNATION

a shiver of snow

waking
the world holds
its frosted breath

landscapes rewritten
wilderness
erasing
dark outlines

poised

trapping
all sound

a meander
soft brush of hours
piling up

an insistence
to slow down

picture perfect
from behind glass
frame filling

sliding deeper
under wool

CRITIQUE

the comments flow in
small trickles of positives
singing over stones
picking up pine needles and loose earth
tumble around tree roots
heavier words
carrying instructions to shift obstacles
pushing me in a different direction
frothing with its own impetus
each wave of advice collects more
leaving the flotsam of my writing
spinning on the surface
the roiling of my mind
with new routes and vistas
re-sculpting my focus
I resist the flood the darker waves
but they pull me under
tasting a last breath of fresh air
the silty bottom welcoming me
others' detritus slow-covering me
mud in my eyes and ears
until I am alone clinging
hands scrabbling for the shore
sand grinding my skin

as I haul myself onto dry land
shake free of their weight and doubt
warm myself in the sun
unthinking until I am dry
and content to release
my reborn poem fins fragile
opening into the current

GINA MARIE BERNARD



Gina Marie Bernard will someday brew home-made mead from the honey produced by her apiary. Bees are friggin' cool! Her daughters, Maddie and Parker, share her heart. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, Best Micro-Fictions, and The Pushcart Prize. She is completing an MFA in Creative Writing at University of Arkansas, Monticello. Twitter: @vixen1724 website: ginamariebernard.squarespace.com

DISCOMFIT

LINES: 63

At 39, she signs divorce papers and stands at her sink
eating Cheez-its and drinking Sutter Home from the bottle.
She wakes to discover she has pissed herself.
Cracker slurry stains the lonely upholstery
of her brand-new sofa sleeper.

At 8, she squeezes her eyes shut and dives
into the Rum River at Kathio State Park.
Mound-builders swam here 9,000 years ago.
Feeling along soft bottom, she hunts artefacts.
Retrieves something to the surface—
a large toad with a smaller one on its back.

The lifeguard says, “That’s amplexus.”

After checking for adults, he whispers,

“But you can call it fucking.”

The male blinks sand from his eye.

Later, at the Indian Museum, she stares at photos

of Ojibwa aunties boiling maple sap, and steals

two tiny bottles of syrup from the trading post.

At 16, she is hired by The Bread Board;

she comes in after hours to sweep and clean,

turning the radio up and waltzing with a broom.

One night, the beautiful girl from chemistry class

stands outside the store-front window, watching her

slowly shuffle between tables to “Dancing in the Dark.”

Caught, she blushes and shrugs and touches glass.

At school the next day, someone has taped folded paper

to her locker. Inside, it reads, “Will you go to prom with me?”

above the drawing of a mop.

At 6, she cannot sleep in Gilmore City, Iowa.

She is certain her grandmother’s home-made marionettes—

Rasputin, Tsarina Alexandra, and a shaggy wolf—will drop

from strings where they hang upon the wall.

Behind the door to her mother’s childhood bedroom,

she hears her parents’ stifled laughter and a whisper of old bed-springs.

At this moment, she may take a shower.

She often gets naked and stands under the head.

Sits in the tub and cries, her fingers dug deep into scalp.

She hasn't washed yet this week, but she reminds herself,

"I used to every day." Instead, she just gazes at the woman

in the bathroom mirror as she puts her pyjamas back on—

hair frozen like a girl from '80s MTV.

-

At 24, she drops out of first-year law school after half a semester.

She sells her books back, and spends a week mustering enough courage

to call her mother. She masturbates to rented VHS lesbian porn

before telling the building manager she's breaking her lease.

She is sitting outside a Holiday gas station eating pork rinds

when her parents drive past with the second U-Haul.

At 48, she rests her back against the stove and screams at her girlfriend

the name of the woman she knows her to be fucking in Fargo, North Dakota.

She uses a paring knife to slice both wrists and sprints to the bedroom.

They wrestle over a bottle of Ambien, spilling it across carpet.

She has swallowed most of them before the police are summoned.

In the ambulance, she apologizes repeatedly to the EMT

for bleeding in his rig.

At 10:17 last night, she saved this document and put her laptop to sleep.

But everything she had written wakes up with her this morning.

AMERICANA

Forearms speckled white, we dip rollers into pans; an expectant room dawns bright.

Her stomach cramps; fists knead leafing back pain. Spotting blooms, then fades.

Our voices rise, edged and amber as broken glass.

A Luna moth caroms off yard lights; inside, she clutches bedspread and turns her back.

Candle flame gutters—one small hiss. Smoke wisps above untouched plates.

Our storm door rattles and I catch my breath—it's just the wind.

GINNA WILKERSON



Ginna Wilkerson has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Aberdeen, where she created a poetry collection *Odd Remains*. Ginna writes, paints, takes photographs, and takes care of her kitties Amanda and McLain in Tampa, Florida.

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HOLIDAY INN EXPRESS, COLUMBUS, OHIO

I watch her from the edge of the pressing crowd,
far from the scribbled notepads and popping cameras.
Perfect in a celery-green suit, her hair
a sleek auburn cap, she coolly fields
questions from the gathered voters – catching
their pop-flies like an agile shortstop, tossing them
back out with an air of expert control.

Her opponent looks bested already – a wilting
weed next to the garden's loveliest tiger-lily.
I feel some sympathy for him, but only
for an instant. She has all my attention, always.

The debate winds to a close, spilling Midwestern
voters, paparazzi, reporters into the town square.
I avoid the cameras and the eyes, watching her shake
hands with her opponent and leave the stage, fold
her elegant legs into the back of a waiting limo –
legs I will soon caress behind closed doors.

Others see the cool exterior, polished like a bright-hard
jewel. I see her – hair tousled and breasts flushed – in
a carefully-chosen, unobtrusive motel near the highway.
Afterwards, she will drop into an exhausted sleep, one white arm
flung wide outside the coverlet. How long
until she swears she never met me?

ALCOHOL AND ATTENTION

spotted in the crowd, i know she's Somebody,
a best-selling author? or classic actress? anyway...
i recognize the expressive face, the stylish haircut,
the slender hands gesturing with baited words
magically she looks my way meeting that gaze takes Guts
more than i can usually muster
a frightening brief connection~~~~snaps across the space

a smaller gathering of comfortable Womyn later
in the evening all natural in sparkling space
conversation closing in on distance
maybe she wants an ordinary lover maybe me?
hands find each other, and the women follow

another party with beckoning booze just one?
(it's a party) we're together and everyone's Impressed

music fills the space with electric motion
dancing, we drink and we kiss too much
stray chatter eating up the oxygen in the room i turn
and she's gone
absorbed into the night and her Fame

the once-familiar veil of distance rises up
from my earlier intoxication alcohol and attention
i try to walk back my misdeeds with a diet coke

no diet, no zero, no regular full of sugar only pale pink
water in one forgotten bottle

home, alone

awaking from foggy sleep to a living Nightmare
legs swollen twice their size perhaps with fluid,
or maybe shame what did I say?
intoxication or humiliation not a Leg to stand on

BRIARS AND TULIPS

If wishes were horses,
I would ride across the chasm
between Then and Now
and kiss your lips with the
tenderness of tulips unfolding in the sun.

I would beg the universe
to clear a path through
the prickling Briars and Brambles
grown up around the softness
that once was welcoming and warm.

With a wish you would give just
an inch of Entrance,
a ghost of a Greeting to my tentative hand,
reaching for the woman
of memory I still have by my side.

ON LEAVING OUR FLAT

She won't have to make any more emergency trips to hospital,
pretending not to notice the way the nurses look at her
as if she were already partly gone,
and only took up half the space her body really should.

The chap at the funeral home,
young fellow with a full head of wavy grey hair,
said to me, 'Well, you know she's in a better place now.'
I know he was just doing his job,
but I couldn't help but think that Alice liked *this* place just fine.
After so many years of moving around, we finally found the perfect flat, and
I wanted to stay exactly there forever.

Alice's brother asked me if I plan to keep the flat on my own.
How can I know, when I can't even decide what porridge to eat,
or remember where she kept the postage stamps, or pick out socks
without Alice here to tell me that they don't match my jacket at all -
and to insist, with her lop-sided grin, that I must be colour-blind
or just completely lacking in taste.

People keep telling me that it will all be okay eventually.

These things take time...

Right now, though, I just have to manage one task.
I have to decide to get up off this couch,
go out the front door, lock it behind me,
and go to the funeral in my matching socks and jacket.

GRACE ROYAL



Grace Royal (she/her) is a writer who writes both poetry and prose. Her work explores eating disorders, mental health, lesbian identity and the small details of life. When she isn't writing, she can be found reading or looking after her seven guinea pigs.

ONE WORD

The morning was cool and bright and the world felt bigger than ever. Cars were louder, the sky was bluer and the trees were definitely greener. Chloe supposed it was all just the consequence of spending two weeks stuck indoors, pacing up and down the living room or sitting hunched over her desk. She'd only had one temperature and besides that, a slightly runny nose and a stuffy head, but she hadn't wanted to risk it. She'd isolated, gone a bit stir crazy and really had to scrape around the cupboards to find something to eat everyday. She hadn't been able to get a food delivery and with Mum in hospital, Annie scared to go out and Nan busy taking care of the rest of the family, no one had been around to drive all the way over to the uni house and drop anything off. She'd been totally on her own and to be honest, it hadn't been all that fun.

Still, she'd survived it. She'd managed to write a whole series of new poems in her time trapped inside and now she even had a new appreciation for the outside world. The air was fresher than she remembered, the park was more expansive and everything was more picturesque. She smiled to herself as she walked through the trees, enjoying the early morning quietude and the sight of other people, just out doing ordinary things like running or walking their dogs. As Chloe approached the duck pond, a woman coming towards her smiled.

'Morning,' she called.

'Morning,' Chloe returned and her voice sounded louder, sharper than she remembered.

Suddenly she realised it had been a good few days since she'd spoken to anyone. Mum hadn't rung and nor had Annie. Yes, she'd sent them messages, but that was the first time she'd actually used her voice. Funny, she thought, how you can get used to being silent. Funny how quickly you can forget to make sound. Now, she felt caught somewhere between sadness and elation. Sad, because it was lonely, this lockdown; sad because she had no one to go home to, no one to come in to and say, *I just had the most lovely walk*, or, *I just popped into Tesco and found this pizza on special offer*; sad, because it just wasn't the same talking over Zoom. But there was elation too, because with just a single word, a stranger had completely made her day. Chloe felt as if she existed in the real world again and not everything was hopeless and empty and terrible. She turned round to see the woman already far away, probably not even thinking about Chloe any more.

Still, Chloe felt more herself again. She felt lighter as if there was an end to all this in sight, as if there would come a day when she would be able to visit her friends again and go back to the uni library. She felt whole, less detached, less achy, less spacey. Funny, really, what a single word could do. Chloe smiled to herself, and when a couple came walking towards her, she was sure to call out 'morning' as their paths crossed.

JANE MACDONALD



Free to Be Jane: I am an urban cowgirl, I bike through Paris daily, especially the upper East side. American and French, I am an engaged citizen and initiator of community service projects and building communities. My partner and I are both art addicts and have an art gallery/ community centre in Paris 18th. We live in Paris 10th with younger daughter, cats, books, and walls full of artwork. Our house always has a full fridge, abundance of plants and furniture can be set aside for a dance floor.

BEARING IT

What to wear conundrum staring at a pile of unmatched socks and folded lingerie sets.

Caffeine jitters, over-water plants on the balcony, fiddle with fallen leaves and throw,

stare as they spiral downwards. Wonder how “I” would land. Monday morning mind havoc. Stuff knife, Sharpies, envelopes and bags, hurry out. A brisk walk to the station, a short train ride to My forest. Everything feels too tight as I sprint to the forest. I haul large branches and assemble tepee. Inside, I strip and visualize my canopy and frantically cut, put twigs and scraps in zip-lock bags, prepare memento envelopes for my sistas. I Create an orphan socks carpet, stand barefoot and remind myself, “Don’t have to match to be a pair, endure blisters, I can still walk, if I fall, my ass is covered, padded with all my undies.” Clamp chest with deformed remnants of elastic, hooks and lace, let it all go upwards.

Toss the bras

Air and Bare the Bosoms

My Pink October

HAPPY 25TH BE(EARTH)DAY

11-hour drive south to visit friends. Worth every kilometre. It was sunny and the family dog chose to sleep with me. I went to bed happy and in a good place. The night decided otherwise. Unwanted reminders. The inner alarm clocks to not forget loved ones and lingering pain went off till wee hours. Every year it is the same thing, I go to bed carefree

and I wake with contractions that last till morning. Sunrises, my tummy is barren, my tears flow and my day starts realizing it's my little brother's birthday.

It could have been embarrassing to come down to breakfast with everyone already up and about. Yet, it wasn't. It was welcoming and reeked of benevolence. I let my guard down, to be just me. I felt free to let my hair down, tangles and all.

She was wearing a light summer dress and was pulling heavy sheets to dry across the cord. She rarely opens up. She is telling me about when she left France to go live in New York. She tells me of family issues and feeling guilty about leaving. She is quite the storyteller. She tells me that life began at 26 for her. She talks about her legacy.

If only he had made it to 26. My little brother killed himself in his 25th year. It would have been his fiftieth birthday that exact day. August 15th 2020.

So as of that day, my birthdays with him on earth would be lesser than birthdays when his presence was in my soul. I look down the yard. The dog runs across the field. I hear a guitar playing and friendly chatter. I go pick ripe figs off the tree and ask if she wants to have a coffee. She's telling me about the next writing class. No tears, in my coffee. I lost a brother but he's not, not there, he's just there differently, as a new sister and word-smith healer happened upon me.

I am sitting at a tiny desk in my Parisian bedroom next to the window. Bundled up, light therapy light on. It's rainy and the cats are both sleeping in bed. I went to bed happy and in a good place. I got up and set to work with unexplained unease. Confinement jitters. The unwanted reminder, the inner clocks to not forget loved ones and lingering pain just went off. Just as the day swings into motion and my gaze gets stuck to screens, the beeping begins. Beep, a new Instagram message sent.

I open a message from my brothers' old girlfriend. "D Mac 8/15/1970-2/1/1996. Thinking about this beloved human today. His final words were peace, love and compassion. I could not say it any better." Red Heart emoji. There is also a so nineties picture of them.

She's wearing denim overalls and had just buzzed his hair. She is striking a pose. My brother is just basking in some poetic head-space. I send her a message back saying "Thanks for remembering. What a joy to see this photo!" I try and send a photo collage I had made.

She writes back, "Absolutely- hard to believe it's been 25 years. Love and Hugs." Purpleheart emoji.

She's got the same embedded birth and death calendar pop up. We all do, it's an annual mourning canon. I turn off my phone to avoid the messages rolling in.

He did not make it to 26 years on earth. Us earthlings still celebrate his departure. 25 years ago today he chose his death day. So as of today, he'll be watching me from above, or below, for more days than he had on the same level. I look down at the plants on the balcony, the fig sapling we were gifted from the south is doing okay.

The cats rub against my leg. I go get a cup of coffee and sit back down. I scroll down my calendar. I see I have a journalling class tonight. No tears, yes, I lost a brother, but I've got an urge to put in onto paper in flash fiction, share and celebrate his legacy.

WHAT A TERRIBLE LENGTH FOR A SKIRT, I THOUGHT

What a terrible length for a skirt, I thought. Slightly bulging in the belly, too tight on the hips and no lining, it rides up, even when you standstill. Unfortunate is, as unfortunate goes. There is fierce competition on which will crucify me first, the cut of the skirt or the positioning and height of the slit.

Sitting there, I felt cramped up. Why did I put so much stuff in my bag? How to store it under the seat in front of me? It's too heavy on my feet and it'll get it dirty on the floor. That skirt is whirling around and around like soft-serve ice cream in my mind. I'm strapped in too tightly, giving me a head rush and the munchies. Can't help but visualize all the things I would weave into the ice cream, Daim, Reese Peanut butter cups and Oreos to get that custom brown coloured edible fabric called in-flight Praline Delight.

On usual days, nude contention stockings are a real turn-off, even a deal-breaker. Yet I'm flipping through these paint shade samples of hepatitis yellow to pinkish grey to figure out her real skin tone with no hosiery. She transfers weight from one foot to the other with grace and agility. I imagine us doing a tick-tock to Lenny Kravitz Fly away. She climbs onto my back and we float out a porthole across the wing and back through another. We go viral. My wings melt. The brown polyester uniform has turned to fur and she is a moose with shiny button eyes.

I continued to stare downwards and lose track of thought. Wow, those pumps are epic. Where Walmart meets Mephisto. Can footwear be so ugly that it reaches stylishness in the skies?

Crap, I need to stop staring at her feet. Yet, if I raise my gaze, that's awkward too. She'll know I'm looking at her legs or worse what if I'm at eye level facing her crotch. Suddenly I remember my dad explaining how he's a bottom-to-top bird watcher and the best view is to start from Lady birds' shoes and looks up. He was a self-declared lower half, legs, hips and butt kind of guy. That is far too much information slipping into my head. Hard to unhear him telling that at all the intermissions of shows he took me too as the room emptied. What was wrong with him anyway? Is that me doing that here and now a sign that I have the same illness, is it genetic? Is that still on the list of mental illnesses in the Midwest? Will I become an old white man?

"Chicken or Beef?" She asked in a smoky deep barbecue voice and my heart dropped 1000 meters in altitude. Being a "femme femme" I learned early on that if you don't boldly speak out to be known to the ladies, then no gal gonna come call on you.

I looked her deep into the eyes "Vegetarian." "We've got veggie platters," she says. "I like a lady in a uniform," I tell her and brace for the laughter or slap. Silence. "I particularly like the lady in uniform here," I add on.

"This uniform is Pierre Cardin, the real thing, designer francais," She tells me and tightens her bun. I can't tell if she's pulling my leg or digging this uniform banter. She rolls her fingers out across her chest like on a homecoming float and I see the golden buttons and embroidery, "Envol", Fly the skies by Pierre Cardin.

All or nothing. I was in it for the full ride, the whole flight, a long haul through the night. I jump no parachute; the night was young and I would land in Paris with a young French bride.

I felt movement on my shoulder. “Help, I panic waking up. What’s happened?” I called desperately, “I’m blind!” Then I feel a weird pull on my hair and ears. It’s blurry but I see the hostess with the mostest holding a face-mask, my face mask. The darkness turns today. My eyes squint and I adjust to light.

“Miracle Madame, you can see.” She hands me a coffee, paper towels and a breath mint. She points to my shoulder which is soaking wet. Immediately I look up to see if there is a leak in the overhead compartment. Nope. “Mon Toutou, Like a boxer, you snore loudly and drool.” She talks without opening her mouth. I wish I could crawl below the tray in the upright position and into the magazine holder.

She gives me a small paper and a pen. “You may want to refill your declaration,” She says playfully and hands me the custom form. “What for?” I ask a bit confused. “You were a bit too creative or wishful thinking as they say for customs.” Then she hands me another handful. The one on top is practically all blue with scribbles. I recognize my handwriting. All the arrows are pointing to the question, Do you have anything to declare? “She’s my silver lining” I had drawn all over the sheet. “She’s my silver lining will she marry me?” On the Second sheet, I had drawn arrows going to Surname, “A horse with no name is my moose.” Suddenly, I imagine my lips are blue from the ink of scarfing down the remaining cards so she won’t read them.

Maybe the tranquilizers in the cocktail at take-off wasn’t such a good idea.

I put down the custom forms and see a little arrow on the bottom right. I turn it over. Envol 06 80 322 707 Call me maybe baby. Air-plane Are yours. Julie.

WHEN SHE COMES

She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes, she'll be coming round the mountain when she comes, she'll be coming round the mountain, coming round the mountain, she'll be coming round the mountain when she comes.

The familiarity of the tune and repeated lines of lyrics of this ballad bring us comfort. GI-YAP!

Eugenia Alice Ayer Morill - 1920. When the census came to New Hampshire, Eugenia was listed as the head of household’s daughter, identified as white, born in Boston in 1900. She was not married and had a sibling named Marjorie L. She could read and write.

Eugenia attended Boston Conservatory and studied violin and piano. When my grandmother auditioned behind a screen (as was customary) for the Boston Symphony, she was offered a first violin second seat. Her Great aunt Jeanette “Nettie” said “Follow your dreams,” but everyone thought she was hysterical and eccentric for never marrying, and for taking over the fuel business alone in Maine when all the men decided to stay in Boston year-round.

She'll be driving six white horses when she comes: When Eugenia got married to Stuart Parsley MacDonald, it wasn't proper to perform in public anymore. She hoped to stay in Boston, but she followed her husband to Florida, where her grand piano sat lifelessly and out of tune in the sunroom and the violin remained in a closet. She had hoped to teach music at home, but she couldn't have strangers over or work for income. It collected dust and board games were stored on the piano bench. (cribbage, scrabble, cards). Eugenia had fallen in love with Stuart's transparent blue eyes and his quick intellect. They quickly became a bridge duo with whom to reckon. At 15 years old, Stuart had been accepted into MIT on a scholarship, but he had never felt like he fit in. He fell in love and married a joyful bright wife. Being too intense and argumentative, he never learned to let go to live in the here and now. Eugenia would sip sweet sherry in silence, while he burst into fits of anger and became bitter. It was fitting that he set up a citrus packaging business. As the engineer, he was patenting the freezing techniques with Claude's Birdseye, but they got into a blow-out. Stuart didn't work well with others, so went cold and sour. *'Whoa-There!'*

We'll all go out and greet her when she comes: They had three children, Stuart III, Sally-Jane and Alan B (my father). "Children were to be seen and not heard." My father complained that Eugenia never made him a meal and that he never had had a meal with his parents. As a child, he ate in the kitchen with help. They all moved off to other parts of the country but would come to New Hampshire for summers and to Florida for winter holidays. *She got dogs and parrots. Hi Babe!*

My Grandma would cook meatloaf for her four French poodles who had their needle-point cushions for the box windows in the sunroom. For hours on end, she would do crosswords and play scrabble with me and was quite the word-smith.

Grandma gave me her violin at age 11 and told me, "You are a young lady now, but too smart for your good. Do not raise your hand eagerly in class, and don't use words I taught you in scrabble. Men need to think they are smarter."

These instructions were confusing for me. She loved me, and I got more cuddles than her kids ever had, but she told me my hair was too kinky, my body too straight, my mouth unfortunate. She would rinse my hair with vinegar and roll my hair into twists around empty orange juice cans held down by bobby pins at night under a bonnet. In the morning, I looked like a *Nelly-from-Little-House-On-The-Prairie-imposter*, but I didn't care. This hairdo got me a spot at the breakfast table with my Grandparents. Grandpa would mostly read his newspaper but some time would ask me a question on current events. Grandma would wink at me, and I would make short and simple but careful answers, without showing my teeth.

Oh, we'll all have chicken and dumplings when she comes: When I was born, my mom was doing her doctorate and teaching applied mathematics, while my dad was teaching business. On my birth certificate, they put my father's profession as a professor, while my mother was listed as a housewife. She had gotten into MIT with initials CM MacDonald, but

the Physics Department wouldn't take women, so she had to apply around in the area, and ended up commuting to Brown in Rhode Island. I was born in Boston, where my dad's family was from. From there, it was easy to go up to New Hampshire for the summer to be with family. Mm Mm.

Synchronicity or simultaneity?

Fifty years after my grandmother's birth, when I was five my mother brought home my baby brother. My maternal instinct exploded, and I took him as mine. He was perfect.

August 15th, 1970. That same day, my grandfather died.

We'll be singing "Hallelujah" when she comes: When mom had three young kids and still wanted to teach, she couldn't take help because that would have meant she wasn't able to raise her family and thus should stop working. When the third German au-pair quit, my dad finally cared to lean out of his ivory tower to ask Lena what the problem was. She was upset because my sister had told her she hadn't stored the dishes in the dishwasher in an optimal way and took them back out every day. My sister also put food colouring in the soap place to see how it dispersed the water inside the machine. "Oh the MacDonald gals are crazy," he said "That's why we took an outsider, please leave instructions on how to handle the kids on the notepad in the kitchen before you leave."

When at age three, my little brother still didn't want to be held by adults and didn't speak, my grandmother started showing concern. Turns out she didn't think his birth had killed her husband. My parents weren't worried. They would say, "each kid at their own pace, as long as they get to the right place." My sister and I created a language and codes with him. Turns out, he wasn't interested in what people were saying.

When you are always allowed to invite friends over for dinner, and both your parents are teachers, kids tend to raise their hands to talk. Once when my dad asked a kid about current events, the kid was lost and did a diversion trick. He pointed out that my brother hadn't eaten his green beans. My dad asked the young guest what he suggested he could do about kids eating vegetables. My brother raised his hand and said, "Well, it's a democracy, we could vote." It was as if the salt or pepper shaker had spoken! Everyone was surprised and laughed. My sister did the maths instantly as she chirped, "It's okay if kids only count for half a vote." Our gang was five against two parents. This is when I realized that bubble gum in a dish with my sister was not a random or fun way of knowing who would do chores.

My dad was not going down that road, and the ever-inner teacher rebounded with the question "When did women obtain the right to vote in the US?" No one knew. "1920," he said.

"When did men obtain the right to vote?" asked my mom. Dad didn't answer. (*Hallelujah!*)

She'll be wearing red pyjamas when she comes: When you said to yourself, go figure, when you knew exactly what was going to happen, but didn't want to rock the boat. We already had learned that our parents weren't in the same boat. When both your parents were teachers, you answered the phone with MacDonald residence, and when is the person calling asked to speak to Dr MacDonald, you said, Mom or Dad? You realized those calling for your mom laughed, and you realized an awkward silence followed with those calling your dad. (*Whoosh Whoosh.*)

When my parents got divorced, my dad bought a huge house right away. My mom earned 45% less, but she eventually saved up enough to pay cash for a house in South Carolina. It was 1978, but the bank wouldn't open an account for her without her ex-husband's or her father's signature as a guarantee. My mom had played the bass and cello at the University Orchestra but stopped when she got married, and the instruments ended up in her parents' attic. She bought us a guitar, a piano, and a banjo. We didn't have a TV but would play camp songs and sing, play board games, read the newspaper. She told us never to call her at work. She hadn't informed them she had a family. She repeated over and over to us that we could do anything in life we set our minds to doing.

My sister, brother, and I grew up and moved out. I moved to France, fell for a transparent blue-eyed Italian conductor, and became a wife, a mother, then an ex-wife and struggling single mom of two girls. My mom became a full-time civil activist and full-time Grandma.

Oh, we'll have to sleep with grandma when she comes: My mother came every year for extended periods and taught the kids camp songs, and to read and write in English. Our flat was small, but the girl's room was plenty big to add Grandma. She got the girls a book called, *So you want to be the president*. She told them all about the two girls living in the white house and their Mummy.

She'll be tearing down the mountain when she comes: While she was growing up, my Baby girl took her grandma's flame, and ran for every possible office in school, led projects, painted picket signs, marched, worked on raising awareness of social inequalities and fighting for gender justice, racial justice, and economic justice. ("Go there") She grew up and left for college to study international justice in the world capital of international justice, the Hague. She left her megaphones to her little sister.

When it came time to vote, we chitchatted, excited that it was the first year we could both vote in the same election. We had followed the debates and were enthusiastic about the women in the US presidential primaries. Then my daughter called in panic from the Netherlands that there were only two candidates left, two old white men.

She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes, She'll be coming round the mountain when She comes, She'll be coming round the mountain, She'll be coming round the mountain, She'll be coming round the mountains when She comes.

The familiarity of the tune and repeated lines of lyrics of this ballad sicken me. *Yi Hah!*

Synchronicity or simultaneity?

1920. My grandma was registered by the census. She was 20. Did she get to vote? She is considered by most to have led a life of privilege and comfort. Was she free? Was she equal?

2020. My daughter can vote for the first time. She grew up with a female mayor and sees women governors, senators and congresswomen, leader of the house. But not a presidential candidate. Is she free? Is she equal? What lies ahead of her?

When the same old tune plays for 100 years and all you can feel is rage, chant "*When enough is enough! This time is mine and it is now!*"

JESSICA MEHTA



Multi-award-winning poet and author of the just-released "Selected Poems: 2000 - 2020," the winner of the Birdy Prize from Meadowlark Books. As a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, space, place, and ancestry in post-colonial "America" informs much of her work. You can learn more at www.thischerokeerose.com. Twitter @cherokeeroseup IG @thischerokeerose

BIRTHDAYS

The morning I turned thirty-five,
I asked the women orbiting my life
to meet me in the forest at dawn. It meant
getting up at four-thirty, being the first
car on the glittering asphalt, boyfriends
and lovers who wouldn't understand. Slipping
out before toddlers unclenched
their dream fists. Which of you would come

after all these years? It was stupid,
it was childish, all *Prove that you cares*
and *Show me you love mes*. I know that,
but I wanted, I needed, I was desperate

to see who would be there

before the birds, in the hours when rabbits
felt safe over human footprints. And it was nobody

I would have imagined, the quietest of sisters
who came, walked beside me, shot
fast as home-made bottle rockets
through the darkest morning hours.

CENTRAL POINT, ORE

I'll always be a small-town girl, take me
into the screaming metro of the Seoul
shopping districts/Hooker Hill—No *big size* screamed
up between fifteen-hour work-days
and still,

I'm the same inside. No amount of rickshaw
rides in Mumbai, nights folded into London black
cabs while my feet bleed from too-expensive shoes
can drown out the child inside, half-shivering
and half-gape mouthed in wonder and suspicion
at just how far I've come. I've run far enough
that Manhattan seems small, a vertical city

crammed high in stuffy corners
like when I used to hide my bedroom mess
in the closet with the deep pockets. No princely
bags or glued eyelashes will distract anyone
forever. Let's play dress up and I'll pretend
I'm red-faced by the small-town girl who,
still,

loves carnival rides and quaint parades, big-tired
trucks and polished Trans Ams. It was there
that the suffocation pressed down, filling my lungs
with desperation and my breath with bravery.
Yet still,

I'll always be that little girl, the valley lines
needled into memory, the streets permanent
in my mind's eye, a map pulling me home even
when my heels dig in sharp with stubborn pride.

CHOREOGRAPHY

To follow in dance is to have a conversation,
albeit often one of the sexually-laced variety,
the kind made in hushed corners of bars between
sips of gin and sweetened breaths—the kind

leading to a crescendo of fingertips
pressed into thighs and loose kisses
in corners or taxis I'll forget by morning.
But to lead,
that's giving a persuasive speech,
a manifesto of sorts, oily words slipped
between practised smiles, a litany
masked as a spoonful of something
that's supposed to be good for us,
and I,
I've never been good at politics.
So let me just follow, match
my body to yours and we can both pretend
it's all for the sake of a rhythm and rules
written hundreds of years ago,
an excuse
to do as the beasts do.

CONCEPTIONS

I'm writing a whole new
book, and just can't stop. It's become
so damned fast that I've screwed
my eyes shut and lifted my feet
to let gravity and nature do whatever
dirty dance they like. I said

the last one would be the *last*—
but that's what we all say. Like,

when we have that perfect pair,
the boy and girl,
and then *Whoops!* someone forgot
the condom or mistook the birth
control pills for Vicodin again
and now there's a brand new mess
brewing. But it's fine, we can't possibly

screw up this one as badly
as the last. Right? Or at least
that's what we tell ourselves
when the panic sets in at two
in the morning. This one,
it will be better. Stronger. More
stunning and durable than those
last shameful productions. Because

if we didn't think that, if we believed
it would be just as hard, the same
hurt and demonic thrashings in the most
embarrassing of times, we'd just stop. Stop
being stupid, making excuses thin

as our wrist skin and be a god-damned
adult for once. But we won't. That's not

how we were made. People, writers, poets
parents. We're designed to forget. To keep
on, try just one more time to create. And maybe
this time, this time,
it will be so hellishly beautiful to erase
all those blunders and ugliness that came before.

CONSTRUCTING CARNAGE

A vine was choking the pine, throttling
its trunk and creeping up limbs.

Moss grew like pubic hair on the apple tree,
reaching past the heavy fruits to the earth.

The pear tree got it hard, ploughed down
to make way for the extra-wide driveway.

And the blackberry bushes? We paid
under the table to have them hacked to pieces,
annoyed at the berry-blood splattering
the sub-floors fresh from the mill.

For all the blessings, the *Pooja*, the cookies
given as bribes to new neighbours,
you can't cover up a massacre. There's no etiquette

that lets you pretend you didn't see.
Don't you hear the old growths screaming,
see the scared deer looking fruitlessly
for their loyal desire paths? In the forest,
where we built,
really we fit right in. What looked so lovely
in the morning mist—all Oregon green
and dewy grass—was an abattoir
the whole time. It's just,
now,
we're the ones cradling the pistols,
the guillotines, the saws
with teeth like sharks.

KATHLEEN 'CORKY' CULVER

Born in Chicago, but continually sliding South, Kathleen “Corky” Culver is a poet, activist, videographer and historian who earned her doctorate in English from the University of Florida. Her full-length poetry collection, *The Natural Law of Water*, was published in 2007. Her films documenting lesbian history in the South-east are archived with the Lesbian Home Move Project. She has written on lesbian activism for five issues of *Sinister Wisdom* and was a featured poet for their “Presentation of Lesbian Poets” in 2020. Culver is a scholar of Henry David Thoreau and she lives and writes in a 1935 log cabin on a lake in North Central Florida.

AFTER THE MINNEAPOLIS NEWS

Heartsore from news, I leave it for
A peaceful moment
An egg for breakfast, in the tradition of new beginning
Wind chimes soothe,
The lake waves robust, just this side of white-caps.

Beautiful peaceful protest next to angry fires,
Shattered glass, out of work
just this side of justified, and

Tear-gassed protesters, pepper bombs,
billy clubs whacking,
just this side of murderous.

No equivocation in the autopsy of George: Homicide.

Meanwhile, the cranes and wrens have colts and chicks
The lake sparkles, the pine needles shine,
Just this side of enough.

KATIE KENT



Katie Kent is a writer of both fiction and non-fiction and lives in Oxfordshire in the UK with her wife, cat and dog. Her fiction has been published in Youth Imagination, 101 Fiction, Flash Fiction Magazine, The Drabble, The Trouble with Time Travel (Smoking Pen Press' time travel anthology), and Of Mistletoe and Snow (Jazz House Publications anthology) and is forthcoming in Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine, This is Not a Punk Rock Anthology, It's a New Wave Anthology (Bone & Ink Press) and Limeoncello. She has had non-fiction published in The Lady, The Mighty, You & Me Magazine, Ailment, OC87 Recovery Diaries, and Feels Zine. Website <https://www.katiekentwriter.com/>

Twitter: @uniKH80

BUCKET LIST

“That’s another one ticked off, Becky.” Jess smiled at me as the sun rose over the horizon, lighting up the sky with a deep orange glow. I yawned and shivered, pulling the blanket more tightly around my shoulders. We’d been up since 3 AM, sprawled out on a picnic rug on the sand, with the doctor’s permission. My legs had gone to sleep, I was having trouble keeping my eyes open and I was dying for a wee, but I felt happier than I had in months.

Jess took a pen out of her bag and crossed out, ‘Watch a sunrise on the beach’ with a thick red line. Her eyes scanning the page, she asked, “What’s next on the bucket list?”

I studied her as she lay back on her elbows, her long, tanned legs straight out in front of her. Her blonde hair was tied up in a ponytail and there were rings under her eyes but in that moment, she looked just as happy as I felt.

I turned and leant in towards her. “Kiss a girl.”

KELSEY DAY



Kelsey Day Kelsey Day is a writer and environmental activist from southern Appalachia. She is most well known for her poetry collection "The Last Four Years." She is a contributing writer for Two Story Melody and the Head Poetry Editor for the Emerson Review. Her work has appeared in literary journals such as Stork Magazine, Astral Waters, Atlas Magazine, and Blindcorner Literary. Instagram: @kelseydays www.kelseydays.com/

MORNING

she reads an unsent letter over breakfast
speaking around the scorching petals in
her mouth, heady chamomile, lazy threads
of smoke climbing up the windowpane,
humming against the bug screen.

I keep being baptised by this place.

we spread cards over the table. all aces. the
birds are laughing. we can hear the hushed
prayers of the trees outside the window.

I have come to know something fundamental.

smoothies at midnight. a blue screen, gaping.
banana ice cream cooling in our mouths.

You are in good hands.

singing bowls. undrowned streets. you are here,

and so am I.

So be it.

TABLE TALK

a hummingbird, first, giddy in the tangles of a birch
then a falcon, who sits with her shoulders hunched,
watching us pass from a power-line. I meditate on rest,
on the slow scorch of a work that feeds you, crush my
mouth full of glaciers and copper. I tell her over dinner,
in the chewed-up glow mid-evening while the cliffs refract
vowels into blue heat, until the warmth eats itself and the
confession spills over the rice, dimes buried at the bottom
of the bowl – if there is such a thing as truth, it is this:
that I have known, that I have burned, that I have loved her
with tender lunacy, celestial ferocity since the very first
day mid-June three years ago, clutching sweat glazed
cardboard boxes, doe-eyed kids in the hazy Carolina sun; that
I ached for her in the psychedelic roar of the city, in the
stumbling drunken nights in stone walls across the planet, in
the breathless ancient forests I come from, in every near-missed
train, every late appointment, every letter rewritten, that she has
infested my dreams since the beginning, that I've been possessed
every minute, that I have gone mad in the days since we touched
under the silken window in February – I tell her this over dinner

nine thousand feet in the air, pressed between lavender wrinkles,
food in my mouth, and she smiles, she smiles, she-

LAURA LEA



Laura Lea is a sixty-five year old lesbian and Californian, rocking and rolling down the road with her partner of fifteen years, Carol, in their full-time home, a 1989 Winnebago. www.instagram.com/travelloglea/

SEASON'S CHANGE

Marta padded her way down the hall hoping to get in and out of the bathroom before Sally woke and needed to get ready for work. The dim light of sunrise through the condo's tall windows in the living room kept her from bumping into stacks of boxes lining the walls. The movers would be here at eight, so she couldn't sleep late anyway, though the March wind outside made her want to dive back under the covers on the couch. And never come out.

Brushing her teeth, she spits into the sink. The foamy spittle was salty and tear-doused. She didn't stop to dry her eyes. Just stick to the agenda. One step at a time.

Brush teeth. Get dressed. Make coffee. Finish packing. Don't forget bicycle in garage. And Hermie Hamster's bag of sawdust in the side closet.

A soft knock on the bathroom door jolted her from the list.

Sally's low voice stirred her heart. "Marta, can we talk?"

Not trusting her own voice, she opened the door.

Sally took Marta's hands. "I don't want you to go."

Marta leaned forward, feeling her resolve collapse. Sally held her close and whispered, "I love you. We can work this out. Just be patient with me."

Patient? Marta's mind recoiled. Sally wasn't apologizing. She wasn't promising to stop working such long hours. She was asking Marta to be patient. Again.

Marta thought of her list and revised it. Make coffee first, then get dressed. She pulled away and headed for the kitchen, looking back at Sally. "For how long? I have been patient. This is your signature move. Treat me like I'm on the bottom of your priorities, then ask me to give you one more chance."

Opening the kitchen cupboard, she remembered her favourite coffee was packed away. Sally's jar of instant decaf stared at her from the shelf. Marta slammed the cupboard closed.

Sally stood close beside Marta and stroked her hair. "Don't go."

Marta revised her list. Finish packing. Get dressed. Bring bike in from garage.

In the living room, she pushed blankets and her pillow into a duffel bag. Through the windows, she caught the scene of elm tree branches buffeted by the wind, bare except for tiny green shoots. The hint of spring.

She slipped her nightshirt off and pulled on the jeans and sweatshirt she'd set aside last night. Lacing up her boots, she looked toward the hall, but Sally wasn't there. What was next on the list? Bike.

Marta rolled the bike in from the garage, just as the front doorbell rang. The moving crew must be early. She sighed, frustrated that no one could stick to the program.

She opened the door with a sour face, but her eyes widened at seeing Sally there, holding out a large coffee from the shop around the corner. "Dark roast, black."

Marta revised her list. Have coffee. Count blessings. Cancel movers.

And then, throw away the list.

LAURA MITCHELL-GHAFOOR



Laura lives in Halifax (West Yorkshire) with her wife and two cats. Typically enjoying days out and a pit stop for tea, she adapted surprisingly well to the UK 'lockdown' in 2020 and is recategorising herself as an Introvert, contrary to what every online quiz has ever said. After falling out of love with reading or writing for pleasure after studying a law degree and post-graduate qualification, she rediscovered her passion in her late twenties and is still trying to get over the heavy weight of Imposter Syndrome. Laura has previously had diatribe published in Diva magazine and short stories on DearDamsels.com. Laura can be found on Instagram @loraemjee.

WEEKENDS IN LOVE

Let's sit in a dark room and
You can draw circles with your thumb
in my palm as the film rolls.
Later our bodies tangle while the night cocoons us.

We make breakfast in pyjamas
with sleepy eyes, hair and teeth unbrushed
but you kiss me anyway.
The radio hums the song we first made love to.

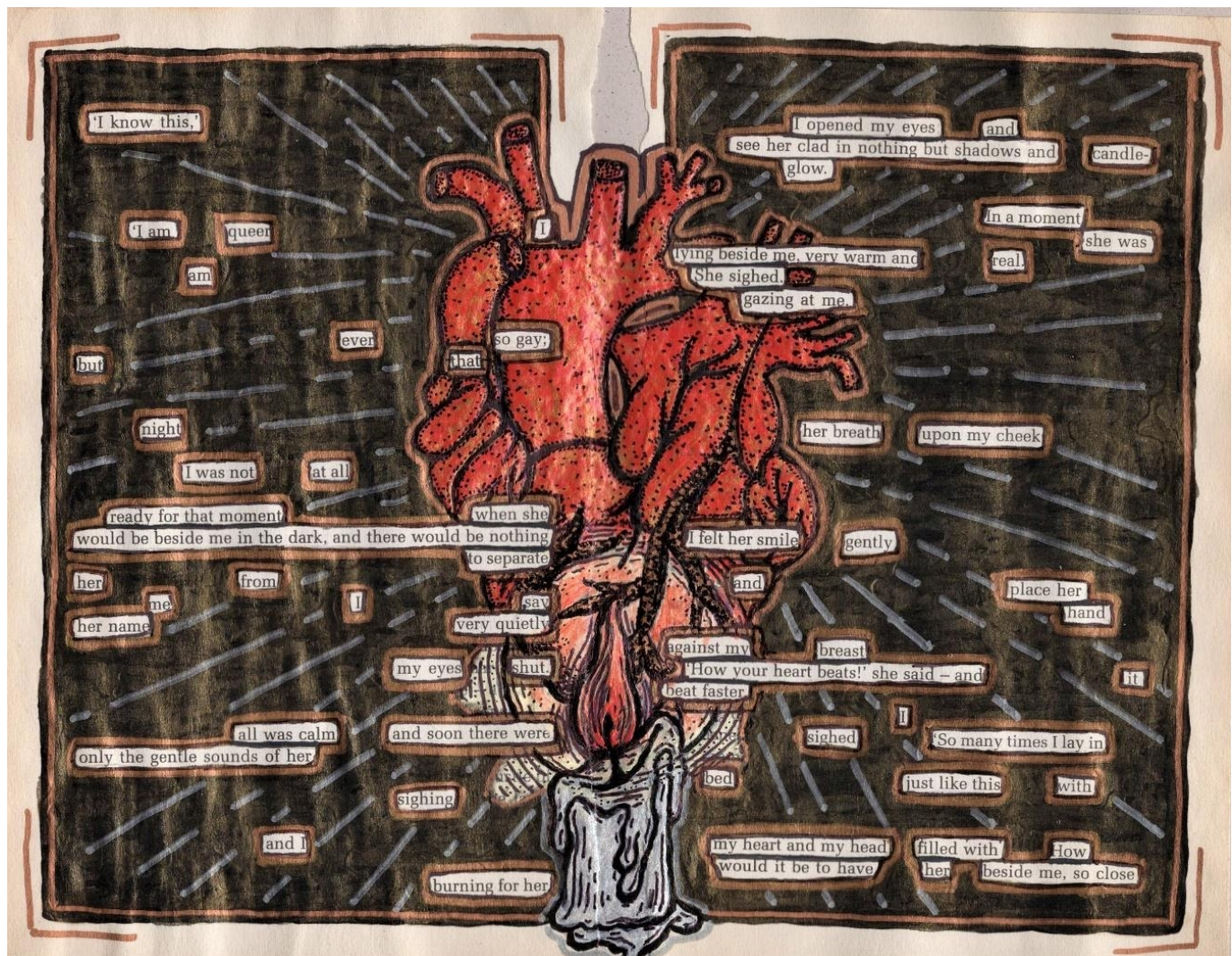
You make pancakes and I sip hot tea,
bare feet swing under the counter top.
We call it our song.
Those first notes still make my stomach dance,
like when your lips send electricity through mine.

LEIGH GONZALES



Leigh Gonzales is from Denver, Colorado. She has been an elementary art teacher for 15 years and an artist her entire life. She earned a bachelors degree from The University of Northern Colorado in art education in 2003. Her artwork has been shown in several gallery exhibits in Colorado over the years and her short comics have been published in various anthologies including Vagabond Comics, The Dirty Diamonds comics anthology, and Like A Girl zine. In 2020 she adapted her comic featured in The Dirty Diamonds called "Stray Spirits" into a short film and it won first place for the Denver Botanic Gardens Dia de los Muertos Film

Festival. <https://leighnonme.wordpress.com>



CARRY THE FLAME

(Derived from "Tipping The Velvet" by Sarah Waters)

I know this, I am queer.

I am ever so gay;

but that night I was not at all ready for that moment when she would be beside me in the dark,

and there would be nothing to separate her from me.

I say her name very quietly, my eyes shut.

All was calm and soon there were only the gentle sounds of her sighing and I burning for her.

I opened my eyes and see her clad in nothing but shadows and candle-glow.

In a moment she was lying beside me, very warm and real.

She sighed, gazing at me.

Her breath upon my cheek.

I felt her smile gently and place her hand against my breast.

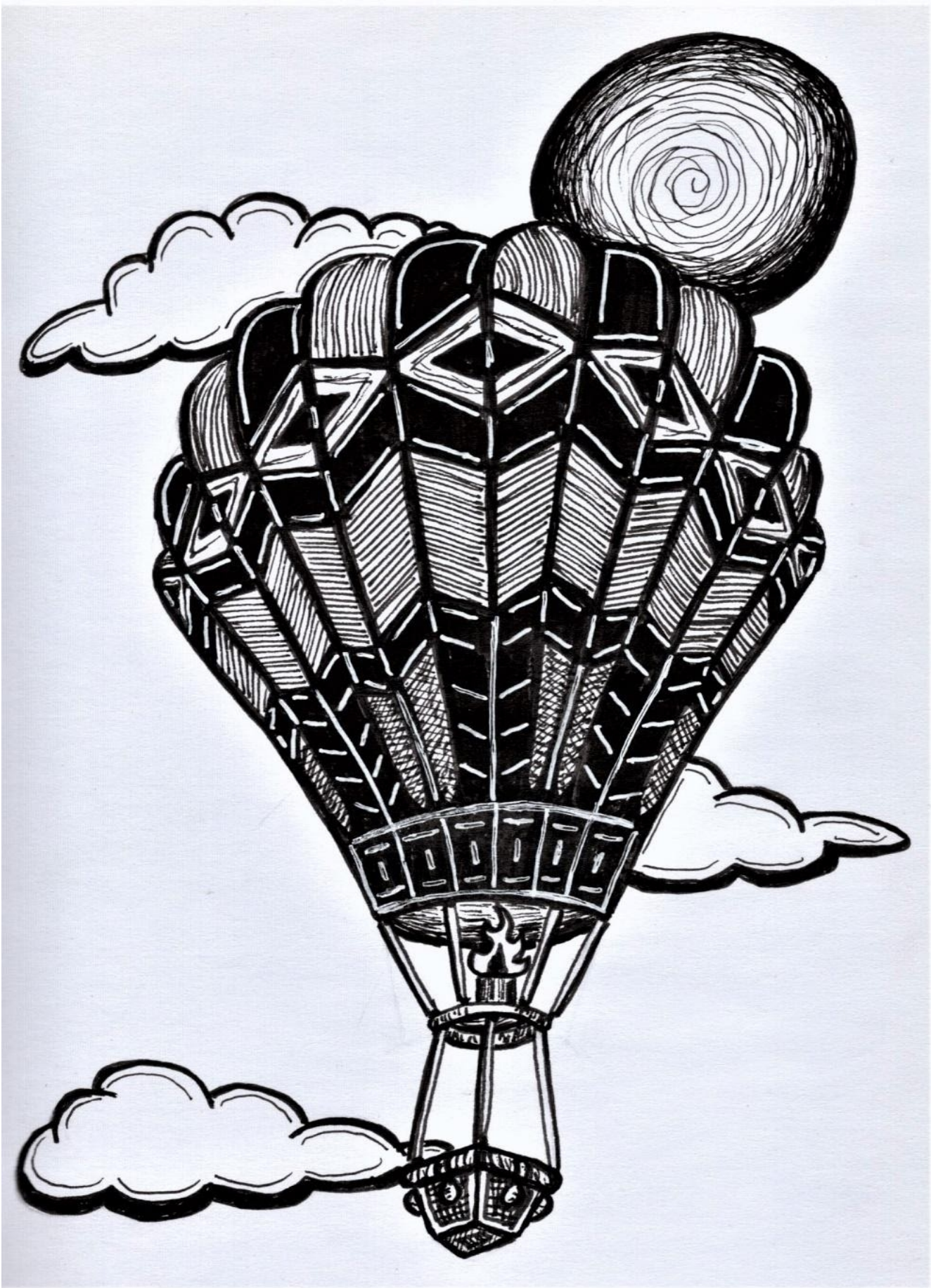
"How your heart beats!" she said – and it beat faster.

I sighed.

So many times I lay in bed just like this with my heart and head filled with how would it be to have her

beside me, so close.





LEXI BUTLER

Lexi Butler is a media consultant, television producer and writer living outside of Boston. Her short stories have appeared in *MOON Magazine*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *The Loch Raven Review* and *Press Pause Press*. She has an MA from Emerson College in Media and Visual Arts. lexibutler.com

LIFE IN A SCENE

(Originally published in *Potato Soup Journal*)

I was now a visitor, an invited guest to a home that was once my own. It was the first time I walked up these sharply pitched cement stairs, stood soldier straight and rang the doorbell. Ding-dong it sang. Ding-dong it repeated. It was the first time I was on this side of the door, and not answering on the other side.

It was bizarre looking through the front door to see the long hallway through vintage glass. Everything was out of focus, only slanted images and glassy pearls of reality. Even just observing from the doorstep the house appeared homier, a bit gentler than when I lived in it.

Coming into view a blurry image of a small figure eagerly grasping while on tiptoes for the door handle. Successfully opening the door, as if in celebration, she performed a wiggle dance. This hive of energy then rushed to hug my knees, "Mummy, you came." It hurt more than a little that she doubted me. I knelt down to kiss her face in fast repetition, telling her it's not every day a big girl turns six.

Hand-in-hand we walked into the party. My gaze immediately collided into my ex-mother-in-law. She palmed her scotch and gave me an indisputable look of disgust as if she just sent back her dinner. The look on her face made me imagine the thoughts running in her mind - how did she allow her daughter to get into this circumstance of a turbulent divorce? Now, her only girl lived in a condition of singleness, being untethered - the worst offense for a woman, even a gay one.

My words came out all automatic, "Hi June, nice to see you." She wielded a small, loose smile then sauntered into the kitchen while pulling down her long red bedazzled jacket. As if my voice was now foreign the hello to her mother startled Jillian. She stopped what she was doing to look up. "Nicki," she nodded with indifference then returning to dolling out portions of mac and cheese to hungry children.

I needed to anchor myself. The scene was proving to be unsteady. I clutched the white granite kitchen island, long and geometric. My fingers ran back and forth with a compulsion, stroking over and again the imperfection in the counter-top Jillian and I fought about for days. She ranted on and on as to why (why?) I accepted this piece of granite with a defect. It was now, as she said, literally “cast in stone” in our home forever. Over the next few weeks, she asked the question in a loop, her abhorrence cascading everywhere like a cannon echo.

Alyson, Jillian’s long-time “best friend” from college, unexpectedly appeared. She was thinner than I recalled and dressed up a little more than everyone else in tall boots and tight black pants. Her hair was pulled back in a long ponytail that swayed with her hips as she walked. She was wearing just enough eye make-up for the daytime and her pink lipstick matched her green eyes. She hovered around Jillian as if spotting her on some type of gym apparatus.

“Hi Nikki, we’re glad you could make it,” she said opening and closing the refrigerator with familiarity.

While the rest of the kids played, my daughter clung to me, wrapping her legs around my legs, hanging off my arms and twisting around me slowly. Her laugh exposed her toothless smile. She snaked herself around me to gain enough momentum to kick her younger cousin as he bobbed by. Jillian’s stern look snapped on me, “Nikki, don’t let her do that.”

Alyson was on duty. She grabbed empty cups and dirty plates feeding the sink while whispering something in Jillian’s ear that made her laugh. The doorbell rang and Alyson sprung for it. My daughter followed behind running to see who was next to come to her party. In unison, their movements carried a fluency making it obvious my daughter had followed this woman many places before.

At the door was someone Alyson knew well. Jillian waved a hello from her position in the kitchen telling me this wasn’t a stranger to her either. My ex-mother-in-law caught my eye, smirking at the view. I was out of the loop.

When it was time to open gifts, Alyson lingered behind in the kitchen waiting for Jillian. She looked at her with a gaze that was a mixture of optimism and that specific kind of anticipation when you’re close to getting what you want. They stood close together almost touching surrounded by a sea of off-white cabinets and shiny silver accents. If they were conscious of my gaze, they didn’t show it.

Their lack of attention to all else allowed me to witness the unfolding of the moment and its quiet truth. There in full display Alyson’s eagerness; her mouth opened just enough to be alluring, her elbow extended to touch Jillian’s side, eyes darting up and down Jillian’s form as she licked ice cream that was melting down her hand.

I shuttered as if the air changed when it went into my body. The room blurred a bit for me. It was one of those singular moments when something changed for you but unchanged for

the rest of the room. You're alone in your new conditions. I stood off to the side smiling as the kids opened gifts pretending this wasn't the final end in a long journey of endings.

For a moment the sun reflected against the window glass. The light cascaded into the town-home creating rainbow colours on the wall only sunlight can make. The cluster of light bobbed above and between Alyson and Jillian but they didn't squint. The glare didn't impede their vision. Rather they saw very clearly and moved along walking together both holding a large birthday cake as the children cheered.

LIZABETH KINGSLEY



Liz Kingsley is a poet, fiction writer, and the Administrative Director of The Writers Studio. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College and New York University. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Ohio Review*, *The McNeese Review*, *The Round*, *Euphony*, *Exit 13*, and *(M)othering Anthology*, and her fiction has appeared in *The William and Mary Review*. Her personal essays have been published in *New Jersey Family Magazine* and the anthology *Blended: Writers on the Step-family Experience*. She received Pushcart Prize nominations for her poems in 2013 and 2019. An almost 52 year-old special education teacher in an elementary school, Liz lives in Westfield, New Jersey with her wife and eight children (five

human, two canine, one feline). Instagram: [lizzieb_kings](#), Facebook: [Lizabeth Paley Kingsley](#)

MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood I turned thirty and handed you my life.

Motherhood my pots and pans, my sheets.

I am nauseous with my own inadequacy.

Where's your fucking manual?

You are not a shed to be built.

Motherhood when will you be my ally?

When will all your books bear fruit?

I thought you loved your subjects

Who pray in your temple.

You did not infuse me with appropriate empathy.

You did not prevent my faulty decisions.

Where is the instinct you promised?

He has forsaken me.

You didn't train me for this.

You didn't tell me this could happen.

Where is your contingency plan?

You have betrayed your faithful.

Beg as you might, I will not exonerate you.

I will scrub you off my skin.

I will dig up your roots in my garden.

I will deny ever having known you.

Motherhood, come back.

Motherhood, your heart beats in me.

I don't recognize my own voice.

I am exhausted.

Motherhood, you duped me.

Fix what you have broken.

I drink vodka every night.

When will you convene the board?

When will you give reparations?

I walk the halls with one limb missing.

MAKAILA AARIN



Makaila Aarin works as an academic librarian in Mississippi where she lives with her three rescue dogs. She holds degrees in English, library science, and education. Currently, she is pursuing an MFA in creative writing. Her poetry has appeared in *Prismatica Magazine*, *Stone of Madness*, *Poetically Magazine*, *Tipping the Scales Literary Journal*, *Dwelling Literary*, and other magazines. Her work is forthcoming in *Versification Zine* and *Sinister Wisdom*. Find her on Twitter: @makaila_aarin

CITY AT NIGHT

wind wraps our bodies
on a cold park bench. your hand
snugs in my pocket.

we watch the dark city:
apartment windows glow where
insomnia prevails.

office lights shine where
overworked eyes never sleep.
traffic lights stop cars

driving to warm homes.
coffee shops tug chains belonging
to their LED signs.

taxi tail-lights flash,
turning to halt for the girl
leaving a party.

my shoulder - a pillow
for your head pondering light
we'll chase together.

your glitter flats untangle
from my Converse. We walk toward
the street-light where we'll kiss.

MALLORY PEARSON



Mallory Pearson is an artist and writer based in Queens, NY. She identifies as a Baba Yaga stan, lesbian witch writer, and a reader of all books strange and wonderful. <https://instagram.com/the.lesbrary>

MARCIA FROM THE GULF COAST

may came over us

like the top of a Ferris wheel.

every bird was a blemish

in the clove-scented wind.

i thought about oranges,

and her fingers against my neck,

and the tendency of the metal cage

to swing, with no direction.

i closed my eyes, wished i could

touch butterflies without crying.

i only think about it now

because she was a good kisser,

blooming against my mouth
like late summer wild-flowers,
sweet with kool-aid coloured nectar.
in a few past lives, this must have been enough,
her molten hands in my hair melting at the roots,
the swift rush of her body
like the Atlantic, coming in cold.

every body of water was thick with salt
and that summer was a Medusa of a girl,
shattering me like glass when i looked
towards the sun. the memory of her wrists
was slim, like poplar trees,
and i sucked at the skin of my own
when i was hungry for blood,
desperate to be seen by whatever waits
in the dark. when June came in, hot like hell,
it put me to sleep in the swamp.
begged me off that crooked tree
on the outskirts of the hunt.

BAPTISM IN THE GREAT WICOMICO

that June it felt violent to even cross my fingers
behind my back, felt tumultuous to hide hard candy
under my tongue, behind my teeth.
every river was a way for the moon
to tell me it was tired of the way i kicked at the rocks.
the sewer was a hole cut in the earth
and the salamanders were familiar things,
snakelike to small hands and bared teeth.
wanted to cut my hair short but felt the ugliness
up in my shoulders, wished for longer legs,
smaller hips, less resistance to be had
when pushed under that myrtle-kissed surface
of the pool. i suppose it gets priestly enough
to be a girl with your clothes off, swimming in the dark,
waiting to be caught by whatever god it is that evening,
bats coming down for a drink. eventually
the decades round out, and I'm a siren
calling out to my own hate, drowning it in the river.
is it still a baptism if I'm on my back among the reeds
thinking about kissing her, deeply?

OLD DOGS

the native sense of touching the crepe myrtle
and knowing the bud, the leaves,
the common way the birds settle in
and claim the eaves. hornets behind my ears
sing about sting. i'm off being an eagle
behind my eyes again. there's a house on a hill
and every night i'm there, waiting on the porch,
drinking coffee again before the sun comes up.
it's always been Virginia, first love, forever love,
those ghost-blue mountains,
those crab-apple spines.
no one loves like a woman
and here i am, touching her softly,
brushing back the green grasses in search of glitter.
in my dreams i don't look like this.
rose hips for love, petals for sleep,
i just want to understand the things i see.

MARIANNE BREMS



Marianne Brems is a long time writer of trade books, textbooks, and poetry. She has an MA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Her first poetry chapbook is *Sliver of Change* (Finishing Line Press, 2020). Her second chapbook *Unsung Offerings* is forthcoming in 2021. Her poems have appeared in literary journals including *The Pangolin Review*, *Nightingale & Sparrow*, *The Sunlight Press*, and *The Tiny Seed Literary Journal*. She lives in Northern California. Website: www.mariannebrems.com.

REUNION

In the swarm of arrivals
at the international terminal
an anxious welcomer perches
under oversized monitors,
her two young children
chasing one another,
tugging at each other's arms,
as anonymous depleted passengers
with luggage carts piled high
stream from a gaping linoleum hallway.

She watches clutching for relief
as others lean consummate
into the waiting arms of loved ones
then whisk themselves off
folded into easy gestures of familiarity.

With each departing cluster,
nagging emptiness grows,
filling her eyes
that settle without recognition
on the faces of every emerging traveller.

The minutes drip by.
Her children now bump in boredom
against her,
the face of their auntie dimmed
from memory.

Then without words,
distance shrinks
between two grown sisters,
separated halves,
any differences forgotten,
as their reaching arms touch.

First published in *Avatar Review* August 2019

NO FOOD BY MOUTH

I carry into the hospital waiting area
the nameless constriction of my mourning.
Boxes of tissue wait on horizontal surfaces.
Every voice too loud.
Every noise amplified.

My mother hiked the Sierras into her 80s.
Played tennis until she was 90.
Now at 97 she lies with a fever of 102,
a needle in her arm,
little awareness of any of it.

Fellow strangers wait near me.
No reason to speak.
One offers me a cup of water.
My mother was here just
three months ago I say.

We talk about the mothers
we will have for a little longer,
the bond they cinched in our hearts,
their travel down love's unpaved roads,
their departure from cognition,

the tangling of their feathers
against their will
in the chain-links of ageing.

A nurse calls me.
I leave this better-known stranger
to hear what I already know.
Aspiration pneumonia the verdict.
No food by mouth the prescription.

As the fever shrinks,
my common sense grows.
Thicken-up and half-inch pieces
will have to do
for the next small forever.

First published in *Thimble* March 16, 2019

WARM NOTES

A Mason & Hamlin concert grand
with a bottomless ebony finish
manufactured in 1916
having survived two world wars,
nineteen U.S. presidents,
and a handful of pandemics,
dominates a living room.

Still,
among the daily pressures
of fleeting minutes,
unpaid bills,
and arthritic joints,
warm notes hang in the air,
notes that rearrange particles of dust,
soften the slap of a closing door,
blend with the weight of a hillside,
alter the light in the room.

BARE FEET AND BOOTS

Children catapult into
a sheet of water
receding from the beach,
gathering itself
into a mounting mass.
Its peak at last folds over
into a wave that roars toward
feet scrambling to outrun it
then topples them into its rush
amidst shrieks of glee.

As small bodies
regain their footing,
they gasp and laugh,
fling water into the air,
and helplessly tumble
against one another,
unmindful
of the passage of time
or unwashed dishes.

Their drama lures me,
but I am caught in a march
I cannot stop,
thoughts of cold
that stiffens the limbs,
submerged sea creatures
just waiting to bite,
sand I'll track into the house.

Through the shrillness
of their giddy voices
and the freedom
of their uncontrolled gestures,
I still hear boots marching
but more softly now.

NO TUG OF WAR

A Golden Retriever
sits with legs splayed at random,
right front paw folded under,
as though he just fell that way
while trying to please,
really what matters most,
shoulders in a soft hunch,
gaze welcoming passers-by.

He's always there
by the entrance to the pool,
a book with bears and giraffes ,
or balloons and honeysuckles
placed with care before him.

No tug of war or ball to retrieve
just quiet composure,
as if to say,
Not my world,
but I can wait a while
among these gentle strangers,
his owner counting down laps
until their worlds can join
in a game of fetch,
two native speakers
of the same language.

First published by *Vita Brevis Press* Oct. 21, 2020



Martha is a young aspiring poet and artist from London, living in Cornwall. She has previously had her artwork exhibited at The Tub Hackney gallery space. Her poetry is written to explore her memories of childhood and youth, and to attempt to process the world we find ourselves in. [@marthascollage](#)

THE APPLE TREE

The apple tree in the garden sits in a dusky white
silence of gentle snowfall.

She feels a quiver of the last of the winter scent
so she shelters in the darkening shadow of a mist.

Above- her blooming leaves, a starling calls.

A startling awakening of migration, and a graceful flight with wings of wonder,
spanning length untold, spanning the globe.

Above the apple tree, the mountain calls out in loneliness,
his dirt green coverings now trapped beneath
an ever-growing smattering of snow.

Below

the apple tree, a dormouse scuttles past, past midnight past autumn and through-
the wintry nights

NORA MACINTYRE



Internally motivated by her own experiences as a lesbian woman in society, Nora's writing and research stems from a place of thorough, relentless passion. A film aficionado from an early age, she found in classic films not only an appreciation but an understanding that helped her to navigate the choppy waters of her adolescent years. Now confident and vocal about her lifestyle and convictions, she hopes to build upon and expand the realm of queer theory in film by expanding the limited narrative on lesbians and queer women in the cinematic universe. She graduated with a B.A. in Communications from University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 2017, and enjoys travelling, exercising, and reading in her spare time. Social media links: @notoriouslynora on twitter, instagram Wordpress: <https://notoriouslynora.wordpress.com/>

ESCAPISM

I've been running before I even understood what it meant to walk when my head was still too heavy to withstand its own weight, pinned to my chest. From birth, we are shown how heavy the mind can be: even if this was a natural, physiological phenomenon, it was representative of something much bigger that would come to dominate my world. Long before I was even able to grasp the concept of what it means to be alive, to be self-aware, to be a living, thinking and breathing entity with a conscience. It's something one feels in their gut, long before they're able to discern just what it is. Sometimes, even words can't do it justice. It is innate, an intelligence that has always existed somewhere in our DNA, latent until the mind can make proper sense of it.

Escapism is a master of its craft, a chameleon-like creature with the regenerative abilities of a phoenix. It rises, falls, and re-emerges as some enticing means of avoiding reality. By definition, it's a paradox, promising reprieve when it only serves to further complicate. In moderation, like anything, it can be beneficial. But so often its own genius obscures the already murky threshold that separates a healthy habit from debilitating obsession, which makes it all the easier for the victim to fall into this stunted, vicious cycle of entrapment.

My first dalliance with escapism, like many others, was found between two hardbound covers. Inside, pages danced to life as black typeface strung together some semblance of meaning. Letters to words, words to sentences, sentences to paragraphs, paragraphs to images. Before long, the subconscious was teleported to another dimension, a fictional world in which the law of the land was governed by the very text that rested in my hands.

Escapism took many forms throughout the ages -- at age nine, it stood as the incarnation of my childhood dreams, an alluring vision depicting a utopic future that catered to my many insecurities. *You can be a pop-star*, it teased, weaving vivid and complex webs that peered back at me through the other side of the orb. Not only was there fame and prosperity -- but there was beauty. The chubby duckling could shed her baby fat and emerge a real-life Barbie, svelte and blonde. The attention would be endless, lavish. Money would surmount all obstacles, allowing for an easy, idyllic life surrounded by palm trees and passion. It made no mention of any potential hardships, unrelenting in its pursuit to keep my head in the clouds despite my feet being anchored to the ground.

At fifteen, escapism was the adrenaline rush of signing onto an old chat server and inhabiting another persona, temporarily abandoning the weight of being in favour of a newer, more ideal self. A world which granted total control, where I could play God and never have to worry about anything going awry. This persona evolved and transformed over the years, adjusting as necessary to reflect the wishes, desires, and interests of the girl behind the keyboard, inhabiting the ghosts of fictional characters in order to grant every wish and desire that haunted the subconscious. I did not discriminate, wading into many different universes, trying on these persona's as if they were fancy dresses. Fictional entities became outlines to which I gave dimension and made my own. In *RESIDENT EVIL*, Jill Valentine was a survivor of a zombie outbreak and crusader for good. When I stepped into her shoes, she also became an addict struggling to weather untreated mental illness. Her favourite colour was blue; her favourite genre was indie rock. There were shades of myself in every character which I played, but I never wanted to acknowledge that.

I've come to learn I'm very good at rationalizing things, which took a painfully long time to recognize for somebody so self-aware. I dismissed my consuming habits of escapism by reassuring myself that I was still able to function in society, and furthermore, that placing myself into another character was helping to build and structure my abilities as a writer. Nora the adolescent was very much alive and real, a rather nondescript teenager. Sure, she was eccentric, but who wasn't? Nora still participated in extracurriculars. Nora was a swimmer on the high school swim team. She was real and tangible, and yet, always looking for a way to run from herself.

When I outgrew the comforts of role-playing, I erroneously believed that I had conquered my issues with escapism once and for all. No longer was I throwing any energy into a performance not representative of my true self -- surely, then, I was cured! It didn't seem abnormal for me to be centering my entire personality around one trait or habit, particularly given my diagnosis of OCD. I had always been all or nothing -- it only seemed natural that my personality would reflect this as well. First, there was Nora the Gym Rat, bolstered by a bevy of unresolved eating disorders. Every word out of her mouth pertained to fitness, to healthy living -- so much so that she even nearly convinced herself to pursue a career as a physical therapist. And then there was Nora the Stoner, who structured her entire day around when and where she'd get her next fix. "Weed isn't physiologically addictive," she'd drone, taking a hit from a home-made apple bong. "It's a way of life." Slowly but steadily, money began to funnel out of the bank and into the pocket of some questionable campus dealer. Life lacked an edge without the fuzzy embellishments of a good high, and a habit soon became a dependency until it led to my eventual demise.

Moderation. I knew the word by heart but somehow could never comprehend it to the point of application. Exercise, at face value, is a touchstone of good health. Cannabis, too, when rationed appropriately, boasts ameliorative qualities. My talent of taking any tangible, reasonable conduit of escape and transforming it into a thing of malice remains unmatched. I could write it on the board one hundred times until my hands hurt, or shout it until my voice went hoarse -- EVERYTHING IN MODERATION, ESPECIALLY ESCAPISM -- but the concept would never fully register in my brain.

I remember the night that Stoner Nora imploded, a disaster a long time in the making. It was inevitably brought about by years of long-weathering self-destruction. I never saw it as such, given that this was ultimately a consequence of excess. How could indulging in something which brought me joy be self-destructive? It didn't make sense to me, in a vein similar to my understanding of moderation.

We piled into the car one by one, fresh off of finishing a bowl packed with who knows what. It was before cannabis was legal and regulated -- every tokes was a gamble, but even the worst of odds couldn't have dissuaded me at that point. The engine hummed and the three of us drifted across campus, but with each passing second, I felt increasingly alien in my surroundings. My friends were laughing, having a good time -- no fault of their own. Rapidly yet in slow motion, I began to dissociate. It was an experience reminiscent of hallucinations I'd endured as a sickly child, stricken with a fever of 103. At age eight, it was my father seeming a million miles away as he left my room, despite the fact that he was well within arm's reach. At age nineteen, my best friends were the ones who seemed unattainable, and the sensation only continued to swell. I regressed. I was a small, terrified child, aware enough to know my delusions were my own but distressed that I couldn't articulate what was happening. We stopped at Panera for food -- they continued laughing and giggling and I trailed along like a phantom, white as a sheet and resigned to silence. I didn't want to be alone that evening but I was faced with no choice, knowing nobody could understand me at that moment. The blame was entirely mine, and I knew it well. Desperately, I poured myself a double dose of Zzzquil, waiting for it to supersede the effects of the marijuana that held me hostage. I remained unaffected, the THC continuing to burrow its talons in the crevices of my mind. It was the beginning of the end of another era of escapism, another habit taken up with good intentions that morphed into a destructive manifestation of excess.

Once again bereft of a personality and unequipped with the necessary skills to cope, I experienced what I came to understand as my first ever mental breakdown. It started long before I had even lit my first joint, but culminated and reached its breaking point after two successive bad highs. Suddenly, the entire core of my being had been eviscerated. I'd been pushing the envelope for as long as I'd known, and now I was experiencing the whiplash of consequence first-hand. I was empty and scared, a walking corpse who didn't know who she was or what she liked because she'd been throwing herself into the guile's of escapism for so long. The episode struck the final week of my second semester of undergraduate. I could not function. I lay awake for hours on end at night, consumed by worries. I was unable to stomach any food, no matter how mild or small. My mind was hurling a million miles away into madness, whirring uncontrollably as I shakily grasped the No. 2 pencil in my right hand. I don't remember anything about my finals that year -- I just remember

haphazardly scrawling in different multiple-choice bubbles as fast as I could, wanting nothing more than to go home. I knew it was no solution, but at the time it was the only release I knew how to obtain.

Dear reader, I wish I could tell you that I fixed my ways after that stunt -- but alas I did not. Freed of weed, I slowly pulled myself out of the trenches. That summer stretched on interminably, and I exchanged one vice for another, throwing myself into video games. Every second spent in a virtual environment was a safe haven, a place where all of my present ailments were rendered meaningless. Without a question, those games helped to save my life, even if the cure was the very poison which had undone me. Slowly, I began to feel normal again and even started taking antidepressants.

It was a remarkable leap forward -- nothing will ever take that away from me, even the many varied relapses I suffered after the fact. For the first time in my life, I was consciously taking measures to take care of Nora, instead of shoving her aside in favor of an easy way out. I confronted many unpleasant things in those months going forward with the help of great therapists, friends, and family.

The final relapse was a slow-burning affair, one which I have only just surmounted one week ago. Escapism came back by way of a smooth, sculpted bottle: its blood-red contents promised relief, security, and ease. Like all of my dalliances to date, I was enamoured upon my introduction: a glass of this elixir transformed me in a way I'd never known. Suddenly, I felt more secure and confident, like a butterfly emerging from a moulted cocoon. And like in times past, the concept of moderation completely eluded me, warping this occasional, beneficial indulgence into an obsessive disease.

One glass was never enough, just as one joint had never been. I wanted more, to feel intensely, to perpetuate the ebullience it radiated through my body. Falling victim to the present, I never stopped to ponder the downsides. Once again, my head was lost in the clouds, mired by the sybaritic illusion of unadulterated pleasure. And once again, I resorted to my old ways: instead of confronting the void that lived inside me, I continued to feed it. It was -- and still is -- a greedy bastard, appetite seemingly never sated. Limits, it told me, were a figment of the imagination. And so I pressed on and persevered, under this mendacious illusion that my stamina was something of which to be proud. I remained wilfully blind to the blackouts, to the over-brimming recycling bin that touted my body count in a way that should have raised alarm in me. Instead, I saw the empty bottles as trophies. As warped as it strikes me now, in the fog of my addiction it seemed perfectly normal to be proud of my drinking abilities. Finally, something I was good at, with tangible evidence to prove it -- rationalization at its finest.

I am one week sober as of yesterday. The rush of sudden perspicuity was refreshing but also frightening -- a humble reminder of my own humanity and fragility. It forced me to reckon with myself, unveiling a seemingly endless nest of Russian dolls, each one more grotesque and cryptic than the last. Somewhere at the core lies the truth, the answer I've simultaneously desired and avoided, dwarfed by layers and layers of displacement by means of escapism.

Living with OCD, I am never unaware of my propensity to take things to the extreme. I know well that any hobby, substance or habit, no matter how trite, can consume and destroy from within without careful recognition. I know I could easily fall into another

debilitating cycle of escapism, and while that possibility is both frightening and disheartening, I am careful to be kind to myself. Constant ruminations buzz in my head, even now, as I write this. I think about my career, and how I've chosen to pursue my passions after years of wrestling with my conscience. Leading by passion is unmistakably powerful and self-affirming, but where does one draw the line? When does passion breach the limits of obsession, enacting more harm than good? The thought never truly leaves my mind.

I know that I am human, as much as I've tried to deny it. By my nature, I am subject to failings and slip-ups in every arena. We are not machines, far from immaculate in design and execution, even if at times we long to be. Our behaviour is never perfunctory, shaped by all sorts and kinds of variables. We are vulnerable to bad moments, without question, but we are also just as vulnerable to the good ones. Perspective can be hard to conquer.

Reflection is as strong as it is frustrating for the sheer fact that we will always understand best long after the occurrence has passed us. It is a tool that allows us to learn, grow, and better ourselves through careful examination, a hallmark of humanity. At this very moment, it is easy for me to look back and see the patterns of my behaviour, easier still to vow that I'll never fall into such a pattern again. Truthfully, one can never really say for sure -- but a constant certainty is that life marches on. Highs and lows wax and wane, continually eclipsed by one another. Even in the face of the unknown, there is comfort knowing that nothing -- for good or ill -- is ever really permanent.

PAULA SAYWORD



Paula Sayword's full length book of poetry, Canticle of Light and Dark was published by The Synthesis Center Press in 2014. A chapbook, What Sleeps Inside was published by Slate Roof Press in the summer of 2010. Her poetry has appeared in *Sanctuary, the Journal of Massachusetts Audubon Society*; the *Naugatuck River Review*, *Cyclamen & Swords*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *The Zuni Mountain Poets* and *Adrienne Rich: A Tribute Anthology*. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her long-time woman partner.

LET HER RIDE II

It's a Wednesday afternoon. The pandemic rages, so does the wind that seems to blow from one direction or another every day, a wind that bites her face whenever she walks. So she thinks about getting in her car and driving, driving anywhere, not too fast, not too slow, but one thing she knows is that she's got to turn the radio on, turn the volume up and put on the Dance or maybe the 70's Station. Screw the news, she says aloud as she pulls out of the driveway.

Nothing but words teasing out the truth of things, as if there is a truth. So she turns a disco song up, the music that makes her feel good. She can be inside the happy times, alone, with the music playing as loud as she wants, remembering the women's dances, the back rooms at the local bars where women met on Tuesday nights, smoky and sweaty, smelling of beer and lust. When she could dance for hours and get up and go to work the next day. When her body didn't hurt, didn't feel like her bones are pushing against her skin, muscles strained like frayed ropes, too much weight around the middle and too much alcohol. Now she's a few years away from eighty, knows the clock does not tick backwards. She remembers the hearts she's broken and the pain of her own wounds, the one that pierced her gut as deep as darkness, so she turns Gloria Gaynor up louder and watches a patch of blue open in the gray sky as she drives slowly on some back road.

She thinks about death and God and how she wears this envelope of a body over something that will sing forever. But her envelope is growing old and tired and she wonders what will be on the other side of her final breath. The patch of blue closes and snow starts to shift down, soft and steady. She turns her headlights on, switches the station to Tina Turner asking what's love got to do with it and heads for home.

MUSIC NEVER HEARD

The old Renault leaked feeble heat
as we drove the New Haven Streets,
leaving the Chinese gift shop where
she'd bought me brass wind chimes
for Christmas.

The December afternoon was raw,
light leaning towards darkness.
On the radio the weatherman said
the needle-like rain would soon
turn to snow, perhaps back to rain.
No promise of a white Christmas.
No promises at all.

The President was dead less than a month
and we stumbled through our senior year,
listening to Baez and Dylan,
trying to make sense of all we didn't understand.
My life had no idea of itself.
But she was music
I had never heard---
the girl from a private school
who drank Norwegian beer,
read Camus and Buber,
smelled of oil paints,
a body odour, dark, moist.

On the way home snow swallowed sky,
came wet and thick,
crowded the headlights.
In my driveway we talked long and close.
It was night. It was white. I trembled.
Snow deepened, everything was quiet as sleep.
Stay, I said. The roads are bad.
My mother won't mind.
That night we hung those delicate chimes
from the overhead light in my ceiling,
until one day while I was gone,
my mother threw them away.

PUERTO MORELOS: WINTER 2014

The hotel across the road
falls asleep
window by window,
lights extinguished.
Darkness in the mouths of glass.
As others lay sleeping
I sit alone on the second floor porch,
sipping vodka and melted ice,
listening to coconut fronds
swimming in the wind.
Coatis emerge
from the dense mangrove.
Bandits of the night,
nosing through trash
for discarded fruit,
carrying off a plastic bag
into the black forest..
The sky is a gauze of clouds,
the moon, drowsy and vague,
sleeps on her back.

WHAT WE REMEMBER

There is a lake in her memory,
long, wide, deep.
There is a guide boat on the water,
water as still as the space between
one breath and another,
until a fish jumps for insects
hovering over the face of the lake,
leaving a ring, a ripple.
There are two women in the boat,
voices soft with the dusky evening air.
Oars nearly silent as they fall then rise,
water dripping off their edges.
There is a pair of loons,
shadowed as light slowly weakens.
V trails across the lake's surface
as they separate, call out
a quiet hoot, a tender yodel.
There are three blond children

waiting on the shore,
with voices like a sighing wind.
A golden puppy is with them.
They are all so young,
the children and their mothers,
their happiness.
There is a lake in her memory.
It's image flawless, haunting.
Children calling their mothers
to come ashore, their flash-lights blinking
into the swelling Adirondack night.
Smell of balsam as a mist rises,
far off sound of loon voices,
an eerie echo moving further away,
floating down the arm of the lake.

WINTER PSALM

Outside our window,
the morning spoke to me
of rumpled time, rivers of light.
Snow was heavy on winter branches
and blue broke through clouds
turning another page in the sky.

I am more than I know myself to be,
I said to the glass,
where doves on the other side
pecked at black seed,
looked back at me as though I were not there.

Wind kicked at the branches
and clots of snow fell
as doves left the ground in a burst of wings
to rest like prayers in the wild cherry tree.
After a storm twenty winters ago,
we would have spent the morning
shovelling to the goats and chickens,
hauling buckets of warm water,
sweet smelling grain.

We might have come back to the house,
to touch under flannel sheets,
singing into each other's bodies,

drifting off to sleep.

But those days are gone,
remembered under the skin,
behind these eyes looking out
at the white dancing fields,
the morning still telling me stories,
time trembling like a psalm.

THERESA DASKALAKIS

Theresa currently spends a great deal of time working in a big blue box, trying to interpret Swedish furniture names for the public. She is the proud mother of two felines, who have never been kitten of the month in any educational setting. Originally from New York, Theresa resides in Los Angeles where she earned her MFA from Antioch University.

Theresa has published sparingly, for several online journals and writes constantly in her head. Theresa is a writer of CNF and fiction, often choosing to inject her acute powers of description into her wry world view.

SILENT NIGHT

“Mah-Ree! MAH-Ree!!”

My mother’s head turns toward the voice calling her name.

“Mah-Ree, why you treat me mean?”

My mother’s eyebrows meet in the middle of her forehead like two waves crashing from opposite directions.

“ RIGHTRIGHTRGHTRIGHT!” she yells back. Her head turns away, the lip on the left side of her face curled downward, disgusted.

“I’m sorry my mother is so mean,” I apologize to Margaret, one of my mother’s Home Health Aides.

“It’s OK. Some days me come and she love me up, kiss my hand and cry, cry, cry.

Other days....mmm mmm mmm, she mean. I don pay no mind.”

“RIGHTRIGHTRIGHT!” my mother shouts to no one or maybe to someone she alone sees. The words shoot out of the left side of her mouth, the side that is still able to move. Her eyes are unfocused except for the occasional times she suddenly turns and looks at me with her *who the hell are you* expression she has not lost. It is amazing what aspects of personality disappear and which ones hang on. My mother has a Ms. Pac Man like cancer eating away at her brain and *she* decides what goes and what stays.

The room has been de-cluttered, the mess having been contained to fit the hospital bed. There is an old radio/tape deck playing Christmas carols. The room is so unbearably hot that the roses I brought this morning are already bent and brown. There is a plastic container of strawberries from Costco sitting on the kitchen counter that I bought

yesterday. Barely able to see any of the lush, red through the thick, gray fuzz that now covers them, bacterium took advantage of the temperature and pored over them at a miraculous rate. I immediately turn the thermostat down before I faint or collapse or run out of the room, all of which are options. My mother is lying on her back, her thin, dry hair like the skeletons of tiny birds, arranged on the pillow under her head.

“Hi, Ma.”

My mother lies looking in the other direction.

“Hi, mom. It’s me.”

She turns and faces me directly. Her eyes are clouded. The right one seems to bulge slightly. I have no idea how much she can see. Sometimes she seems to recognize me. Then, she doesn’t. She reaches out with her left arm, I take her hand. She curls four strong fingers around my thumb, the way babies do. She pulls my hand close to her face, tucks it under her chin, and leans her cheek against my hand. This is how we stay. She does not sleep. Her eyes move around, slowly, blankly. Margaret sings along with the radio, her island accent clipping some words, drawing out others.

“Si i- lent night. Ho o - ly night. Aaaa-ll is calm. Allll is right.”

“RIGHTRIGHTRIGHT.”

My mother’s mouth turns downward in an upside U. She squeezes her eyes shut and a weeping noise escapes.

It is not her voice.

It is a high, child’s noise.

It is without power or air behind it.

It is a sound of hopelessness and resignation.

It is one note, one syllable, one long, keening sound.

She keeps her eyes closed and tightens her grip on my thumb, using the back of my hand to wipe the tear that runs down the left side of her cheek. I can’t pull my hand away. I can’t get away.

I look up at the head-shot of Jesus that hangs on the wall behind her bed. It is the long-haired, almond-shaped eyes one, the one with the crown of thorns and a thin trickle of blood that drips onto his forehead. It is the handsome one.

What the fuck, I think. You are right here, can't you do something? What are you waiting for exactly? She is not going to get any holier and if you are waiting for me, well then she is gonna live forever. This isn't helping your cause in my book one damn bit.

I look at Handsome Jesus.

Handsome Jesus looks at me.

We are at a stand-off.

So I talk to my mother in my head, instead. I tell her to let go, it's OK, I am here. There's nothing more to do, just let go. This is it. Just let go and it will be OK now. I am here. Jesus Christ, just fucking let go! But she doesn't. She just holds on to my thumb. And weeps.

I am my mother's only child and the only unpaid person who comes to see her. She is dying alone because she has lived a selfish, heartbreaking life. I am here because it is the right thing to do. Silent Night. Holy night. Right.Right.Right.

In one day my mother will wrestle Margaret with the strength of a kitten when she needs her diaper changed. They will emerge from the bathroom together, finally quiet and clean. Her sparse hair combed. Her clothes fresh. She will immediately urinate in the bed.

In two days my mother will be in the kind of agonizing pain I have only heard about. She will cry out; she will writhe like there are serpents under her skin. The Hospice nurse will tell me that there is no such thing as too much morphine. I believe her but I cannot seem to give her enough to stop the torture she is experiencing. Her cancer is in her lungs, her brain, but she is grabbing some place deep beneath the covers and rocking and groaning. I am again a child that can't help. In the middle of the night, there will finally be enough drugs in her system to quiet her. Her moans will be replaced with deep rattles that will bubble up into her slung open mouth.

In three days I will squirt another dose of morphine in the pocket of her right cheek. I will touch her wrist and feel her pulse skipping around, thrumming more and more gently away from my monitoring hand. I will feel the last beat of her heart as it recedes back into time. It has always been just us and it is right that I am the one that makes the pain of her world go away forever. But still.

Silent Night.

Holy Night.

Right.

Right.

Right.

TINA ANTON



Tina Anton is a lesbian author currently living in Ohio. She started submitting her photography and artwork in 2020 and her pieces are featured in Harpy Hybrid Review, Tuna Fish Journal, and others. You can find her on Twitter @Dean_is_Batman

"Possibilities"





"Randomelity"



“Pathways”



"Nature's Ghost"

ZEENA YASIN



Zeena Yasin is an Iraqi poet, digital artist and aspiring film-maker. She recently graduated from SOAS with MSc Middle Eastern Politics. She is passionate about storytelling, beauty and wonder. In her spare time, she loves to dance to Afrobeats, Dancehall and French rap and RnB. Her favourite club nights are Latin, with plenty of salsa and bachata. She has a love for fashion from the 90s and early 2000s era. She obsesses over cinematography and production set design in her favourite music videos. Instagram: @lamassuking Twitter: @queenofnineveh

IN MATTERS OF FRIENDSHIP AND IN MATTERS OF THE HEART

“once again, we are in a similar situation”
my best friend tells me
as we lament over our love lives
my best friend and I
we are together and one
our way of being unscathed
full of hope and optimism
we believe we conquered our inner demons
paved way for new paths
my best friend tells me
“I thought I had processed this”
and I tell her
in matters of friendship and in matters of the heart
when we are together
we feel like we can conquer anything
when we are with them
our hearts begging to crawl out of our chests
all of the childhood memories return
we are back in the nation we thought we had fled
the one who you felt
had your homeland in their chest
in matters of the heart
we lose our homeland
we scramble for citizenship
in matters of friendship
we thought we had conquered everything
and I tell her
“we all behave differently when we are in love”

CRASHING OCEAN

You are chaotic, messy, difficult, negative, impossible. And you are beautiful, a light of fire, the colours blue and purple, and there is so much hope and stories within you. You are full of conspiracy theories, self-destruction, stagnancy. And there are rivers of emotion in you, that ebb and flow to the moon. You lie to yourself, you delude yourself. You always speak to me of karmic experiences, how everything is always someone or something else's fault. How you are tied to this destiny of suffering.

And you would turn to me for guidance and rationality. You found hope in me. And you would turn again towards your destruction. You are a circular tide of emotions, thought processes and sense of self.

You are beautiful, so beautiful and you are chaotic. You are two people at once, and you are a whole novel.

I wish I could fix you, I wish I could heal you. I wish I could pull you towards rationality and realise all of the potential success stories within you. How multifaceted you are in all directions. I can only wish.

I can only witness the crashing ocean from a distance. Chaotic, beautiful, soothing. But I must not drown.



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