

Penumbra

2014



Volume 24

The Annual Art and Literary Journal
of
California State University Stanislaus

penumbra (pi-num 'bre): n. 1. A partial shadow, as in an eclipse, between regions of complete shadow and complete illumination. 2. The partly darkened fringe around a sunspot. 3. An outlying, surrounding region; periphery; fringe. [Lat. paene, almost – La. umbra, shadow]

All About Penumbra

This is the 24th edition of Penumbra, California State University, Stanislaus's art and literary journal. Since 1991, Penumbra has proudly published poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and visual art by contributors from the Stanislaus region, from throughout the U.S., and from abroad. Our staff is composed entirely of students: they make all editorial decisions—which submissions to accept, how to design and format the journal, etc.—as well as selling all the advertising space.

We have no aesthetic or political agenda; we accept the best submissions we get, based on democratic deliberations. Because new students staff the journal each year, Penumbra's look and contents are always evolving. If you read two different back issues, you're likely to find two very different objects!

Annually, we launch the new issue with a reading on the CSU Stanislaus campus, usually near the beginning of May. This introductory note is a general invitation to submit to Penumbra* and to attend future readings, which provide writers and artists with an excellent opportunity to share their work with a supportive audience.

CSU Stanislaus students, this is an invitation to join Penumbra Club and to enroll in English 4019: Editing a Literary Magazine. You could help to shape the future of this campus treasure!

** For future submissions, visit <https://www.csustan.edu/penumbra>*

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This publication could not be possible without the enthusiasm, wisdom, and leadership of our Editor-in-Chief, Kayla Seabourn.

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Aquaholic

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A Lonely Sestet in Search of

There are no beasts driving me into darkness
No leopards nor lions nor she-wolves baring fangs,
No, it is the darkness itself that dominates
Stashing the very light away into caves;
And since we know dark will way the final say,
I have come to loathe the close of each day.
Night, unable to offer the elixir of sleep,
Presides over the dashing of restful dreams.
But now, at the turn, with only six lines
To counteract this octet's despotic designs,
We need to walk hand in hand with leniency,
Finding solace not in creed, but in the primacy
Of kindness, kindness which by its grace alone
Provides us modest means to meander home.

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Abstract Cave Drawings

Neanderthals necking on the Rhine.
No, Neanderthals don't neck, pillage perfectly
Spears, speaking, cylindrical rifts through the ice cold caverns
Chewing, cheek to bone, bending stiffly through the marrow.

It's not enough to feed; it's not enough to eat.
Still sinking teeth, tattered, into flesh.
Charlemagne said, No.
We will not go into the darkness of night,
Aachen is ours for eternity.

And the Fat King, Louie, sat upon his throne.
Corpulently craving the products of his slave labor
Slip-sliding it to the courtesans left and right,
Necking, knocking, right into his grave.

Jürgen took Willebadessen,
Masquerading as Meister, The original McDonald
Tilling the earth until the cows, they literally,
Came home sparing not one quiet little ear of corn.

Frederick never gave up corn, transplanted across the schism.
Tracked lead footing back and forth
Disturbed dysfunction, mead and all, swallowing
Down that hallow satisfaction.

But they never mattered, they never knew.
T'was time for tempers to shift and shake.
She who has the will
Can bear any how.

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And the beehives grew
And the fire spread
And they stood
Two feet to the ground.

Maternal caskets slammed on fingers.
Chalk lined the lives of children on pavement.
Wind dragged hearts through fields of cacti.
Gunshots ripped through flesh like husking corn.
Cheap whisky bottles broke on hands.

Fists juiced blood orange noses.
Guts slid past third base into home.
And the beehives withdrew
And the fire fell
And there they lay,
Roots above head.

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Swirls



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AFTERTHOUGHT

When it's time,
let me fly away
like the translucent
husk that births
the deep blue bud
of iris
and morning.

Fodder for wind,
sun, rain and soil.

No eulogies.
Cares about posterity
soaked back
into the earth.
Fear of darkness
swallowed
by the moon.

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Alone in the Trench

It struck me after checking my family tree --
there is no one around anymore who knew me as a baby --
my youngest 90-year-old aunt, who helped breastfeed me, is gone.
I am the last soldier in this shallow trench
that failed to guard them from that creep
who claimed all those who remembered me as a baby.

In their loaded-up coffins,
they took away my embarrassing dark secrets,
my coming-of-age confusion,
my begging for understanding and love,
my attempts to make up for wasted time.
They left me alone in this trench with all their soiled blankets, bandages, medications and blurred
words about my being a bad girl who did not live up to their expectations,
who betrayed their dreams of my becoming them.

To the very end, they kept mumbling
about stale half-century-old grievances
and things that I could have today
but do not want anymore,
mesmerized by a queer music reverberating in my clouded head,
lulling me into indifference to the past,
making me able to stay in this forlorn trench, alone,
crying and plotting an angry revenge.
As always, driven by adrenalin
rather than by reason and conscience,
I rise up between death and my son and daughter --
I am the last one, who remembers them as my worshipped babies,
but a creep in black with a reaping hook
knocks me down with pneumonia,
pumping me up with despair.
The queer music stops reverberating in my clouded head,
and now I hear only wolves howling a happy message to one another --

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“dinner is almost ready.”

I contended with well-built powerful men

but I am helpless against the skeleton in black with a reaping hook.

I decided to ration the rest of my life --

raised on the streets I am not afraid of isolation and starvation --

I am resolute to spare my son and daughter

from watching me laying like a ripped-up rag doll in the trench

that could not protect anyone from the creep

who claimed all those who knew me as a baby.

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Elephante



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Alzheimer's

It's 1942 and I remember my time on the USS Lexington....we sunk the Shoho.... "scratch one flattop"... in WWII.

After coming home I married my high school sweetheart, Joan, in 1946 and...

we
aaaaaaaa children named Mary, John, Beth, and .
I worked 36 years at the plant, the one.... oh where was it

Yesterday we went to the supermarket

we need meat for dinner, toilet paper, and LEAVE THE TV ON!

Yesterday we went to the supermarket.

I know I already said that! I KNOW!

I just meant...

Hi, Beth! Did you and Joe just get home now?

How was school?

Right, I knew that. So how was work today?

Yesterday we went to the supermarket

This morning on the news I saw... it was about the President...

Clinton, right?

No, Obama. Who's Obama? Well, anyway he said

Yesterday we went to the supermarket

Beth, where have you been? It's been so long since we've seen you. How's that fiancé of yours?

I'm hungry. When are we eating? I re

turn on the news By the way, Joan, I
 Yesterday
 Oh go away, GO AWAY GO AWAY LEAVE ME ALONE! WHO ARE YOU?
 My medications? Oh, all right...
 Remember that diner we ate at on our road trip to the Grand Canyon? Jimmy O's Diner, the one
 that served the best meatloaf and mashed potatoes I've ever had? That trip..... what a great time!
 The Grand Canyon is a wonder
 Hi, I'm Jim Brown. What's your name?
 Oh, hello, Beth. Nice to meet you. Yesterday we went to the supermarket.... We need meat
 for dinner
 Why, Joan, you look so pretty tonight... Yes, I'm tired, I'll go to sleep now Did you say
 prayers with the kids?
 Good night, Joan. Say good night to your friend there for me. Oh Beth, yes nice to meet
 you.

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The Angels Under Water Are Calling My Name

Oceans do not retreat,
the tide leaves and returns again.
Elegant waves are bittersweet

Is it blue, or just deceit,
like the lie of where it ends?
Oceans do not retreat.

Beauty inviting us in our fleets,
but vengeful saltwater will condemn.
Elegant waves are bittersweet.

Infinite beauty growing with heat,
spreading further with every attempt,
oceans do not retreat.

Will it take over, and flood the trees,
washing up man's discontent?
Elegant waves are bittersweet.

No more calm, the end is concrete.
Four or five will break and bend.
Oceans do not retreat,
Elegant waves are bittersweet.

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ANITA IN BOSTON SPEAKS:

Our Serbian friends don't speak to us,
claiming Marko was a Nazi,
knowing very well
he was in the Resistance,
while other Croats
denounced friends and kin.

Solidarity with their brothers
in the war across the ocean,
after forty years of the melting pot,
playing tennis, learning bridge.

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art

that thing is still hanging in the hallway
sailboats and seashells that wouldn't be at home anywhere
not even in that ratty motel down the road
the one that rents rooms by the hour

it's the ugliest thing i've ever seen
and most everyone agrees
an unsightly platitude in oils
your mother was losing her eyesight then
and my God, it shows
it's an embarrassment when people visit
that's why i moved it over to that dark corner
where the light from the bathroom doesn't reach
the place where your toes caught the carpet
and you fell
she's been gone twenty-six years now this December
you'll have been gone eleven in May
so it gets me to thinking about how long i got left
when i think of you and her

how i miss you
her—not so much

i tell myself i deserve to not be rid of the horror
i deserve to go out with some peace of mind
still, i can't bring myself to take it down
a promise is a promise

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Aerial View



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Because We Like To Look At It

I love hands:
I love a hand to hold
a hand to stroke
my back
my hair
my you-know-what down there

I was taught that sex
is something
we only talk about
behind closed doors

I love to spell it out
when no one else is in the room

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V-A-G-I-N-A

I love these white pages
that let me see it
before I taste it
on my lips, tongue, and teeth,
before I say it
slowly
each syllable accented:

VA-GI-NA.

This is the first year
I saw mine,
in a teaset mirror
in a Japanese bathtub
legs draped over the ledge

spread
with silver lining between my thighs
the folds
like a skirt
pretty in pink and white

like the baby blanket they wrapped me
in after i fell from another's
my mother's
one that wasn't ready
but birthed anyway
and loved it more the more she grew

It's me, momma, and you I love

I love eyes:

I love the eyes of men
that drink my image in
before they lower their lips
to my skin
to kiss
my neck
my chest
my navel
before they lower their lips
to drink
the nectar
from my you-know-what.

Now that there is a man in the room,
I dare not spell it out,
even though
the door
is closed.

Unspoken between me
the crumpled sheets
and he
whom I love
whose eyes
whose nose
whose tongue

I love
rolling his R's
in my you-know-what

God, I love:

God, whose name I moan
as I gaze into
the eyes of men
God, who I see looking back
God, who granted me
goosebumps
and nerves like iron
for the sword in the forge

Now, I thank God for
the women who birthed
all the men I've ever loved
all the men I ever will

I thank God
for the women
who birthed
the earth
from their
vaginas

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Beneath These Stones

The wind will sweep it away
everything not tied or nailed down
Beneath these stones
everything will move
poems and songs and tributes
to masked assassins and ravens
Beneath these stones
everything will crumble
novels and supernova
asters and red admirals
everything will recess, tick backward
Beneath these stones
are fissures, water cracks
breaks in the seals
Beneath these stones
are vampires and celluloid crypts
cicadas and opera
lawn tennis and murder
The wind will sweep this away too
all of it
Beneath these stones
there is only quiet.

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Pervenio



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Beware of God

At first I read the sign on the fence as Beware of God
rather than Beware of Dog—and really I’ve more
to fear from God than the tired mongrel barking
and pacing apathetically behind the fence,
doing the bare minimum to guard
the house from the few people
who pass on Cedar Street.

God wreaks serious vengeance—
no sneaking past his fence
without him taking notice,
for he’s everywhere at once,
unlike the dog guarding
a small city lot on a side
street in Nashua, New Hampshire.

What the hell was Abraham thinking
listening to God? Kill your son for me.
Sacrifice, wrath and eternal
damnation in hades?

Even federal prisons
eventually let most convicts out,
so until God can be god-like,
I’ll trust my fate to the dog
barking behind his fence
on a side street in Nashua.

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Breathing in Moonlight

We sit on the stern of a sailfish on the beach,
one boat in a row of rentals whose masts pierce
the dusk. Already the moon has sliced the sea
and slips up into the night toward the masts.

From down the beach a fisherman's headlamp
cuts the dark and he climbs
hauling a cart with his rods and catch—
fifteen fish—*sorry about the light* he says.

I'm not sorry about the light
or anything tonight, sitting here
on the beached sailing skiff
with fifteen fish pulled in moonlight from the sea.

Florida moonlight pulls us in,
back to the saltwater from which we came,
though we couldn't breathe in the sea
any more than those fish could use gills on land.

There's more moonlight
than we can imagine
reflecting in the sea,
out to the east ships' lights float on the horizon.

There will come a time when I'll no longer
breathe next to you, but not tonight;
let's sit on the sailboat's stern
until the moon touches her masts.

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Broken Yoke

What if I just didn't get up
And I let the sun lay upon me
And warm my skin like the thin blankets couldn't
Why can't I let you wrap yourself around me
And be enveloped in you
A secret letter only lovers know

The breaking dawn
A yolk across our bodies
Running toward the present
Of course
Secrets cannot lie
They will the call to go

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But what if we kept laying
Putting this small limb to risk
A judgment misunderstood
And far greater
While you take inside me
Would I cease to be me and start to show
And for the first time
When you come to me after you are made
Will my heart burst
And will I want you there in the sun
This yoke of mine next to me
A ruddy growth
What will you think of this person
That is forced upon you
And will you love me anyway
Because I didn't do much for you
But lay.

Imprints



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Coming to Grips with Cancer

for my brother, in memory

“Chagall?”-- he announces to no one.
“Four letters?” the daily paper’s puzzle in his hands.
I commandeer tactfulness slowly.
“Oh you know *Chagall*,” I cajole. “Just not--

Marc.” {Silence fills the room).
“You always gave me
more credit
than I deserve”
(this, nodding away).

It was fantasy to think crisis
would strip off the old scales

between a brother and a sister
fitted in against seeing one another.
There is still the immovable

blindness in seeing, the deafness in hearing
much as there’s always been. Throes
of agonized thin fingers
do not change touchlessness.

“Oh, I didn’t want to wake uh-up,” he murmurs softly
after a day-long nap: “You just needed to get some
beauty sleep...” I answer our old talk
designed for utterance skirting
communication. Then, later,
I know exactly what not to say
when he calls himself: the King of Pain--!”

Oh, I would be any kind of sister to him

that he wanted but we are in our childhood masks,
sometimes with glances right to the face
of love that cannot break apart or hold.

He turns painfully alone on the couch
“... it won’t be long now,” he groans,
softly, forgetfully--- intimately
to no one in the room
but me.

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Confessions of an English Major

Reading is so boring

When I was fifteen, I used to tell people that Nicholas Sparks was my favorite author. Part of me will probably always hold a little warmth for his writing because he is the first and only author my mother has ever recommended to me. He is the first author that introduced me to the physical, as well as intellectual and spiritual, aspects of love. I think this was why my mother gave him to me—hoping I could find something like what he'd written about.

Fifteen was a time in my life in which my world revolved around ideas of love or anything *like* love. I worked hard to figure out this abstract idea of *love*. I listened to music, scoured the lyrics for something relatable. I watched television with a purpose of finding at least one line from the narrator or a character that *meant something*:

“The bad guys lie to get in your bed. The good guys lie to get in your heart” (Mark Schwan, *One Tree Hill*).

“I can’t swim in a town this shallow”
(Death Cab for Cutie, “Why You’d Want to Live Here”).

“My daddy said, that the first time you fall in love, it changes you forever and no matter how hard you try, that feeling just never goes away”
(Nicholas Sparks, *The Notebook*).

I would post what I had to share on my Myspace page, which offered it to the abashing judgment and critique of my fellow fifteen-year-olds. I wrote poetry for boys who told me reading was boring. I hand-crafted musical playlists on my Myspace page as well, offering the lyrics as open-heart inquiries. I stole quotes from *everything*, letting them form my identity—belonging to them.

You have a talent.

I knew I liked to write, but I didn’t think I had any potential at writing *well* until my English teacher during my sophomore year of high school told me so. He told me my poetry shined and that my stories were intriguing. In response to a project that required a compilation of short stories, poems, and photography, he spoke to me privately to let me know how impressed he was with my work. The one that touched him most. He also made me promise to share it with my mother, the woman whose influence, he said, could be felt on every page.

Senior year of high school, another English teacher of mine made the idea of college real as she constantly reminded me that I was smart, and that she thought I would do great things *especially* if I went to college. So I did.

Most people never finish.

I’m not most people.

What are you going to school for?

I liked to *play teacher* when I was little. In my Kindergarten class, a small group would sit in the small blue chairs in front of me while I used the mini-chalkboard to pretend-teach

them. I knew, from the first time I read Robert Munsch's children's book *Love you Forever* when I was six, that I liked to read. I knew from the first poem I wrote in fifth grade about my new baby sister that I liked to write. I also knew, about halfway through my sophomore year of high school, that I wanted to teach kids like me: fifteen and full of every emotion all at once.

I didn't know what to choose that would make me worthy of the position of *first in my family* to complete college. I didn't know what to choose that would also make me happy.

Why would you want to be an English major?

Because I like to read. Because I like to write. Because I think these are two fundamental things that shaped me into who I am. Because some of the work that has made me most proud was accomplished in an English class. Because I'd like to hone my reading skills into analytical ones that can help me learn more from reading. Because it helps me grow as a writer to read things I usually wouldn't. Because it helps me become a better reader and analytical writer. Because I like the challenge of proving myself as an educated person. Because I want to prove that not all English elites are snobs. Because English was always my favorite class in high school. Because these same classes became the most pressing, demanding, stimulating, and fulfilling courses in college. Because I want to be different. Because I want to belong.

Cut the fluff.

My first professor of the English discipline at my university told me this. As I sat

in her office waiting for her to finish reading my introduction to my first research paper for her class, I had decided in that minute or so that I wasn't cut out for the English major, that my writing was horrible, that I must have only gotten lucky in my junior college classes. Really, I was a failure; the other professors had just failed to see it.

"The whole first paragraph has to go," she said. *"It's pure fluff. I mean, it's good writing, but it isn't arguing anything."*

I later let those last words haunt my thoughts: *good writing, but not arguing*. What could this mean? How could my writing—my words on paper—*be doing nothing?*

Welcome to the wonderful world of *Literary Criticism*.

The creativity lies in structure now: where to place the kick-line, and how to conclude without literally repeating myself. I've learned how to take others' ideas and work them into my own. How to keep context. How to cite correctly. I've learned about plagiarism, and how easy it can be to mistake any literary analysis as a glorified example of it. But those little parentheses at the end of the sentence, right *after* the quotations, and deliberately *before* the period—those make it a legitimate, *original*, work.

It's fine to steal, they tell me; just make sure I've cited correctly.

I finally understand how people can think reading is boring. It's laborious, dreadful at times, when it isn't for fun—when it's for something more than enjoyment.

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Argument after argument, article after article.

I don't know if I like to read anymore. I sense I'm forgetting how to write creatively.

I don't know why I want to be an English major.

Why did you settle on becoming an English major?

I'm too far in.

Why do you want to be an English teacher?

Maybe I want to be an English teacher as an ever-present angsty rebellion against *what my mother wants for me*. I didn't become a nurse, as she'd encouraged me to, because I'm not doing this for the money; I'm going to be a public high school English teacher. Yet, I think there might be a part of that ever-present need for approval from my mother that drives me, too. She often reminds me of the potential earnings of school principals and superintendents, leading me to imagine myself as that one person who "makes a difference." My mom offers these options as happy mediums—careers that both allow me to be a part of education as well as make a comfortable living. My mom doesn't want to see me struggle; she just, lovingly so, *wants it all* for me.

I realize that my chosen profession might be as selfish as it is selfless. The selfless part of my future career: public high school teachers don't make a lot of money; I'll deal with students who will forego my attempts to inspire them at all costs; it is somewhat dangerous; my main co-workers will be teenagers; I am sacrificing my own dreams of writing, at times, in order to teach the art to others.

But there are also so many *selfish* reasons I am going into this. I want to share my knowledge because I'd like the chance at keeping my ideas alive. I get to teach kids about my favorite thing—words, and the way that words can work together to make us feel something *bigger*. I think I'll be able to feel pride in what I do. I hope to change someone's life, even minutely, the way my teachers changed mine; to give someone inspiration; to keep someone moving. I'd like that chance, no matter how romanticized it may seem.

I'm an English major.

This isn't normally my way of introducing myself. I like to think that this chosen major doesn't determine my future, that it doesn't restrict me in any way, and that it doesn't define *who I am*.

But it does.

I am a writer for a grade. A writer with an intended audience of one professor. A writer who is unsure, always, of the feedback I will receive.

I often reject the English major; I am also bewitched by it.

I am also a writer of ideas, moments, and lives. I write to forget what I feel and to remember. I write to forgive as much as I do to let go of guilt. I write for myself. I write with a dream of being heard someday. I write knowing it isn't easy. I write hoping I have a shot.

The fickleness of the world of writing drives me, like mad Ahab after the great white whale, to the white blank page. It beckons me like Romeo to Juliet, asking me to go blindly

into what I feel. It waits for the right word the way that Gatsby waits for Daisy. It wishes, like J. Alfred's older self, that I would get a life outside of writing poetry. It also knows, somehow, the *toads* of truth I find and place within this world of words that Marianne Moore entitles "imaginary gardens."

There is more to this writing thing than can even be described by writing; there is more to its allure than can even be rationalized. It isn't just "fluff" on paper. It's the gnawing need to create novelty out of the ordinary.

No matter the cost.

Long Day



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Disconnecting

Just before dawn she stirred
pressing against his side, pulling
the quilts higher around them.

At seven he showered, shaved,
made coffee, read his newspaper
then left.

She drank coffee, read
her newspaper, applied makeup
then left.

Driving east, she saw huge clouds
with lavender edges against the cold sky
and wondered

Does he see beauty
in a cloud? Does he ever
think of me?

At his office, reaching for a file
he saw her arms curled tightly
around her pillow, heard

her soft breathing.
But that night as she graded papers
she no longer remembered the clouds

and he, watching the six o'clock news
had forgotten the way she looked hugging
her pillow.

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Doula

Consider it well worn the view of Orion
but always mysterious.

A gaseous puff, hoarfrost
the fogging of a windshield
with stars not yet here.

They will come.

On arrival with the comet
the earthquake or tsunami
all in one,

atoms in a seismic drama
heated and boiled over the stove
to many Kelvin

and now the wave of light.

It breaks over the edge of the cloud
with Turner's colors:

Rose madder, cobalt, gamboge, viridian
and especially white flake,
the color of stars being born.

Night isn't always night.

You can see it any January
clear and frozen, north and south,
eye or glass

All the stars are not here yet.

They will come.

The doula is not done working.

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Baby Blues



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Driving San Joaquin

— *Great Central Valley,
California, 1964*

“Alfalfa, almonds, apricots ...”

the freeway rolls on so straight and flat you could drive it
with only knees on the wheel, inertia for cruise control,
roaring by shoulders of irrigated land pushing up an earthy
alphabet lush as some greengrocer’s dream.
Dad pointed out what “used-to-be” like a mapmaker.

“Beans, beets, cantaloupes, cotton. Cows...?”

Passing time he quizzed me on the vegetable whazzats,
as Bakersfield C&W twanged to the windwing’s hum, and tractors
grazed dirt along that highway. Heat lay heavy over it all,
enough to glue your thighs to the seats. We had nothing but
two-speed air conditioning, hot and hotter in our ’49 Buick.

“Grapes, lemons, melons, onions, oranges, peaches, peppers...”

our tires toe-dipped in a water that never was, riding toward a
“*destination forever*” sweated out of the dust and asphalt
like a mirage, or some roadside stand, once-upon-an oasis
of cool rising amid rainbows of fruit and produce.

“Plums, potatoes, strawberries, tomatoes, walnuts...”

that fruit basket alphabet was close as I got to the pick
and shovel existence that saved us from starving,
pulling cotton in fields and sorting fruit in sheds now
ruins beside mile markers punctuated with Eucalyptus.

Riding the back of San Joaquin on old Highway 99
reeks of dirt and money to me, and that blessed sacrament,
great Tulare Lake buried like a promise underneath.

I can still hear Dad say, “This ground will grow anything
if you just give it a little water.”

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Elegy for a Fallen Man

Sphinx, riddle me this:
What door is open and closed at the same time?
You must know, sitting there for ten millennia
sand eating at your feet
wind whittling your eyes and face
as you do what you're best at
Dreaming.
The dream is a game of unequal's
Life and its horizon
Death and its fast wall
Two opposing forces with you left in the middle.
How many have sat with you
and pondered the unanswered?
How many have asked you:
Why am I here?
Where will I go?
How will I stay?
How many have condemned your silence
and cursed your smug face?
How many have answered this riddle:
What door is open and closed at the same time?
Just one.
Yours.

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Farewell, Flavia

When you laughed, tea leaves
chattered their good fortune

from under a love seat, wry dust
blurts out all it remembers

thin books recede into sleeves
pages weary with regret

drawers I open reveal
smells no longer secret

and my fingers resist massaging
memories it feels foolish to knead

I've mislaid those unwritten cues
I learned when loving you was crucial

awaken long enough to rearrange
soft sobs into warm comfort

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Abandoned House



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A Fossil Life

We were just miles from Meteor Crater in Arizona when we missed our turnoff. I asked my father, who already had two thousand miles of driving under his belt in less than seventy-two hours, if he was going to stop. He wasn't.

"Imagine the Smoketown quarry," he said, "only bigger."

All rocks and excavation he meant.

"Don't think they'll let you rummage around. They won't. That's why they got binoculars and stuff on the bottom, not just for context you see, but for the imagination, so you get the sense of it all."

"Still, I'd like to go."

"Just looks like the quarry, like I said."

My father was driving to California where I now lived with my mother. They divorced a year earlier, and she moved to Los Angeles for a management job with a famous non-profit, which meant I moved as well. I was born in Philadelphia, and everyone I knew lived there, it seemed, except for me. I lived in Hollywood, north of.

Another sign came up.

"It's only ten miles or so," I said, looking at the map. I was good with maps, like my dad, and life seemed better, more orderly, with a map in hand. It also offered all the possible futures at once—places to go, things to see. "We can backtrack to the highway."

My father just shook his head.

"It isn't ten miles, more like twenty, and twenty there and back. On those roads, an

hour maybe, plus parking and gawking."

"I can gawk fast."

"It's a two hour decision, Bud. In two hours we're through Flagstaff—"

My father knew time and he knew roads, driving for a living. He pulled long hauls from Seattle, Portland, sometimes even Mexico and Canada, just about everywhere in North America, and the roads, thin and inked on a Rand McNally, were actual places in his mind. He knew them all. The highways, the small dotted service roads, the detours through deserts and hills—these he knew as well as his own house, my mother always said, and you could tell. The truck, when not in use, sat in our driveway, awaiting a load; it sat there fueled, sleeping compartment stocked with clothes, thermos, small refrigerator. Sometimes my father even slept in there when he was home, saying that it was hard to get used to his bed again though I knew better. It was mom that he wasn't used to.

On the road there was only one rule: make the delivery. But our house was a haven for rules, small and large, minor and major chords with smooth transitions, each depending upon the other. When my father was home he didn't adjust well to the rules—hours to eat and wake, hours to work and rest—and he grew confined, pacing the house like a caged animal, at least until the phone rang with a load.

Nobody was happier than my father behind a wheel, any wheel.

"—and they'll be postcards ahead."

"What's the point of driving if we can't

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stop?"

"The point is not flying."

He hated to fly and never did it. I couldn't fly either.

"Mom flies. She says it's okay."

"Your mother can do what she likes. Not you. Terra firma, son."

So we drove. Twice a year he picked me up and drove east. Sometimes he picked me up in the Chevelle, the car we were in now, a classic that he refused to sell even though my mom said it was a money pit. And sometimes he picked me up in the rig, which only embarrassed my mother and confirmed her decision to divorce him. Nobody had a truck in our condo.

"Can we stop at the Grand Canyon then?"

I was twelve and knew the stories. A view through gauze and sun mist, the canyon, a mile deep of red rock, dissected by river, wall and esplanade.

"That's north. Too far."

The speedometer was now at eighty, but it didn't feel like we were going that fast. His hands were steady on the wheel, confident; I always liked that about my father when we were in the car together—God himself wasn't a better driver. It was easy in the Chevelle, big engine made for this, it blended into the asphalt, the fading lines of Ying and Yang, metal and man joined as one. It should. According to my mother he paid more attention to that car than he did to her. She never says this without a wine glass in her hand, reaching for the bottle,

so I take this as it comes, her version. Sometimes cars are easier to love than people.

"Can we stop in Phoenix?"

"Too far south."

"Then where can we stop?"

I knew the answer. We were on a timetable.

"You know the drill, Bud. I have to drop you off and get back."

He had it down. First, to Los Angeles, ten hours, and three days back or less before getting a new load on Monday.

"I have to be in Sarasota on Tuesday."

The map unfurled in my hands. Thousands of miles.

"Can you do that, Pop?"

He turned to me and smiled. This is what he lived for.

But not stopping. My father was a camel, even older he wouldn't stop for longer than five minutes. Gas, pack of smokes and some chow, quick bathroom break then back in the Chevelle again. For thousands of miles, since Pennsylvania really, all I've seen are wrecks, traffic jams, gas stations and burger shacks. A motel or two was thrown in just to prove that my father was human.

"Still, I'd like to see something. Maybe the desert. Walk it."

"You're seeing it now, look."

Mountains, brush, rock.

"—this is pretty much it, Bud."

"Because you've seen it all. I haven't."

I continued to dig through the map.

"—how about the Hoover dam?"

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“Just a block of concrete, that’s all.”

“It’s pretty high, they say.”

My father shook his head.

“If height’s what you’re after then you want the Tetons.”

Of course I knew the answer before I even asked it. The Tetons were two states away.

“Tombstone then. Wyatt Earp. That’s Arizona. We’re here.”

Not this trip. He was in a hurry and I knew it.

“But we can stop for a drink,” he said, pointing to a small stand.

The stand wasn’t one at all but a tourist shack, just off the interstate which now seemed abandoned. The Chevelle growled to slow, uncertain on whether to actually stop. The Chevelle was like my father, better in motion than at rest, and sitting in park was an invitation for its decades-old cooling system to leak and dribble on the ground, dank puddles. We’d add coolant and hope for the best. This time was no better and my father went inside to search.

I remained in the heat, walking through a table of postcards, Navajo trinkets, and blankets laid out with nobody around. For the past three trips I got nothing but postcards, reminders of what I would have seen had I actually been there and witnessed it myself, a faux life; the postcards now were photocopies that stood in place of the real thing. What was the real thing? I no longer knew.

It was while walking outside that I got my idea. My father, I could see through the window inside the shack, was busy stocking up,

coolant, gas maybe, soda and sandwiches for sure, so I knew he was going straight through to Los Angeles— no stops, pull an all-nighter if necessary. What he couldn’t see was the wall, a low slung collection of rocks and stone, some cemented in place, others made so only by time, located just behind the shack. Why I noticed the wall I can’t say. I wasn’t really a rock hound, though I had friends who were, collecting pieces of this rock or that, and now I could see why. The reflections. Tiny chunks of quartz, or what I assumed to be quartz, had caught the sun and now glittered, back and forth, a hypnotist’s watch as I approached, and then something else. Another rock, striated and cut like firewood stood out.

That’s exactly what it was. Petrified wood.

Only a hour before Meteor Crater I had begged my father to stop at an-other place: the Petrified Forest with its downed trees, broken and cracked, from what I’ve read. Now there was a piece in front of me, forged inside the rock wall, but unlike the fossils at the park, which were protected, this one was out in the open for everyone to see.

And touch.

The mortar around the wall, I noticed, crumbled slightly, breaking apart with my fingers as I rubbed, first with the skin, and later with a nail. This is how these things begin, very slowly, an inkling of a bad idea gone wrong: What if I can loosen that rock?

A small rock helped, one shaped like

a flat river stone or spoon, and it cleaned the mortar out in seconds, as the fossil began to wobble like an old tooth. Soon I had it in my hands.

But there was not triumph, only despair.

“Hey, kid, what the—?”

The voice came from over my shoulder, the sound of authority, of some-one who spent his entire life in one place and would move around too, just like my father, if he had the money and a Chevelle.

He didn’t.

“—that’s my wall, you’re destroying my wall.”

And I was. One piece offered into a second, then a third, and like my grandfather’s old mouth where an anchor tooth, once pulled, surrendered an entire row of teeth, so did the wall. Pieces began to slide away, slant and crumble, like a chain reaction. One that I couldn’t control.

The voice yelled louder, but what could I do? The rocks began to slide, then shift and in a moment, a good portion of it slumped into the sand.

My father, now outside, was as stunned as I was, but not from the power of gravity. He knew gravity well. An eighteen-wheeler was prone to the darker forces of gravity once in motion, and that motion wouldn’t stop unless done so forcibly—much like a kid’s curiosity.

The man from the shack, witnessing all this, made a sudden turn, his eyes were vampiric, angry.

“Your kid here just ruined my wall.”

There was nothing for any one of us to say. The fossil in my hand was rough, you could feel the

ridges of the ancient bark, the stony grooves that betrayed a prior life. The tree was once alive, millions

of years ago, sprouting leaves and swaying in the wind, , but was it more peaceful now I wondered, dead? It no longer felt rain, sun, thirst. The tree no longer felt anything, just the numbness of stone and time.

“Someone has to pay for this,” said the man.

My father looked at me like he did the Chevelle when it leaked— as if I was defective and maybe I was.

“What were you doing, Bud?”

My voice was slag, molten, dry from the hot air.

“I saw this and just wondered—”

“You pulled out the man’s rock?”

“It’s a fossil, like at the Petrified Forest. We drove by it.”

“There wasn’t time.”

“I know it.”

His eyes glazed over me and then the wall, which he inspected like he was working under the hood of the Chevelle, moving this, checking that. The mortar, he concluded, was bad, probably not mixed right.

“We can fix this mister. I’m sorry.”

“Darn right you’ll fix it.”

He pointed to a shed and some bags of old concrete in there.

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“Get mixing then.”

We did. In the hot, Arizona sun, near the whizzing cars and trucks just off of I-40 we worked, rebuilding that small wall, stone by stone. It was the first time I ever saw my father work on something other than his car, and he worked quiet-ly. But he knew what I knew. We wouldn’t make it to Los Angeles that night. A wall had slowed us up, and when we finished, five hours later, it was the longest detour on any trip we would ever make together. Next time, he said, I would stay in the car, and I did.

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The Gatekeeper's Song

The water swirls below her, billowing in continuous circles. The winter snowpack is melting, and the rivers run full. In the mountains, granules of snow change to droplets that form rivulets; creeks turn into streams and rivers, then flow into Lake Tahoe. She stands at the lake's outlet, on the bridge near the Gatekeeper's cabin. When she was a newborn, her mother had held her in her arms and stood at this very same place. Every spring, she returns.

Before houses, condos, chain motels, fast-food restaurants, and brand-name stores were built, her ancestors traveled every spring to the lake. They slept in shelters made of tree bark, and lived off the land. They knew the lake as *Da ow a ga*, "the life sustaining water."

In the depths, large trout cruise along the currents—mackinaws, browns, and rainbows. The fish drift through varying depths of clarity as if guided by invisible strings, an intricate mobile of life, each on their own path, yet connected.

She had long ago grown tired of worrying about the things she saw and heard but could not change: angry words shouted during water wars, mushroom clouds rose from the desert, the water itself, which grew more cloudy and polluted.

Cascading over the dam and into the Truckee River, the current's constant pressure wears jagged rocks into rounded stones. In stretches where the river widens and slows, moss grows across the sandy bottom. Small creatures make their homes within the soft confines of the growth.

The seasons continued to come and go. She fell in love, experienced the joy of family and friends, and the grief of loss. She witnessed too many wars to count, and too many injustices to remember. She fought, and she surrendered.

The water rushes down the mountains, and through the dense corridors of Reno. Its path is altered, channeled by concrete walls and man-made rocks. But it continues, not out to sea, as is the journey of many high Sierra rivers, but into the expanse of the high mountain desert and the Great Basin.

She is now eighty-two years old. She has seven grandchildren. They're bright and the oldest have graduated from college. Hopes and dreams of a better future fill their heads. When they were born, she held each one at the same place on the bridge.

The water reaches its final destination, a salty lake with a towering rock near the middle in the shape of a pyramid. The fish are large here, and one strain is prehistoric. Large tufa formations surround the shores, and one of them is known as "Stone Mother."

She holds onto the bridge railing. The original Gatekeeper's cabin was the home of the Watermaster, a person who was in charge of controlling the flow of water out of Lake Tahoe. She looks to the sky and gazes into the same deep blue color as the lake. She laughs, takes a deep breath, and laughs again.

No one can ever be a master of the water.

Musical Notes



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Ghost Stories

“Tell me a story.” Her request had caught Mark off guard at first, just as sleep threatened to take him. In the darkness, and without his glasses, Mark couldn’t see much farther than the head that rested on his chest; Linda’s words had seemed to come from nowhere, bouncing off the nothingness at the foot of his bed.

“Alright.” He said after a moment, gently shaking the sleep from his mind. He thought of adjusting himself briefly, but decided to let Linda’s head remain on his chest. His fingers began running through her hair delicately, as he searched his mind for the words.

“Really?” She seemed surprised, and Mark could feel her arms squeeze him slightly with excitement.

“Anyone you asked would swear the house was haunted.” Mark began, until gentle giggles cut through the darkness. “Yes?” He asked.

“Nothing, just surprised. I wouldn’t have guessed you to be a ghost story kind of guy.” After only a few weeks, Mark didn’t know what kind of guy most people would guess him to be; she seemed to like him though, and that was good enough. “Keep going, I’m interested.” She prodded him on softly.

“The house hadn’t always been haunted. It hadn’t even always been that house. It looks just like the original, but if anyone were

to go into the basement they would see where the flames ran out of things to burn. The concrete down there, some of it scarred and darkened, is one of only two things left over from before.

“No one lives there anymore. These days it stands quiet and empty, the closest thing that town will ever see to a mausoleum. Not too many people seem to remember the family that lived there before, even after only a few years. It isn’t that important, I guess; it’s just funny how forgetting is always easier than hanging onto something painful. Maybe not funny, so much as it is sad.

“But to know about this house, you have to know about Joshua. He had always been a smart kid. Smart enough to do well in school and smart enough to leave that small town behind him. When his dad got sick and his mom took a 2nd job, he was smart enough to know he couldn’t walk away. You can call it a sense of family, or duty, or selfless love if you want; the reason didn’t really matter. All that really mattered was the pile of job applications and the crumpled acceptance letter hidden in his glove box.

“Not long after graduation, Joshua spent his nights at the steel works plant two towns over; cutting steel plates, bending steel plates, and punching holes into those same bent plates.” Mark paused for a moment, listening to the fan spinning above them and the sounds of the city outside; nothing too loud, just loud enough to remind him where he was.

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“It wasn’t long before the routine began to press down on him. Every day he would wake up as most people began to drive home. Every night, his mind would wander to all the places he wasn’t. Every morning, he would drive back to his parents’ house around the time his sister would start getting ready for school. Six days a week, wishing he could be done with that plant and done with waiting for things to get better. “Once the plant’s morning siren howled, Joshua was always the first one gone; aching muscles slid behind the wheel of his car, with just enough strength left to get him home. It was on a morning like this that Joshua pulled up to his parents’ house. It had all started hours before, and now the fire trucks just sat in front of a smoldering pile of ashes. It wasn’t until later that Joshua found out about the faulty wiring, or that he would learn how quickly it all happened; too quickly for anyone to get out. At that moment, still covered with the grime of a night’s work, Joshua could only feel the ground vanish beneath his feet.

“After the insurance money came in, the house was rebuilt; looking so much like the original, but almost unsettling in how close it came to erasing the past. In the end Joshua just couldn’t live there, but still felt guilty for wanting to leave. He did leave eventually though, because there’s more than one kind of ghost story and most of us are haunted by something.”

With the story finished, Mark rested

his head against the pillow and stared up at the ceiling. His fingers still ran through Linda’s hair, but he could feel a question forming in the darkness around them. She wanted to ask if that story was why Mark never talked about his family, but she didn’t; perhaps afraid of not having any words after.

Hymn to Chronos

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Want to
Live in a
World without clocks to
Keep the time and keep
Us living in a space so
Perfectly defined by numbers and hours and
People tapping watches, not watching the world but
Watching the minutes as if they were more
Important than breathing and living and breaking bones to
Understand the world without time that’s caught there in hospitals
Sitting in beds so perfectly lined up with only your thoughts
For your company in those early hours you’ve forgotten the names of.

It’s
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I Believe

I believe in late winter sunsets Little
girls jumping rope in Harlem Bars that
open at 8:00 in the morning

East African children bathing at the foot of
Kilimanjaro
The way my mother giggled on her 80th birthday
Three weeks before she died

The St Croix woman who sang: “I
Work Hard For My Money” On my
50th birthday
The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau The
sacred rhythms of the djembe Profound expressions
of “Bird”

Margaret (not Alice) Walker and Nina Simone Judith
Jamison dancing “Revelations” Barefooted, in a
yellow cotton dress Sister Bertha Bingham
whispering from Her church pew: “Old age slip up
on you”. Wild sunflowers growing 5 feet high on
vacant lots 3:00 in the morning when the ancestors
come Budging me to wake up and give account

The deep, dark chasms of what remains unsaid
The silence between songs and the clowns Camp
Meeting and new ideas Trusting, always the
details

The smell of roasted garlic
Cold wind howling Mississippi
River barge sounds piercing the
night

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Por Vida



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I Met Your Fiancé

I met your fiancé and I fantasized about killing him, but just in the nick of time I noticed something sticking out from behind his ear. I reached back there and unhooked his fake beard, pulling it off his face. He looked plucked. Curious, I pulled down his short pants (the kind experienced hikers wear) and put my hand on his genitals as if I were testing a doorknob. I turned to the right and, sure enough, they came off—penis, scrotum, pubic hair—revealing the smoothness of a mannequin between his legs. I handed beard and genitalia to you—for safe-keeping.

His eyes were next, those gentle eyes that were so compassionate and warm and understanding and benign; I sucked them out of his head and swallowed them—first the left eye, then the right eye.

I sat him down on the stone wall in front of your house and unscrewed his legs from his torso. I retreated a few steps so that I could lean on my car and I unlaced the boots from the feet of his unattached legs and I tossed the legs in the corrugated steel of your family's trash cans. The legs stuck up out of the cans and looked slightly out of the ordinary.

I tried on the boots and they fit, a perfect fit; those boots had been made for me. I took them off again, preferring for the moment to go barefoot, and laced the two boots together so that I could hang them from my shoulder. I stood up, took a last look at you, got in my car, and drove away possessing everything you thought you were going to get from him.

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If you really want to find me

*If you really want to find me Follow the muddy
river... Down where it snows all the way..*

“Devil’s Music” Amorek Huey

At that bend in the river In the middle of brown
hills Down where the water is dark and still

If you really want to find me

Follow the shallow red gullies
whispering secrets
Roots reaching out like fingers
from the banks
In deep nourishing layers
of silence

If you really want to find me

Down/all the way down
Where thick, humpback vines
twist and choke
The sun’s feeble
Insinuated rays
And the air is pregnant
Nearly full term

If you really want to find me

Down, below where ocher mud Still unmarked by
human feet The cicadas sing every 7 years Time
snickers at its non-passage Where the river
changes its course
If you really want to find me

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Down where all is tangled
dark and green
Down there, where the bones
and the spirits
Of the ancestors speak
In tongues, moans and growls

If you really want to find me

Down where the ancestors have room to dance
And chase the tree demons away

If you really want to find my If you really want
to find me If you really want to find me

This is where I'll be

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In Different Lights

Sometimes
when the sun is behind you
and you turn to speak, its light
glistening for an instant on the wet
curve of your lower lip

sometimes
when moonlight strokes a pale
brush down your face, rewrites
your expression, limns the line
of your jaw, deepens the shadows
below your eyes

sometimes
when you pass under
a streetlamp in the fog
and a fine swirl of it settles
a brief, bright dust
on your shoulders and forehead
and the tops of your ears

sometimes
beneath the sail,
canvas bellying, clouds low,
tacking hard, granting the sea
no quarter, your stubborn, beautiful
face streaming with salt and spray

I glimpse the boy you were,
his faint, innocent image
ricocheting off you like a fleet ghost
released by an aspect of light, vanished
before I can catch his hand and save you.

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Jewel in the Lotus



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IN SPITE OF HIS DANGLING PRONOUN

He was really her favorite
student, dark and just
back from the army with
hot olive eyes, telling her of
bars and the first
time he got a piece of
ass in Greece or was it
Italy and drunk on some strange
wine and she thought
in spite of his dangling
pronoun (being twenty four and
never screwed but in her
soft nougat thighs) that he
would be a
lovely experience.
So she shaved her legs up high
and when he came
talking of foot notes she
locked him tight in her
snug black file cabinet where
she fed him twice a day and
hardly anyone noticed
how they lived among bluebooks
in the windowless office
rarely coming up for sun or the
change in his pronoun. Or the
rusty creaking chair
or that many years later
they were still going to town in
novels she never had time to finish

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In the night of death, hope sees a star

In the night of death, hope sees a star, and listening love can hear the rustle of a wing
-Robert Green Ingersoll

PART I: SUPERNOVA

Bang!

155 million years later is the start of the fusion engine—the first collection of gas, the first star. This is their time. This is the age of stars, and the biggest shine brightest—they are the most unique. Only twenty percent of stars are as big as the Sun that proudly watches Earth’s dance. So shine, shine! What is there to lose—

—but everything?

It’s true that low level stars are more common, more average, more ordinary. They are also simply better at living.

Never mock a red dwarf: you’ll be outnumbered—and outlived. They may not reign as brightly, but a 10-trillion-year rule is more profound than an over lit one. The red dwarves will watch the end of the Sun’s kingdom, see as his proud form is lost to the ultraviolet, nebulous cloud that will live a scant ten thousand more years or so.

Some high mass stars leave a better impression—a lightshow that illuminates a galaxy, if just for a second, like a paparazzi’s flash bulb. Its fifteen minutes are so quickly and fabulously spent.

How apt to go out as one came in:

With a bang.

PART II: WAKE OF THE MILKY WAY

It was the faintest of stars that lit the vigil at the end of things.

So parsimonious had it been with its consumption of life that it aged much slower than the others. Perhaps it knew. It had been stingy with its fuel, like a miser with his coffers, and so earned a seat nearer and nearer to the end.

It couldn’t see the futility in this, any more than the flesh-and-bone creatures on their rocks could see it. And much like the flesh-and-bone miser, the star’s careful resilience only bought it a place at the viewing. It was stuck there, like a white pin in widow’s weeds, waiting in the fields of corpses that would have been the night sky, 100 trillion years ago.

It was the faintest of stars that grew fainter and fainter in the blackness. The carbon and oxygen collected in its core, the star itself too small to burn them. They built up, like a lump in the throat, while the helium fuel disappeared—leaked out as it would from an ineffectual Get Well Soon balloon.

The central black hole opened its maw and swallowed a galaxy. Man’s Milky Way is dead, but he’s no longer there to mourn its passing.

PART III: HEAT DEATH OF A COLD COSMOS

White dwarfs, brown dwarfs, and neutron stars fade like embers from a bonfire. Go on, it’s time to go home—there’s nothing

to see here. So much nothing. Huge pools of nothing that have filled in the vacant houses left by the stars, creeping in like a plague.

Even these black holes are not long for the world. Even these hollow-faced monsters are marked for death. They begin their slow and swirling dance towards inescapable demise, lazily evaporating as if they had nothing better to do.

There is only one spark of warmth in this cold, dark, lifeless place. Particle-antiparticle pairs, too close to the soulless pit, are ripped apart. The monsters will leave nothing intact. If they must die, they will take the last flickers of activity with them.

The stars saw their end and died beautifully— died gracefully. The black holes died as they lived, trapping the universe within it and never letting go: A spacetime beast, clutching at fistfuls of eternity like a petulant child. Perhaps they weren't the best at coping with their inexorable doom. Perhaps they even knew that—and their conquest was a silent scream, a protest—caught in their own event horizon and unable to stop the torrent of destruction they'd unleashed.

How it must ache to be jailed in that whirlpool of rage at circumstance, knowing the hopelessness one only feels at the point of no return.

After countless years alone, how they must envy the bright stars with their supernovae, illuminating the galaxy, masters in their art.

The art of letting go.

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Inherent Inherit

It's supposed to be something
to make up for the loss
of fingerprints on the front doorknob every morning
the shuffling of feet down the hall
the flushing of toilets in the middle of the night
the crackling snores from across the hall
the repeated questions about your day
the troubleshooting of accidental spyware downloads
the repeated TV remote user errors
the wadded up tissues buried between the seat cushions

It's inherent hush money,
forgetting bitter stares across the dinner table
forgetting blame for broken chopping blocks
 kitchen utensils misplaced
 cluttered clinkage collecting dust
forgetting general disapproval of life choices
forgetting contempt of romantic relationships
forgetting disregarded birthdays
forgetting comments about how I just don't stack up
 to my immortalized mother mocking our similarities beyond her grave.

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Just to spend it on

paying off tabs of a
twenty-something who's not quite sure
she's an alcoholic prone to violence,

making up for years of
Personal neglect caused by brainwashing,

adorning the body,
memorializing the death.

Crematorium



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Liberation

Finally I don't have to prove anything to anyone.
Both my parents are gone
believing that I am incapable of learning English or driving.
My son and daughter are in their forties --
I can admit to the world that I wasn't a teen mother.
I let myself nap, grouch, and read all day long
on the lumpy couch in my housecoat
having two chocolate donuts for lunch
and two candied donuts for dinner.
I can see my physician when I feel like it and don't feel guilty.
Now I know for sure that I'll never be offered tenure,
I'll never be fluent in Cantonese,
I'll never wash myself in the Ganges,
I'll never sip champagne on the Kilimanjaro summit.
I stopped revering writers --
they multiply in a geometric progression,
I cannot keep up with their bulky volumes.
The sacred promises I made to myself failed,
my former idols proved to be aging idiots
and I dreamt about being one of them --
I cannot get lower than that.
Finally I don't have to prove anything to anyone.
Fascination with humans and their secrets evaporated.
I am free of major worries --
I'll not get pregnant if I miss a pill,
my children's diplomas are up on the wall,
I have no more tests to pass.

I wasn't with New Frontier in Africa,
I wasn't a manager of philanthropic projects.
Another safe day in Modesto
where I am a nerd writer -- my poems give me identity and refuge.
Finally I don't have to prove anything to anyone --
the vexatious task is to prove to myself that my life was worth living.

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Late Trains at Landstuhl

Suspended in darkness, red signals
bookend the station. Couplings
groan like submarine hulls. Through
underground air lit with weak florescence,
passengers hurry between platforms.

On a bench recessed in shadow, a vagrant
pulls a coat around him. Rats, lean
as new moons, shuffle past, ignorant
of the man for whom sleep is mercy.

In anger over missing his train,
an accountant, wearied of the world's
numbers, grips a briefcase so tight
the blood disappears from his fist.

A woman, exiting the station, merges
with convergent streetlight halos
that double her shadow against a station
window. Castoff tickets wreathe
the pavement with spent travel.

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Rainbow Glasses



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Living Plastic

They sat under the willow tree turning and twisting the soft plastic arms and legs, slipping the electric colors and bright plastic shoes onto naked dolls. Sammy squeezed a pair of blue jeans over slim hips, and Phoebe showed him how to stuff the bright orange turtleneck under the flowing blonde hair. Cliffy moaned as he tried to force his doll into a glowing pink party dress that had somehow turned inside out to expose the curve of the plastic underneath. He finally handed the doll to Phoebe and she adjusted the dress and spread its pink ruffles, making them fluff over the doll’s slim thighs and legs.

“Put the clothes on her, not her on the clothes,”Phoebe told him, and went back to fitting the studded black motorcycle jacket on the svelte red headed doll she turned between her fingers. She knew the boys were only playing with her because she had been away to what Cliffy called “the place in the long thin trees.” She’d gone there to gain back the weight, and to stop vomiting. It had been her first time and she’d been surprised to find so many other girls with the same fears and problems she had. Her cure went on for three endless weeks, and she wondered if she’d ever stop thinking about fat fingers, chubby faces, and growing breasts. The real test came when she sat down to her homecoming dinner at the big oak table with the family. She ignored their strained voices and furtive glances, and tried not to give any hint that she was about to rush for the toilet to

throw up at the end of each bite. Her Mother finally wheeled in a large cake topped with burning candles that spelled WELCOME HOME PHOEBE in dark dripping-chocolate. They had all brought her presents for the occasion. There were brand new ice skates from her parents and handmade earrings from her brothers. “If they don’t fit I can always take them back,” her mother blurted and even her father laughed. Phoebe put on a fake smile, and wanted to go upstairs, close the bedroom door and be alone with her dolls. For three horrible weeks she’d thought about nothing else but the smooth, slim bodies of her perfectly shaped Barbie dolls and their bright electric clothes.

The boys waited for her to finish putting on the motorcycle boots. One of the shoes on Cliff’s doll hung loosely on its torn strap but the magnificent pink dress glowed in the bright morning sun. Sammy’s doll was perfect in its form-fitting turtleneck and glittering black heels. Phoebe finished dressing her redheaded doll in the tight leather pants and studded jacket, and snapped her onto the sleek motorcycle.

The boys giggled and waited for her to yell, “Ready, set, GO,” and they popped off their dolls’ heads and passed them to each other, snapping on the new heads so that the dolls were transformed and wearing different clothes. The boys shrieked and laughed, and kept popping the heads on and off in a blur of revolving hairstyles.

Phoebe laughed with them, waiting for

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the kitchen window to open as she passed her doll's head into the mix of tiny hands pulling off detachable heads, snapping them on the slim waiting bodies, and holding them up to show before starting all over again. She loved laughing with her brothers and was glad to be with them again, even though she longed to be alone in her room.

The kitchen window opened, got jammed, and Phoebe waited until it finally straightened and shot up all the way. Her mother's shrill voice poured down over them, "What's going on? Are you making the boys play that awful doll game again?"

Phoebe's finger came up to her mouth and the boys' loud laughter turned into light giggles. "It's all right, Mamma," she yelled up at the window, "We don't play that game anymore." The boys hunched their shoulders to repress their laughter and crawled further under the willow tree to begin changing the clothes on the dolls again. When they finished they looked up at Phoebe and held their dolls in position. "It doesn't hurt at all," Phoebe whispered, and the boys leaned forward waiting for her. "Ready, set, GO!"

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Blue Door



Lock Box

You lay there, in the dim glow of the television, wrapped in white sheets and printed, patterned socks. The sun has long escaped our private corner of the world, and we are left only with the pathetic light of our forgotten candles and the tinge of late-night primetime.

You bring your hands to your mouth and chip away at the polish that grazes your nails. The chips fall to the thin sheets beneath us. You half smile, and the flush returns to my cheeks. It spreads through my body all the way to my finger tips and down to my toes, warming them against the chill of the ceiling fan.

And then it's over, and gone. I'm clothed and pale under the lights of my kitchen table. The blush that filled my skin and tackled my fair complexion has vanished into some remote part of my hated body, into a lock box, and I don't know the combination. The fake cloth flowers stand in front me, and they glare, daring me to wish that they were real color, and real life, and heat. So, I stop.

You climb into your own bed, cold from the neglect of warm bodies and the harsh chill of the open window, and wonder why we are both so wrong. Why the us is wrong and why the them right. She cries, and she hopes and prays for it to just go away, to vanish into that lockbox and stay there. But she's wrong, and the light, and the heat, and the color resurfaces with the force of a tidal wave, washing away the doubt that their sidelong glances inspire.

I'll try to avoid it, resisting a pull so magnetic it makes my bones ache. We'll struggle against the desire, but we will find ourselves there again, wrapped so tightly in the blankets of your bed, bathing in our light, basking in our heat. On Sunday I'll sing the hymnal at church and I'll melt into the pages of the tattered Book, looking for an in; I'd yet to realize the path of the righteous has no place in the path of desire.

Slowly, though, the lock box will wear. The sides will splinter, and the steady pressure of our growing affection as it replaces our ever shrinking silence will contaminate the walls and rust the hinges. The screws sculpting its tightly constructed closure will loosen, and we will smash this miniature wooden cabin of shame into a thousand pieces. The fire will ignite, and rather than being squelched by the moisture of our realized indignation, it will burn. We will give into this, into candor and the lack of restraint. And for once, we won't be wrong.

The Lost Art of Forgery

No juice-stained notes tugged from backpacks,
dog-eared quizzes dripping red ink.
Soon there'll be no signatures to master,

art replaced with clicks and tiny patter.
No trilling loops of *f*'s and *p*'s
to be drawn, erased, shaded—

*I grant permission to attend the field trip.
Yes I know my son needs to practice
his times tables. He says he really likes you.*

Children studied the holy craft
of monks, practicing copperplate bends,
doggedly adhering to the details;

even Shakespeare's signature
had six lovely versions in question,
a lingering Italic legacy.

Now the kids have all grown.
They drink sugar with a little bit of coffee,
hands shaking all the way from tabletop to dry lips.

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Mad Woman Bending Light

(after the photographer, Christina Fernandez)

I picture you holding a Leica,
snapping the shutter
and there is bowed light.
You are balanced on the last narrow step
above some tomb in Mexico,
bending that light all by yourself,
putting a little English on God's curve.

And who is holding you up
while you lean into that
darkest space,
coaxing light,
teetering on the thinnest,
the narrow-
west of
steps?
There are arched gates, they
open away from you,
tempt you off balance
like a dark valentine,
and now the light is at the back of you:
a Spanish girl
bending light like a mad woman,
teetering on the edge with
eyes wide
seeing it all without blinking.
I picture you never blinking
at all.

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McCullers Fresh Start Booze

There was fog over the mountains
that I'd been trying to hold.
But the tighter I squeezed
the more tears that poured
down the hillside meeting the soil
growing sad trees that wept for the sun.
My body was splintered from holding
on as you stretched and you grew.
But when the cold winter came
you were covered with snow.
I dug through the ice
to bring you a coat made of wool,
but when I reached the bottom
you had turned into stone.
I cracked all of my teeth
trying hard to kiss your granite skin
until you grew legs and you ran.
I found new wood to carve my sorrows in
And I became an old boy
on a stool with a drink
telling fish stories to kids
with a full glass half empty.

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Misreading Ezekiel’s Vision by Raphael

“Whither the spirit was to go, they went... “
Ezekiel Verse 4

This was what I first caught in faulty seeing:
something seated on the winged bearers,
Jehovah on the backs of griffins and snarling mastiffs
(as though seen through a depression)

but they were animal kings with men’s faces
and angels carrying him gently down,
his arms up-flung
like a winning coach carried to earth in victory.

But mis-seeing saw the anti-accomplishment
the fear the viewer runs on, fear
that changes costumes merely by stages,
never dissipates except in lethargy

onto which a mastiff’s jaw
clamps and growls
in a dissent. Life now
all descent, senselessness and the anti-

accomplishment running on fear,
peeling away the images. An anti-Ezekiel
vision rocking away, washed away, smells
of the chewed over, spat out; massacre of children

in Connecticut feeding an anti-vision
on a ticker-timer. The necessity
of faith and love because the human being now
is only silverfish in the lower left hand

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corner of the vision canvas, the decay of God
in a dream, the anti-vision with the terror
of anti-accomplishment, runs on now
with the realization fear can't be enough
to keep the world going. The fear that it is.

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My Beast

Pure beast, my beast
Raised in the poor barrios of Mexico City,
fought poliomyelitis with your sweet mother
watching over you as the doctors injected needles
into your tiny feet.

Your mother sweet as Mexican sugared bread,
with a smile as big as the sun, married at age 14
without her ring finger, cut off by her big brother,
preventing her from wearing the ring of a dark Mexican Indian.

Who gave light to nine children with her sunshine smile,
without a ring but with love, the kind that can't be cut off
no matter the color.
She made enchiladas for her precious child,
who survived polio to graduate from high school,
build houses and lay roof tiles in Santa Barbara.

Swallowing the heart of his English teacher at Adult Ed;
this poor child, so rich in love,
inherited a generous heart and five fingers,
five fingers that clung to life, laughter and song,
nailed themselves to the soul of his Anglo-Saxon teacher
who longed for an earthy man.
Pure heart, pure beast, pure you.

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Black and White



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Next Time

“Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings.”
Charlotte Bronte

When you’re young, and your mother asks you if you’ve cleaned your room, knowing full well that you’ve been hiding in the closet with your favorite book for the past hour, avoiding her. When you’re in high school and you’ve skipped a class or four, and you have to explain the resulting call from the attendance office. Church. Doctor’s appointments. Coffee bar baristas who forget you ordered soy, nail salons with services listen in Chinese, the return line at Walmart.

~

I’m pulling the sheet pan of freshly baked cookies out of my grandmother’s oven. She called me over to help her bake for ladies’ day at the church. Her arthritic hands and dramatic nature have made the task impossible, or at least that’s what she declares. I slide an oven mitt underneath the silver sheet pan to avoid burning the white tile of her kitchen counter tops. Then I plunge my hands back into her tub of store-bought dough, rolling and kneading the substance into small flattened balls for the next batch.

Fox News is on in the front room; I can make out Obama’s name a few times, and I’m glad I’m stationed in the kitchen.

My grandmother hobbles in from the living room and takes a seat at the kitchen

table, feet from my working space.

“Cindy had her baby last week,” she offers. I have no idea who Cindy is.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, a baby boy.” When I don’t reply, she continues, “He’ll be a church man, like his daddy.”

“Mmm.” I scoop another round of dough from the tub, hoping my silence will stop this conversation before it really begins. I try to avoid personal subjects with my grandparents, more for their sake than my own. But, of course, she continues.

“I bet your mom can’t wait for some grand-babies.”

I try and fail to think of an appropriate response. The silence blankets us, and eventually she moves back into her recliner in the living room, turning up the television.

~

On Sunday afternoons, after I’ve completed most of my school work and managed to avoid Church with complaints of sleep-deprivation and a migraine, I switch the main television in our living room to Lifetime. What could be a more satisfying lazy-day activity than submerging myself into the scandalous lives of cheating husbands and murderous wives?

This particular Sunday, I’m a tall blonde woman married to a wealthy European diplomat with a semi-automatic tucked away in the third drawer of my armour. I’m laying on my back as the errand boy slowly unbuckles the strap on my heels when my husband bursts through the door. My suitor flees from

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the room and the door closes behind him. My husband's face turns the color of my lipstick. He threatens divorce.

I shoot him twice in the chest. Blood splatters against the sheer curtains behind him.

I stand next to his body in silence.

~

My timer goes off, and the last batch of cookies are out of the oven. I let them cool and line them up next to the others, and count. One hundred and two chocolate chunk cookies, most of which will not be consumed. I tried to casually mention to my grandmother than most of the women who go to Ladies' Day are over sixty-five, many are diabetic, and quite a few seemed to have trouble chewing. I suppose my grandfather will enjoy the cookies later this weekend.

The running water is hot, and I'm scrubbing dried cookie dough from the palms of my hands and in between my fingers. The bristles on the wire brush scrape against my skin. From the bay window above the sink, I can see a fat tabby cat stalking a small grey rodent across the field in front of the church. The cat's head moves lower and lower to the ground, preparing to pounce on the unsuspecting creature. I watch with anticipation, unable to decide which party I'm rooting for.

A chime from the front television calls my attention back to the house. The sink is quickly filling up with soapy, cookie-dough infused water, and a female voice from the front room television grows louder as the volume is increased.

"Several officers and FBI reporting to the scene of Sandy-Hook Elementary this morning. An unnamed gunman has entered the school carrying multiple firearms. No information on the status of the students and staff inside has been released yet."

I shake the water from my hands and walk into the living room. On the flatscreen, a thin brunette reporter is talking to the camera, describing a standoff at an elementary school on the other side of the country. The living room is cold as we stand and watch the brunette speaking stoically into the camera. It's mid-December, and I wonder if my grandfather has the air conditioner on. I rub my damp hands together and walk to the hallway to check the thermostat. My grandmother is already talking about praying for Sandy Hook, although I'm not sure if she ever did. When I reenter the room, my grandfather is standing near the TV, shaking his head in silence.

~

MSNBC is on at my house. In a quiet voice, Rachel Maddow relates the number of deaths that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary. A picture taken from the scene is blown up on my television screen, slightly blurry but clearly showing a line of students no older than eight walking, hands on each other's shoulder. A girl in a blue long-sleeved tee-shirt and pony tail is center of the photo, her mouth hanging open in an obvious scream. In that moment, I am glad it is a photograph rather than a video, for fear of the associated sounds permeating the walls of my living room.

~

We had a moment of silence, and we had a moment of prayer. Our flags flew at half mast, and we watched tirelessly as news stations all over the country featured photographs and stories of twenty children and seven adults who died on December 14th. And now, months later, we've moved onto the next big story.

"Until next time," the grey-haired man on the screen says, smiling, and bids his daily news show audience goodbye. I press the red button at the top of the remote and silence swallows the room.

Beauty in My Soul



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Not Forgotten

There are trees that root
down to buried bones, circle
them with a blind fingering
of love, like a narrow hand
would circle a violin bridge,
press strings the heavens
translate into music.

What matter they died
hundreds of years ago?
The earth does not forget.
She accounts for every leaf,
every bit of bone and rock,
remembers it all
and sings to the sun

Nothing to See Here

I know it's not really him in there
But it is
And it isn't
Over six feet poured back into birth's size
I can't wrap my head around it
So I stare

A strange Japanese priest
Mispronounces his name
Over and over again
Speaks of the mystery and glory of the plan
Of the god he didn't believe in
There is no mystery
And glory is a bad joke
So I stare

Pews of people
Think they were closest to him
Weep because they don't know
His most coveted secret
I knew it

V And I still didn't know him
A I want to laugh at the absurdity of it all
N But instead I just stare

E Irrational imagination consumes me
S Like the inferno that consumed his body
S And I shudder

A I know that he never felt the flames;
never actually experienced the singeing of what little hair the chemo had left behind;
B never cried out from the searing of his flesh or the crumbling of his bones
R But suddenly I do
A And I can't erase the image

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And my eyes burn
And my heart blisters
And I stare
He had come to terms with the dirt he'd become
But suddenly I'm not so sure I can
My resolve in the pure, ultimate absence
That death leaves behind
Is shaken by the reality of nothingness
Just one final breath transported him
From something to nothing
The surrealness of reality seizes me
And suddenly I am desperate to see his corpse
To see the waxy complexion
That artificial garishness that makes death real
But it doesn't exist
He doesn't exist
So I stare at nothing

First and last time fitting in my arms
Your smooth metal shell
Nothing like the last time
I touched your hand
You hadn't pulled away
The last time I saw your pulse
I wish I'd said more
But unlike bodies,
Lifetimes can't fit
In such small places
And there was nothing to say
But "Take it easy"
And a final, unreciprocated glance

And then you did
Take that last easy breath
And eased your eyes
Away from life
And the burden of having
To stare

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OCEAN ISLAND

Twice the size of Texas
Constantly moving, currents
pulling bits of plastic
in every direction
Particles suspended
bobbing to the surface
and back
Bright fragments reflected
by the sun
Ever growing
By night, twinkling
like inverted stars

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Ode to Letting the Light In

There I sat
on a hot summer night,
wondering *why*?
Why did things have to end
like this? Why do I not
feel good enough? Why do I feel
this pain?

I stared at my phone
every thirty seconds, waiting, for a call, a text, anything.
Minutes seemed like days, days seemed like months,
and months seemed like years.
Why was I waiting for something
that is never going to work out again?

Seven long, slow months of nothing, but sadness.
I lost myself, I didn't know who I even was anymore.
The truth was like swallowing sand. Again, sitting here waiting for something
that is never going to work out.

So why wait? Life is so incredibly short to sit here
and beat yourself up. "You can't live like this." I told myself.
But, then again I chose to suffer.

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Mama told me when you have
a broken heart, it lets the light in. A year has passed now,
and that's exactly what I'm doing...
letting the light in.

THE OLD STORY

Instead of a brief and clear refusal,
she told him out of kindness,
or confusion, that she was unready.
He took this as a challenge –
a challenge as old as earth.

In silence risking rudeness,
he would not let go of his embrace.
She thought of pleading for release,
but with kisses on her tightened lips,
she could not speak.

She wondered if she had erred
as something electric pulsed
through her limbs and body.
She stopped trying to shake him off,
and unsealed her lips.

Only Part

You're speeding up onto 99 toward home.
You're offered a view of the mountains to the west at dusk,
and it makes you feel like you're about to get out.
Back home to McHenry at night
haphazardly lit by mismatched streetlamps
that keep it bright enough to see the wanderers.
The guy with the hoodie over his eyes,
the overstuffed backpack slung on one shoulder,
full of stolen goods that he'll sell back.
The kid on the bike without reflectors,
crosses to the other side right in front of you,
and you almost don't have time to hit the brakes.
The vagrants, looking sorry for being so lost,
remind you of your brothers,
and your mom's brothers,
and of too many others you know
who've forgotten how to feel without a hit,
living with a reliance on the nostalgic idea of tomorrow.
You are part of the generation with runaway fathers
and mothers who hurt too much
to deal.
You are part of the family of unmet potential
from a cycle of fathers trying to find themselves in their sons' talents
and mothers losing themselves trying to save their children.
And you're just another American kid
with a typical *boo-hoo* dad story
that you're tired of having to claim a part in.
Maybe you can get out
and go someplace *good*.
If you can wait until tomorrow.

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When I walked in the door the apartment was dark with the blinds drawn it smelled a little bitter and stale and I looked for the blown-out candle but saw her sitting on the couch. She was there with her knees all drawn up and her elbows sticking out to accommodate knees and a limp naked pillow and half-buried face. From her familiar form I really should've known better at that point and I thought I did but didn't care but I really didn't and I asked her anyway.

"What's up?"

Her squinted eyes peered at me sideways above the bulge of her deltoid with a glare that could've melted the half eaten and mangled chocolate bar sprouting from its blossoming wrapper on the couch beside her. Red enameled toes like bloodied talons gripped the couch's pillowed fuzz and the upholstery was creased like a crater-in-progress under her little weight. The pillow wrinkled under her freckled nose as she crushed it and willed me to shrivel up under her stare.

"Don't be a dick."

I grinned stupidly without really meaning to and perused the collection of DVDs she had amassed on the plywood coffee table set on uneven piles of books and bent to pick up the cheap plastic wine glass and tipped my head back to let the last drop of her nine-dollar sweet white wine hit the back of my tongue. I dropped my computer bag on the couch and bent to search for her lips but she ducked her

head into the pillow until all that was there for me was curly wires of hair so I rerouted and brushed the bare smooth pink of her thigh and kissed her bony knee where the tiny crevasses made the invisible stubble stand so I knew what it felt like when she kissed me.

Chewed-on fingernails bit into her triceps as she tried to tighten and shrink up smaller but the pillow she wasn't willing to give up was in the way so she ended up locked in a futile little push-pull battle of opposed wills.

"Piss off."

The muffled hiss was barely audible but I'd been sitting in a cubicle all day and I didn't think I cared so I lifted a tuft of hair and licked her ear.

"Ass!"

I had to jump back and throw myself off balance to avoid the arcing swing of her arm but I still had the plastic wine glass in hand and I could see her face at last so I figured it was worth it after all. Spinning the plastic stem between my fingers I half ducked half danced to the kitchen while she glared furies at my amused smile.

"Did you leave me any?"

The reply wasn't in words but a sighing groan and a creak of the couch.

"I have to catch up."

There was an empty bottle in the trash and an opened half-empty one getting frosty in the freezer door so I pulled out the second and sloppily filled the glass then had to lick the cold drips off my thumb and the tasteless plastic lip. It was sweeter and fruitier than I cared for and

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not near enough dry bite to tell me it'd soften up the day I was dragging behind me quickly enough but it was what we had and it was hers so I didn't much care and drank it anyway.

I came up behind her and leaned over the couch and slid my hand down between the thin cotton of her shirt and the fine fuzz of her back and the strap clasp that wasn't there following the curved path of her spine and she didn't pull away but didn't reach to meet me either. Over I went and let the couch back resist my ribs as I felt for hers and upside-down I found her lips and she tasted of wine and chocolate and salt and she was all warm body and cold teeth. My hand roved and she winced and gasped and hid herself and I came away with lips wet with her tears and my eyes open.

She didn't look at me but I was looking down the dim little hallway and the faint shimmers of glass on the carpet and the broken frames on the walls and the open bedroom door off its hinges falling over against the wall and the round blur of burst-in drywall at the end and I dropped the plastic glass of cheap wine.

"He was here."

I didn't move and didn't stand but just stayed bent over and stared and she found my hand against the heat of her stomach and threaded her fingers into mine and wove in her knuckles tight.

"It was over I told him it was over over over."

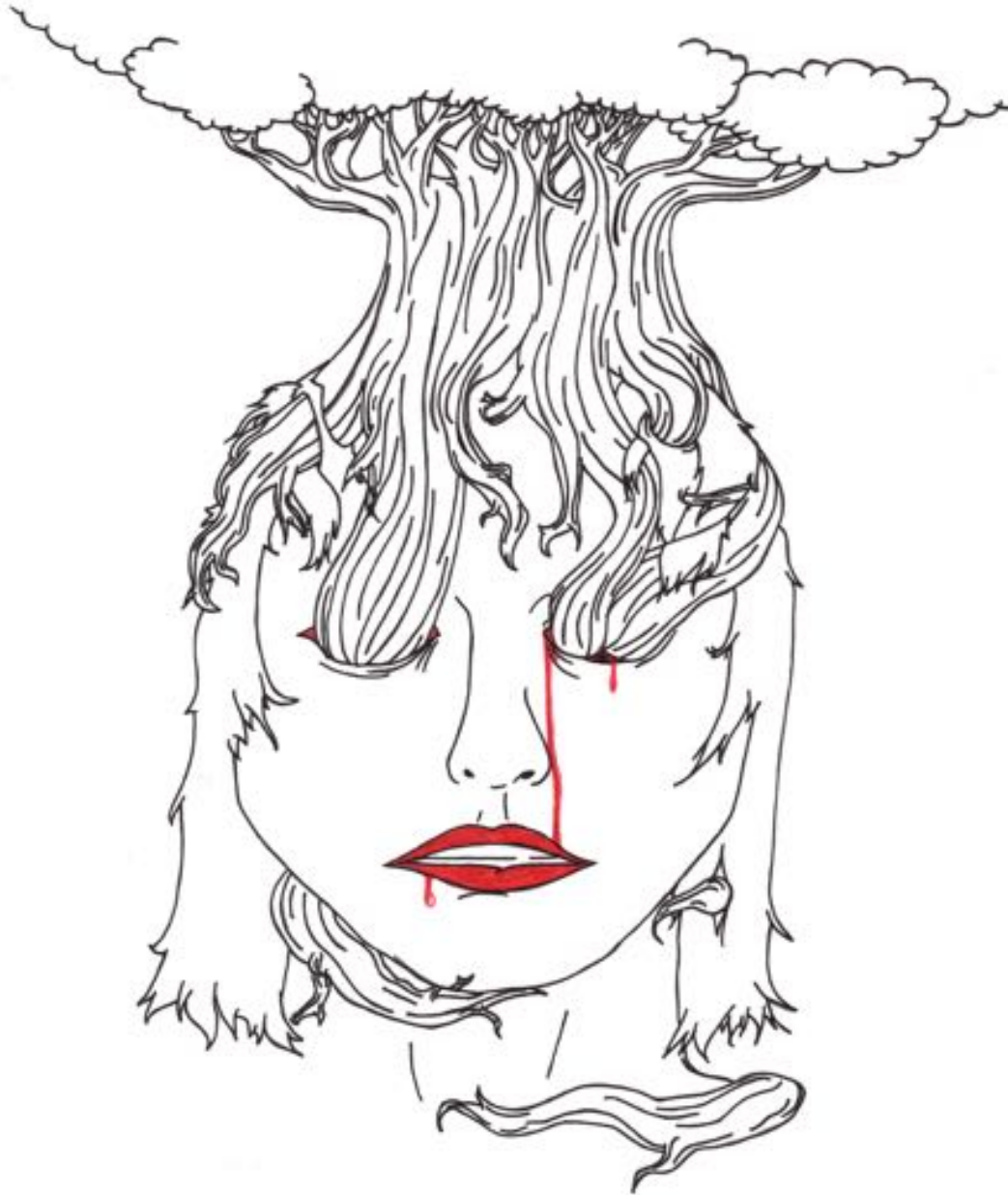
Still leaning over her still looking I didn't move and she was grinding twisting

pushing her forehead into my temple crying and repeating and squeezing my hand under the naked pillow between the thin damp cotton and skin.

I could smell the bitter and the blown-out candle with the salt of her and the wine and the chocolate and the stale coffee table books. There in the dusk I was cold and I was burning as she held on and I held her leaning over that couch and the plastic wine glass rolled and the wine spread over the floor and she cried on and it was over all over being over over over

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Reclamation



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The Path Taken—

A Piece of the Lewis and Clark Trail

My window frame holds a painting,
Rows of treetops and trunks.
Baring only their heads
And chocolate bases for
Wanting eyes to see.
Their branches brushed
Marshmallow burnt white
A once sublime green forest.

Droplets of rain leave trails
On the faded glass,
Making the trees dance in my view.
I can smell the vastness of the river—
From my summer memories,
A mixture of sand and moss.

The stretching hills are masked by a thick fog.
Changing suddenly--
Golden warmth, but now bitten with frost.
I imagine holding it in my hands,
Like clay after it has been abused by artists.

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The fog begins to shift
Ever so slightly.
The hills unwilling to let go,
Pleading for its cover.
But it urges to be free,
To uncover the picturesque mountain top
Beyond its shadow.

Mt. Hood is the candy cane of the Columbia River Gorge.
 Its peak forever stained the hue of snow.
 The middle blended colors of alabaster and gray,
 Where the grace of snow melts with earth.
 The bottom, purest shades of emerald,
 Flourished with the markings of God's creatures.

Pine masks the summer breeze.
 A temperature so low
 Limiting the amount of water the air can hold,
 Turning hot breathe into images of smoke.
 Twirling upwards,
 Endlessly towards the starless, obsidian sky
 But seized by the crisp night air before reaching the heavens.

Rivers sway in rhythm to the howling wind.
 Washing away the paths
 Beaten with careless footing.
 Forgotten summer experiences
 First kisses, lovers picnics, and
 Playful walks with man's best friend.

Sacagawea would have tasted water from
 Celilo Falls, "echo of falling water"
 Natural wonder, ancient burial ground
 Submerged by a dam.
 Remnants of elegant falls
 Are masked by the bounding salmon returning home.

Through this window frame
 Only the painting remains the same—
 Nothing will ever be what it once was.
 Nothing will stay uninterrupted—untouched.

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Corky the Cat



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Pow Wow

My teepee of suitcases lean together.
For two long days we face each other across
miles of silent newsprint.
Father, daughter
sun and moon reflecting six feet of
trackless carpet, matches flaring in
the distance, smoke signals through
twenty-four inches of electronic cloud.
Between a hail of invocations for youth,
beauty, and sleep without dreams, we
make a run for your garden, father.

Bismarck to Bakersfield,
I've come half a continent to meet this moment.
Punctuated by strands of thunder, a wilderness
of cucumber vine, the pungent reek
of new tomatoes, radishes, turnips, beets
green heat rising between these red
exclamations, we root out everything
but the weather of the heart. Somewhere
underneath, our words gallop the
empty spaces like buffalo grass.

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The Pre-Op Hairdo

She had been waiting
for days, it was all that
occupied her time.
She was a little scared
but had an appointment,
didn't want to be gray,
wanted to look younger,
maybe a nice reddish
brown. She thought it
was important to be
gussied-up, wanted to be
prepared. The operation
was unnerving, something
new and you never know
who you're going to meet
in the strangest places.
She wanted to be ready,
just in case, it was her
maker.

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Sunset Moments



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Proximity

-- at the Eamon Grennan reading

Most young people today wouldn't flinch—
a Pulitzer Poet scanning for a seat,
pointing to the small space beside me.

I cup my scarred notebook in one hand,
mouth *Yours* and gesture with the other.
Conversation slowly crawls in the young night.

He settles in, huffs at the edging crowd,
asks *And what have you been up to lately?*
Too self-aware to reveal much of anything.

I play it cool, general, until mention
of my son. This turns him back to me,
interested, registering a baby

with his memory of a sunburned student.
His poet friends cross by our row,
doing double takes at the pair we make—

he, wizened and frail, shoulder
brushing mine. My unlined face
taken out of context, a pause.

I don't want him to see what I write,
jot down titles, a concert of phrases,
nothing of my own. I fit in,

my Irish looks renting me a place here.
His hands fleshy-pink, soft,
no more veiny than my own.

It's cliché to consider
the writing he's done with those hands.
No fixing concrete driveways,

not even typing deep into the night;
his hands are the unknown friend,
the gentle observer who holds

a god's insight between his fingers,
and I wonder if he will write
my son into one enduring line.

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Reading a Used Book in July

I relax into the lawn chair,
open *Fifty Years of American Poetry*
from the free-bin at the local library.
This little Dell paperback
so old, the spine cracks,
the glue disintegrates,
and pages fall away to poems
that must have been someone's favorites.
I doze, then wake to words:
lustful, fickle, elegiac and spellbinding

We come to the mountains
for a few quiet days, too early
for the crimson kokanee to spawn.
Perhaps I will write about Canada geese,
lichen, even graffiti. Someone painted
the name Neva on fences and granite outcrops.
We wonder about Neva.

Yesterday, by the front door at the Chinese Buffet,
a gnawed bone lay in the dirt planter
without even the token
plastic flowers. Not good for business.
Here are some lines:
a Swedish pool boy
a patchwork scrap bag
a receipt for nail polish from Monoprix.

The sun slips behind the summit.
I put root vegetables in the steamer, realize
I've left my rock cod too long on the side board.
You fiddle with the new antenna,
try to get the Summer Olympics from Reno.

A page breaks loose, lands on the fish.
Why write unless you praise the sacred places,
a line now wet and glutinous.
Later a cleansing swim in the lake.

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Fleeting



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Resurrection

I was resurrected in my earthly life
and I am not looking forward to repeating this experience --
saying a long goodbye to my favorite people,
finishing my last goblet of sweet wine,
swallowing the last crumbs of bread
to be resurrected on the third day
after sleeping away in peace
ready to meet my maker
believing that I will never again
dust,
vacuum,
mop,
iron,
change soiled diapers,
shop for food,
or poop.

My soul broke up with my useless body,
put on a silky white dress
anticipating seeing a play
of penetrating two dozen screaming virgins
performed by a young Muslim martyr
in the Garden of Gethsemane
when to my huge disappointment
I was resurrected by a fireman.

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I hated my feeding tube,
I hated the way they did my hair in Doctor's Hospital,
but I could not do as much as raise my middle finger
to indicate my disappointment.
Hopeless, motionless I started to covet my doctor's husband
thinking dirty thoughts about my neighbor
craving to be sent back to a bright tunnel that leads to Heaven.
In the unlucky case if I get better
I will rewrite my will making it clear that I do not want to be kept on life support.

Last night I was resurrected for a second time by some idle ER intern.

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The Rhinoceros

Guns and ammo lay about his living room floor
like a young boy's toy soldiers after a week of battle.

His two-ton mass struts around his habitat
in war-vet camouflage.
Her heart pounds like a thousand feet,
five hundred civilians fleeing at once.

He kicks up dust, pausing,
looking dead, straight ahead,
his tusk erect.

Her eyelids grip each other
like his hand around her neck,
the other fighting off her fists.

His feet dig in as he charges,
knocking her knees apart,
laying siege
with the force he used to kill
enemy soldiers.

She is just a statistic,
another casualty of war.

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Operating Room



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Running a Tab Close to Home

My grandpa timed his visits to the bar based on the sun.
A poet of sorts, he liked to watch the fiery pink slow to gray,
then the twilight of sky to sea to night before dipping his head
through the beads at Pat’s to take his place on the stool—his for so long
they almost bronzed a plate with his name when they remodeled
some years ago.

But he said *no, I’m a father now. I have responsibilities.*
His nightly visits stopped for a while, then came the bartering
with himself, then the hangdog she was better off without him
anyway. He’d hand her his check and run a tab, finger a twenty
from her purse when she was primping for her trip to the store,
a mild flirtation with the butcher bought her a bit more here and there,
for the children.

You could smoke at the bar then. My grandpa would come home late,
the coarseness of a pack of Pall Malls hiding scotch - neat – not that it mattered.
There was no drama, just resolute resignation. No reason for anger,
packed bags or even desire for appreciation by another. Too much effort.
My grandmother would just turn over and finish what faded to could have been,
plan tomorrow. Even on their anniversary.

My grandpa missed everything but the night’s colors.
By exception, he taught my father how not to be. That pride was no sin,
that the awkwardness of your son at his prom, poorly-fitting tux
and poorly-fitting girl, were right, that you have “the talk” even though
everyone knows everything far too young. And you bring flowers.

Now I understand those evening skies grandpa loved. The occasional scotch
and I are great friends. As are my father and I. My grandmother
had a hard life. The palm of her hand—a permanent shadow on the window
where she pushed the drapes aside to watch and wait. I stare into a bouquet
of wildflowers, see my entire life recaptured. Shadow and sky,
the same dirty glass. Melancholy and joyousness. Keeps a family going.

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Sawed Short

I sink softy into a bed that is an ocean
allowing no drowning. Steady is her touch
guiding my shoulder away from a door for strangers
into which, on any street in any city, I fall.

In that hungry hall behind that door, every kid
steals his friend's food, and a wise child's elbows
guard his plate. We shout at each other,
as if the front legs of our chairs

have been sawed short and, fighting falling,
we notice neither our curses nor the taste
of moldy gravy over mean strings
of sour meat. All we can do is bellow.

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Mr. Lion



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Shadows and Reflections

My mother’s face and voice,
once as familiar
as my own signature
or the soothing sound of rain,
have become mere memories yellowed with age,
like lace and appliques on the gown
she sewed for my wedding,
dimmed like old photographs
no longer vibrant with color,
her aspects eluding me even as
I run my fingers down the surface
of an oil painting,
searching for the softness of her hand
that created it.

Today, in this year that divides
exactly
our thirty-two years together
from thirty-two years apart,
I look for traces of her in my own reflection,
catching a glimpse, sometimes,
in the gray of my hair,
the slight swell of my belly,
but more often seeing shadows of my father
in the set of my jaw
the turn of my mouth,
and I worry she is lost to me
until I find her again,
just for a moment

in my daughter’s smile

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Ship in a Bottle

These nights I am transforming again:
mer-girl, moth, mayflower.
I feel it coming on, do not resist.
You ask why I'm not gone from you yet,
why I pace your dream-shore.
You crafted me from slim slices of oak,
glue, paint. With your delicate tools
you made me into a capable ship,
masts pulled taut, pride billowed
through my sails, protected glass home.
Though you sleep thousands of miles away
in another sphere, I still hear
your breath catch, see your fingers twitch
in memory of creation.

Sirens

My hometown kept a siren
to quell a midnight flame.
Our schoolyard had a June
who slicked her lips a rosy sheen.
She, too, was a kind of warning.
Sirens like seals on a rock
reach you where you crouch,
and running in the crackling dark
a fireman clangs up the porch
in his bright, shiny jacket
and offers a gloved hand
or wraps you in a shiny blanket.
Like the fireman June was bred
to lift a gangly Jack or Jim
out of his sweaty dread.
The sirens sing aubade.

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Healing Waters



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Sky Talk

Winter evening, heading home,
I see the cars recede on I-80,
rear-embers glowing in the gloom.

I remember our fat Sundays
going home after a day at the park,
Volvo full of kids and sloshing lattes.

Inside and out there was a glut,
stuff to buy or discuss, myself a wife
stir-frying the scuttlebutt.

I swear that Volvo was set to go off—
five years or ten; only an x or n
required, nothing foolproof.

Now here is Sky gulping the last sun.
Sky ethereal, practically weightless.
I say to him: How do you get your calm?

Sky says: Moving me takes the wind's fist.
So humming in my numberless voice,
I turn off from Sky, and drive east.

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Slip Shod

Grandma liked to say cleanliness was next to godliness,
so we make the effort
to tidy our workspace,
scour the sinks,
vacuum the blinds,
wipe the insolence off our faces,
bind our impulses tightly
with hospital corners.

Yet, the carelessness seeps in
like silt through the cracks of our daily lives –
torn relationships,
bruised egos,
offhand remarks, and indiscreet gossip
smudge our reputation,
filling up the corners
like neglected cobwebs.

Song for Beatrice

I.
This is how I see you on a Monday morning;
beside your friends, beneath a willow tree, uniformed in teal.
Distant eyes and constant smiles, surrounded by the flowers.

Your gaze inspires in me the longing to catch the first
rays of the rising sun to embellish your eyes with
the golden light.

My blasphemous hands reach out - a ludicrous attempt to
catch the wind, the light, the ember image of the sun,
but catching a dream proves, once again, impossible.

II.
And so, at 3p.m., when our day together is done and
departure time comes, I give you marigolds instead of sunlight;
instead of a gift stolen from the gods, I give you a
mundane offering.

Regardless, you smile contently and as you look in
my eyes, I realize how foolish I have been, for I had not
seen that your bright eyes already harbor
the light of the sun.

III.
Twilight brings silence and only silence, for no memories of you
mark this time.

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IV.

But this is how I imagine you at night; kindled, brown skin
lit by the lamp that sits on the nightstand - your
white dress lies at your feet like a flame of divine offering.
You climb onto my skin like a fire and a breeze, and
I am blessed by your enchantments.

Afterward, I imagine our souls at rest at last.
My body warmed by the light of your eyes, yours by the embrace
of my arms; bodies that have learned to say, I am not afraid
to sleep now even if it's for the last time.

We are, in that moment, light as air: a warm, soft
pollen settling to dust.

As we fall asleep and the rhythm of our breathing matches up, I
kiss your forehead and your eyelids twice. Your lips form a
smile that says innocence still lives within you.

And I say a small prayer for you, then sing a song,
the one only you will hear me sing:

“Oh, my sweet, sweet
girl, I have learned to love you even though you vanish from
my arms before dawn.

Oh, my sweet, sweet
girl, I have learned to miss you even when my blood
sleeps in yours and yours in mine.”

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Secluded



Sovereignty of a Broken Heart

I breathe out.
I've become so use to the harmony of our breathing.
I wait.
It's just my labored breathing,
By itself, myself.
No presence, No remains.

The pace of my breathing intensifies.
I sit against the wall.
Unwilling to open my eyes.
I squeeze the tears through the creases;
Just enough pain to feel alive,
Enough to know it is not a dream.

My lungs compress.
Did I just scream?
All I can hear is the sound of my heartbeat.
Pounding in my temples,
I press my hands against the beat;
The drumsticks to the drum.

I hear footsteps.
Heavy, unsure
Yearning.
A touch reverberates through each nerve ending.
Heat surges from my shoulder to my legs.
Blood rushes from my chest
To my eyelids.
I peek—
Sneak a glance.

I watch a tear fall to the already soiled ground.
Falling like cayenne on the fresh wound of my heart.

One tear.
No words.
Just glances—
Our eyes have the conversation
Our hearts cannot express.
We're wounded.

But,
Life seems like a Eternal-empty playground
When you walk away.
Scared of the day when-
that playground-
Will have more meaning to you
Than us
Than *me*.

I've broken you.
A wooden rocking horse with too much glue
My bottle will never run out
But your pieces will only clasp back together so many times.
How unbalanced can your rocking become
Before the whole structure shatters?

K I try to stand.
A Gravity takes hold
Y But,
L You catch me.
A My knight in weeping armor.
S I grab hold and never let go.
E Selfish— I'm not your princess.
A Worthless version of a Snow White.
S We hold each other
E so tight
A I feel we could *erupt*.
B Magnetism of 'our' love.
O Or is the magnet within my heart

U
R
N

Yanking your weak metal into this black hole?
Can you escape,
 Would you?

 I don't know
What I'm saying,
But I mean it.

 I breathe out.
 I wait.
Your breathe reaches the same margin as mine,
Same sound wave.
Right now,
 That is all I can hope for.

That Word

I found my favorite word at three. I'm sure I wouldn't be able to remember it if it weren't for the overly told stories of my mom who won't let me live down the fact that I was so young.

This three year old petite girl, who I'm sure looked no more than two, with her mountain of soot hair piled on top of her head played in the bathtub with her brother, Greg, who just never stopped grinning. My Mom had just stepped out of the bathroom to grab fresh towels while Grinning Greg grabbed handfuls of bubbles from the top of the bath and blew them straight at me. Of course, he had no idea what he was doing, being only one. Those bubbles must have bothered me as I began to poke at them, and poke them hard. Death to the bubbles. As my mom walked back into the bathroom, towels in tow, I in my Minnie Mouse voice squeaked out "Fucking bubbles. Fuck this bubble. Fuck that bubble. Fucking bubbles."

My mom started laughing, but you know that moment when parents can't believe what their kid is doing because it's so funny and naughty the same time that they laughingly scold their kids? Yeah, that was exactly what happened as she attempted a stern reprimand. Clearly, I didn't take it seriously.

As I got older and I used potty language, my mom would say, "If you say that again, I'm going to wash your mouth out with soap." I often didn't believe her, and for the most part her

threats were empty. Until, at age six, I discovered my favorite word again.

"Goddamnit, Jessica. If you say that *word* one more time, I'm going to wash your mouth out with soap."

"Fuck," I exploited, looking to the back of her crystal clear eyes.

My mom grabbed me by the arm and dragged me straight to the bathroom. No hesitation. She grabbed up the peach bar of Caress sitting next to the sink faucet. "Open your mouth," she yelled in my ear. So I hesitatingly cringed my mouth slightly open, clenching my teeth together with her hand prying my chin down. She forcefully inserted the edge of that peach bar and grated across my teeth side to side, scraping off flakes of the soap. Foam started to build in my mouth from the combination of soap and saliva; foam started squeezing between my teeth, sliding down toward my throat. My nose dripped as the taste of peach and orange cleaning detergent seeped in. The tears were falling down my face, and I could feel the knot in my stomach start to build and rise in my throat. And there it was. Vomit in the sink and all over my mom's hands. She still swears to this day that she used liquid soap.

That should have been the last time that I said the word. It's not like a little kid has use for vulgarity on a daily basis. But when you have a last name like Dickman, you are almost inducted into the Vulgarity Society. We have secret

meetings, you know, where we discuss which foul words we will use daily. Almost as far back as I can remember, my everyday speak has been that of a truck driver. And I'm sure some think, "Oh, she's just another gutter-mouth punk."

Sure, there's some truth to that. But I love *fuck* because it is so many things. It's literary. It's a verb, an adjective, an adverb, a noun, an exclamation. It is used both positively and negatively. It is the ultimate word in the English language so much so that the Brits don't censor it. No other word quite captures the emotion and complexity of a given situation with the sort of vigor and brevity that *fuck* can. It stands alone.

Freda



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**The Time I went to the Ladies’ Room
During a Storm in Third Grade**

It’s December 1999, and I am drenched.
My jeans made of denim patches are soaked to a darker blue,
making them heavy on my legs.
My navy pullover is dripping,
as are my socks, pink Converse,
and my eight-year-old blonde hair.
Before going out into the rain,
my teacher made my bathroom buddy and me promise
to stay under the covered pathways.
The rain made it hard to hear my friend plead with me
not to do it.
That puddle was at least three-feet deep,
and it looked like a swimming pool of warm rain.
I was eight;
I couldn’t resist.
I am grinning as I walk into my classroom
full of posters listing rules to follow and
how to be polite—what it means to be a golden child.
This is the first time I have purposely ventured away
from the narrow concrete paths.
I can only smile at my teacher’s glare
as I walk to my seat at the front of the room
where I’ve listened to every piece of advice
until now.
My smile does not fade as I get goose bumps from the window A.C.
nor as my teacher writes my name on the board in red.
I look out the window and watch as the storm rages on.

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There, I Rest

My invitation floated
between crests and troughs
washing ashore in the ark
of an encrusted carapace

Its message burned my brain
like ten commandments
into Sinai stone

There was no disputing its
urgency, authority, finality
The sound of the sea drew
me to a rocky promontory
spit-slick from spray coughed
up from a throaty canyon

I welcomed an unexpected calm
to continuously enter, leave,
enter my physical being to
mollify the molecular turbulence
which had so recently taken its toll

S I had been, after all,
T a restless guest, soothed
E here, ready for permanent quarters

P Thin clouds enfolded me
H with sticky embrace
E smelling faintly of flowers
N of familiar fragrance
K as the sea welcomed me
O for the final time
P
E
L

Think of them.

Think of all the words, everywhere, everywhen.

All those scratchings in manuscripts tossed out into puddles from smoke-choked windows of
burning private libraries,
The monikers of too-rich-white-guys inked on title pages of works they didn't write,
And the scribal glosses (additions-subtractions-substitutions-improvements) between the lines.
Consider, for a moment, all those lilting syllables uttered once and - well, almost - forgotten.
Some things get said and just get lost in that "vichyssoise of verbiage"
(andwho'stosaysomearen'tbetterlost?)
And some things stick like peanut butter to dogs –
All those to be or nots, redandgreen fish, asknots, the sex like a car (oracarislikesex? - from
ironicallynamed poets),
Things with feathers, nevernevernever-mores, the fourscore and twentys, the ihave a dreams, and
the never saydies.
Then think of all the not-words - you know them when you see them –
What was that thing Clinton did with his thumbfist?
Why did the middle finger get to be the bad one (and the others - all eight of them
[maybe10ifyou'recrazylucky] - get to be good)?
That grin's a smile in any language and apparently eyes (evenwithoutthat"windows"crap)
Speak the universal language our mouths can't (unlessthey'retouchinganother).
Then all those words we trynottosay wanttosay shouldn'tsay sayanyway –
All that [expletivedeleted] anatomy and excess (andexcrement) and fornication and exclamation
and blasphemy –
The taboo/wannado vulgarlinguistic steam valve of the business end of emotions.
Remember all the burned and buried stuff,
The unwritten trappedinheadworlds stuff (now left dried and crusted on tail-ends)
Nevernevernever-more to see that feathered thing,
The light of day, or the forget-me-not bluered violetroses.
Hide/wishfor the unheard and unsaid/forgotten and abandoned ones,
Left as highway scars in delicate forearms - and gas station bathroom stalls.

Just think of the words.
Now, what did they ever do to you?

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THORNWOOD POND

There's a trail that curves downhill
to a blue lake nestled in a
Santa Cruz Mountain redwood forest
Mostly unknown, it allows me to
walk undisturbed
At the edge of the water
sits an ancient bench, recently
smashed by a fallen tree
One third of the seat remains,
for me to sit and ponder
Thoreau and his Walden Pond
No one else ever arrives
The evening light slants amber,
and the voices in my head
fall silent

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Modesto Reservoir



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Throes of Dawn

Upon the paths for man to be
Before all that comes undone,
Desolate winds chill the ardor
Of a noble flame that has begun:
The captivating sight of eternity
As bitter as what must pass on
In the breadth of man's artifice,
Ever before the throes of dawn.

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Top Coat

There's nothing quite
as sexy as
stroking the chest
of your lover
up and down

through fluffs of hair,
wishing he would go
so that you can
sink down
into your chair,
hands glued
to the keyboard,
praying
for the moment
when your writer's block
ceases to exist

and the words
start to stumble
from your brain bass,
dropping emotion
pausing in moments
of jazz rifting,

hair twirling around
the struggle of
saying what you're saying

meaning
what you said
you'd never mean

knowing that knowing
isn't real

and that
biting into red plums
is more real

than writing
and catapulting
through pages of prudence
and preaching.

It's the standardized test
of strength in resistance

pushing back sheets,
braving frosting air
slicked onto bare skin
over the coat of sex.

J
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Uniambic Sonnet 7

What tyranny and painted hells survived
Those predecessors in their lofty poems
And glorious lives at court, and arrived
In love, or meditated thereupon.
What senseless, maddening, and deadening
Strife did penetrate their souls and give birth
To notions fun but false: in crediting
Great pain and suffering does art gain worth.
Great was Milton's blind thirst, telescopic
Too, was Sir Sydney's distance and desire,
And elder Wyatt's withdrawn, myopic
Longing—all too far to that love admire
In reception. But I do well enjoy
The fruits of love their works did not employ.

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Uniambic Sonnet 9

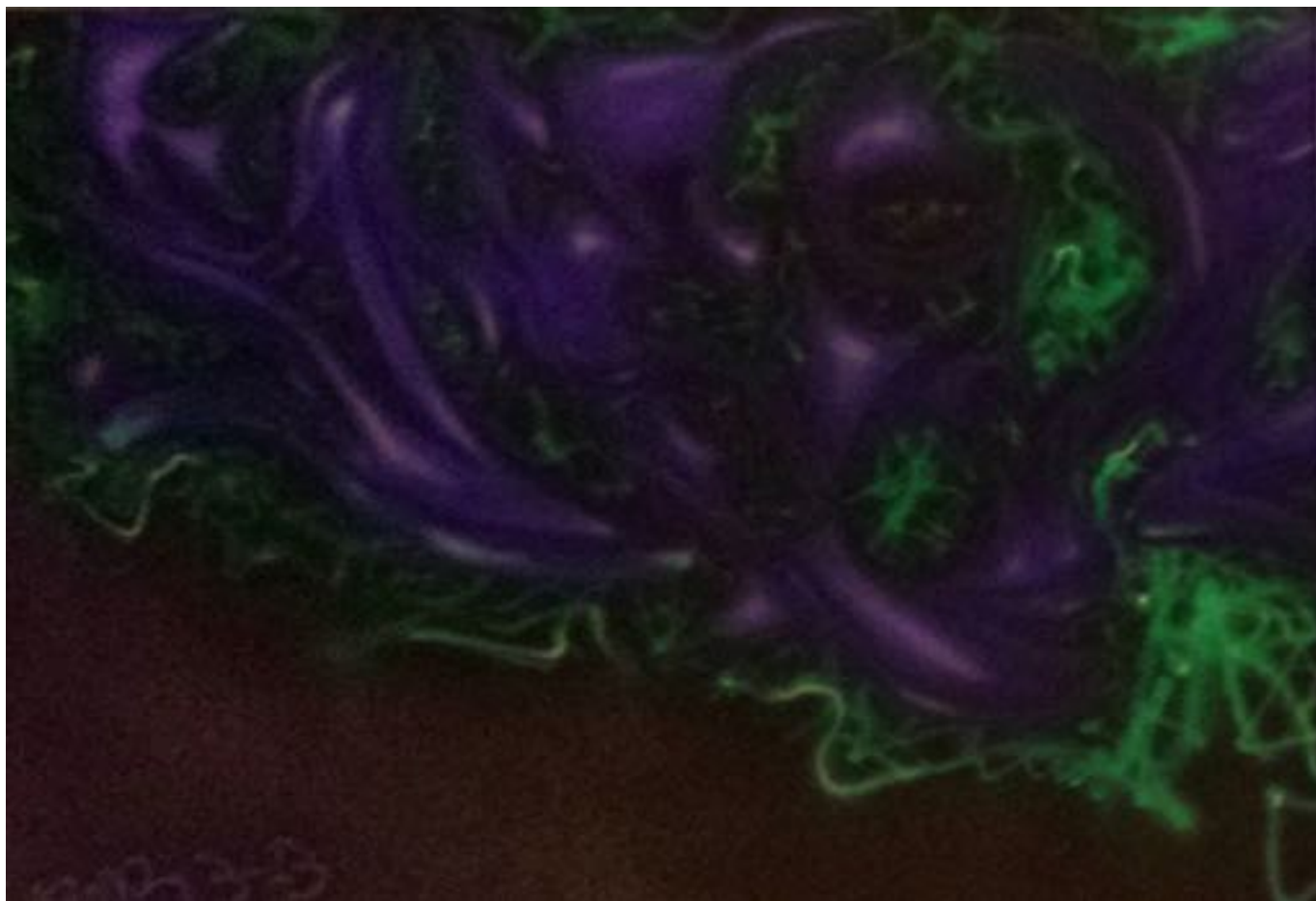
As I enter through high and ancient doors
And behold works and treasures rich and vast
Arraigned in gold, surrounding books and lore,
And ornate legends blazoned in stained glass,
And altars rich with idols, trinkets old
And relics older, imbued with power
To inspire—command!—their small beholder,
Make him bow, swear, pray, devote each long hour
In worship's stay—I of myself do ask:
Shall I not paint thee like these holy shrines?
No, for greed and gladness I do thee mask
From idolaters' false and foolish minds
Unperceptive of fruit, who feast on rinds—
Sepulchred for you do I keep these lines.

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Swevil Da La Muerta



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Unleaving

I left the room at the place in the film
where the benefactor of orphans, the man
we wanted to trust, smashed the rag
in the beggar child's face, and the other man
prepared the acid.

The feel good movie of the year,
the critics said, and I demanded
we shut the thing off,
and you said, I know, I know,
but both of us hooked, we came back.

Then some of the children escape
to a life we can't imaging, where it
all works out, and it does feel good.
But for this to happen, they have to suffer.

Remember how you cradled an infant ten hours old
and like a proper father cupped the velvet skull
and passed her to me? Her young parents,
our friends, had never known anything like it,
never having held a baby before
this one was gathered to them.

I thought of the news that morning,
the college kids meeting in a motel
halfway between their two schools.
How the baby crowned

in a world of blood,
the way we all do,
and his mother said, *Get rid of it*,
and his father did, their boy getting
one chance to wail, being born.

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Urchin Bones

Bloodied fingers black and blue
Damaged in piracy for seaside treasures
Knuckles rapped
And raped
For the life blood stolen of fragile veins –
Hands trace hairline fractures
In her urchin bones

Then the tide returns to cover her
With cool embraces and concealing foamy caresses
The wrath of the sun is softened
Lines of color regrow
The sway of the liquid element brings
The apology for itself
A promise of sure supply
Of faithfulness
Returning love

The voice that whispers drips nectar
Comes close to preach its truth
Turns to screams
Violent vapor
Steam scorching so hot her pain –
Is delayed
And the agony comes in tempests

Then the waves fall in to crush her
With unforgiving force and emotionless thunder
The unreasoned hatred
Chokes out the color
Tears up the bed
And hurtles stones
Through fragile coral

To imbed sea glass
In her urchin bones

J
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Medical Cabinet



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Water VIII

My friend would whisk hot water
with green tea powder
and I'd sip cup after cup of his hot brew
while he'd talk about clouds and rain
as a Japanese sort of a thing
but nothing happened
his girlfriend in Berkeley
and my year abroad boyfriend
someone I never even kissed
had us as only friend
in that long ago year
Alfred turned to translation
married a Japanese woman
whose parents owned bakeries
and I returned to my studies in LA
losing touch with everyone
only have this memory
the froth of Alfred's very green tea

We Were Told to Reach for the Stars

We were told to reach for the stars,
That anything desired might be ours,
And now look at where we are...
All we have to show are rungs of scars,
Because our innocence was preserved in jars,
Just look where we are.
Segregated from reality we've lived a duality,
Deceived with duplicity indulged on morality,
And as the sky was falling down,
The earth was thrashing around,
The two worlds crashed together,
We stand on rubble and remains altogether,
And realize all the lies that blinded our eyes,
The ones that bound us with ties to unattainable highs.
We've awoken from our fairy tale dreams,
To see everything coming apart at the seams,
And we are forsaken and we are lost,
And we are the ones who must suffer the cost,
Because as the sky was falling down,
And the earth was thrashing around,
Our jars shattered and our innocence evaporated,
Leaving our generation dilapidated.

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What It's All About

Even at 4 AM someone's at
a crap table in a casino
with what's left of his life
laid out in chips. Clocks
gone extinct, and drinks
see that they're there.

Even on her worst day
a hooker drags herself
as a billboard to her
usual corner for usual
minds.

And there's little rooms
like arenas where writers
are fighting their insides
for words. But deep night
was made for argue of thoughts,
and daylight comes to release
thought.

Young sunlight on your skin
is a surprising wand. The
Atlantic City boardwalk lays
crisp both ways in breaking
light and sea. Letting casino
chips seem like not everything.

And the hooker retreats as the
shadows have. The writer has
quenched his mental tangle to
get some air.

This boardwalk's some universe
where they could pass each other
with the innocence of somehow
knowing what the other's so
about.

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Hockney



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Witchcraft

There is that burning stigma,
That social disgrace,
Those five scarlet letters
That brands us adulterers of normality,
Once identified, and it applied;
No explaining could prove our sanity.
We, the damaged ones, to be judged,
To be feared,
Just freaks, and crazy, and weird,
Diagnosed as Inhuman.
We learned to keep it a secret,
Our witchcraft,
At every new school or new job,
We practice in secret
Our occult therapy
And black magic pills,
And pray
To whatever our pagan gods must be,
Not to be discovered,
For that is to be persecuted and worse, dismissed.
We struggle to keep every emotion in check,
As well as every stray thought and reaction,
So as not to start a witch hunt,
Because we are the first on the pyre,
Or are water-boarded until our secret is out,
So that the inquisition can truly begin,
Because our secret spreads like a plague spell,
And somehow makes everyone else believe
That *we* are the sick ones.

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Farm House



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Wolves (At Night)

I went through the glass
To rest my face in the ground
And kept my ears to the dirt
Until I heard the trees frown

They wept and they wept
For the leaves they had lost
So I gathered them up
To create a true love

We floated through the streets
To the edges of time
'til you started to root
From the tears in the sky

My fingers were splintered
From the length of your hair
So I sat on the coast
While you began to die there

I tossed every splinter
From the palm of my hand
Until they built us a house
On the edge of the sand

The gray and the blue
Came and swallowed us both
Then you became the frame
In which I lie and call home
And for once I could feel

The Sun released from my chest
As I shriveled and died
Wrapped inside of your nest

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Working It Out

It isn't a too bad place to be,
it's just the place you're in.
But how many times have you told
yourself that, to get through
what you're in.

Thought is a message going on
further than you, hanging in
there because it sees you need
it more than anyone else might.

You've gotten out of the worst places
and more rotten time. Your head
has gambled in much more than this.

So go with what you had gone on,
it was enough for before.

There's no door made to stay closed,
no window that doesn't want to change
with the light, no taken drink that
that didn't go after being some wand,
no cigarette that slowly smoked not
to measure what you're in.

So lean on it and it'll work out.

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Yellow Drift

The speed of time arrests
in vicinities of yellow which
falls more slowly than other
colors and saps time’s pouring
Yellow is a tincture of the sun
Yellow thickens like meringue
and intrigue Yellow lipstick
at a costume ball Guise of
jaundice in yellow eyes
Crime scene yellow ribbon
Time scene Clocks ticcing
Gradual syrupy calibrations
Amber progress Yellow seeping
away to somewhere yellow
no doubt The mouth upon a
flower pouts sulking yellow
Afternoons slowing Naps in
columns of yellow sunlight
Time is getting very sleepy
Seconds sagging to standstill
Yellow calls a time out
Yellow quarantines time
Its banners snap in wind
Mesmer hypnotized the sun
Yellow hypnotizes time

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Zeus Descending

Juno brushes an arthritic knuckle
against his empurpled hand, fusses, strains,
frightened, as if this were not her husband
but her life, long-fought-for, beloved, dissolving.

The dreamed daughter stands looking
for his knowing look, eyes lost. The old man coughs
makes no other sound, as if slipping into a mid-life binge
he’s let slip too far, this time.

My golden sandals flop outrageous laces
to the floor. I’m Athena
by the nursing home window where leaning irises
cannot right themselves, stripped of blooms.

Oh, when he was still himself, he could lift his chin
and seek admiration, feed us the food we craved:
”Cut my meat small” he calls from the lamb skin
pad. O father, where has our mountain gone? Brood

over your dark star collapsed before TV, breath
muffled under an oxygen mask.
Each day, how your mythic mind pressed into mine,
out-folding, until stillness joined stillness.

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Huntington Beach



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Artist Biographies

Jeffery C. Alfier is author of *The Wolf Yearling* (Silver Birch Press), *Idyll for a Vanishing River* (Glass Lyre Press) and *Terminal Island: Los Angeles Poems* (Night Ballet Press, forthcoming). (62)

Christina Abdou is a senior at CSU Stainslaus, majoring in English. She plans to pursue a career in editing and is currently working on her first novel. (126, 146)

James Berry lives and teaches guitar in Brooklyn, NY. His writing has appeared in *The Walrus* of Mills College, *The Lincoln Underground*, and last year's *Penumbra*. He's happy to be a contributor to this year's issue as well. (51)

Vanessa Brazil finds that art is most difficult to create when it's most needed... that's when she bakes. She revels in both the chaos and solace her four children and boyfriend provide; they keep her going when her ink and paint run dry. (50, 81-82, 99)

Charles Laird Calia is the author of two books, *The Unspeakable* and *The Stargazing Year*. His short fiction and poetry has been published in a variety of magazines including recent issues of *MacGuffin*, *Dos Passos Review*, and the *Vermont Review*, among others. (17, 31, 34, 37-41)

Jennifer Campbell is an English professor in Buffalo, NY, and a co-editor of *Earth's Daughters*. Her second book of poetry, *Supposed to Love*, was released February 2013 from Saddle Road Press. Her first book, *Driving Straight Through*, was published in 2008 by FootHills Press. (68, 97, 108)

Christopher Casey is a full-time college student and writer from California. There are more things you could know about him, but you can't truly know him by qualifications and terms alone. If you run into him one day, he will probably make you laugh or think or both, and that's as good as a description as any. (137, 140)

Christina V. Cedillo is an assistant professor of English at Northeastern State University in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, where she teaches courses in rhetoric, women's studies, and creative writing. In addition to writing poetry, she is currently working on several academic book projects and a novel-length work of fiction. (13)

Brooke Chau is 14 years old. She is in 8th grader from Oakdale where she is a cheerleader for her school. Her passions are cheerleading and writing. (85)

Tobi Cogswell is a multiple Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee. Credits include or are forthcoming in various journals in the US, UK, Sweden and Australia. Her sixth and latest chapbook is *Lapses & Absences*, (Blue Horse Press). She is the co-editor of *San Pedro River Review*. (104)

Jamiee Cook is a fourth year student in English and Gender Studies. She will complete her bachelor's degree in Spring 2014 and move onto a graduate program in English Literature in the Fall. (67, 76-78)

Paul Cummins lives in Santa Monica, Ca. His books of poetry include *Postcard from Bali* (Argonne Press, 2002) and *Under Cover* (Finishing Line Press, 2012). Individual poems have appeared in journals including *The New Republic*, *Slant*, and many others. (1)

Noel Daniel is a journalist and IT technician by day, sleep-deprived game addict by night. She likes to write convoluted fantasy stories about political machinations and failed marriages. (48, 57-58)

Nalini Davison with an MA in English literature, taught English for some years, but then, inspired by an intense interest in Eastern psychology, began a second career as a transpersonal psychotherapist. Writing poetry and fiction is as close to her as breathing, yet she tries to take neither them nor herself too seriously. (5, 80)

Jessica Dickman is currently a senior at CSU Stanislaus, majoring in English. She received an Associates of Art in English from Modesto Junior College. She currently plans to pursue a career in technical writing and possibly education, whichever she finds more suitable at the moment. Other works by Dickman can be seen in *Penumbra's* 2013 edition and the *MJC Celebration of Humanities 2012 Anthology*. (2-3, 59, 102, 119-120, 128)

Jesse R. Drake is a pseudonym-loving graduate of California State University, Stanislaus' Masters of Arts program in English Literature, an occasional victim of fleeting delusions of literary success, and word-playing warrior in the battle against a chronic case of writer's block. (88-89, 124, 134)

Regina Marie Droll is a CSU Stanislaus Senior completing her BA in English. She is currently a worship leader at Living Grace Church in Riverbank. Her passion is the performing arts and she writes songs about her life and her son Joshua Allan. She loves creating art and sharing it with the world. (110)

Carmen Germain lives in the other Washington and in northern British Columbia. Her recent work has appeared in The Comstock Review, Naugatuck River Reivew, and New Poets of the American West. Cherry Grove published her first book, These Things I Will Take with Me, in 2008. (133)

Fabián González González was born in El Charco, Uriangato, GTO, Mexico in 1987. He immigrated to Cloverdale, Ca in 1998. His poetry has appeared in Rio Grande Review and in previous issues of Penumbra. (113-114)

Ashli Hall resides in the central valley of California. Ashli is an English Literature major at California State University, Stanislaus with plans to become a secondary-school English teacher. Her dream is to become a successful writer and teacher, living on the coast of somewhere warm and peaceful. (25-28, 87, 122)

Gary Hanna has received two fellowships in poetry and five Individual Artists Awards from the Delaware Division of the Arts and a Residential Fellowship to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation. He is published widely and had two chapbooks come out this year: the homestead poems and Sediment and Other Poems, both from Broadkill Press. He is the Manager of the Writer's Library in Delaware. (95)

Nancy Haskett is a retired language arts teacher. Her poems have won numerous awards and been published in many places, including More than Soil, More than Sky; Songs of the San Joaquin; Stanislaus Connections; National League of Penwomen Magazine; Medusa's Kitchen website. (107, 112)

Rob Hernandez is a constant contradistinction. He doesn't like most of the work he does; it took him years to think of himself as an artist—which he only accepted when he realized how much money he spent on art supplies. He loves his 4 step-kids, his girlfriend and his feo nephew. And his mom. And his sister who made his ugly nephew. His belly button lint is magical. (8, 55, 79, 121, 131-132)

Jacqueline Hollcraft is a lifelong resident of Turlock, CA. Married 17 years and a mother of seven, she is a returning student to CSU Stanislaus. (9-10)

Trevor Jackson is a Ph.D. student, studying literature at the UC Merced. While he is capable of counting syllables in words, he seems unable to detect beats and stresses in them. (129, 130)

Marilyn E. Johnston is author of two books of poetry, *Weight of the Angel* and *Silk Fist Songs* both recently issued by Antrim House Books. In 2001, her chapbook, *Against Disappearance*, was published as Finalist for the annual Poetry Prize of Redgreen Press, Pittsburgh. She holds an MA in English from Trinity College, Hartford. Her work has received six Pushcart Prize nominations and has appeared in numerous journals, including *Worcester Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Poet Lore*. Twenty years ago, she left a long-term career in corporate communications to devote herself to poetry. (23, 72-73, 145)

Helen Kanevsky published her first book of poems, *The Devious Route*, in 2012. She loves to read, take her dog for long walks, and have coffee with her friends. Currently, she is working on a second book of poems. (6-7, 61, 100-101)

J.S. Kierland is a graduate of the University of Connecticut and the Yale Drama School. His short stories have been published in *Oracle*, *Fiction International*, *Emry's Journal*, *Bryant Review*, *Colere*, *Muse & Stone* and many others. A collection of the best of his short stories is being released in July, 2014. (64-65)

Stephen Kopel is a fitness guru, cyclist, blatant wordsmith; author of *Spritz* and *Picnic Poetry*; his special edition is on YouTube. (35, 123)

Inés Leontiev-Hogan is a foreign-born artist and printmaker whose work has been exhibited in the United States and abroad. Leontiev-Hogan is a part-time art instructor currently based in Northern California. Her work is varied, intuitive, and often innovative in the use of recycled or reclaimed materials. (4, 14, 22, 45, 75)

Lyn Lifshin has published over 140 books and chapbooks and edited three anthologies of women's writing including Tangled Vines which stayed in print 20 years. Her web site is www.lynlifshin.com. New books include For the Roses, Poems for Joni Mitchell, All The Poets Who Touched Me; A Girl goes Into The Woods; Malala, Tangled as the Alphabet: The Istanbul Poems. Forthcoming : Secretariat: The Red Freak, The Miracle; and Luminous Women: Enhedu-canna, Scheherazade and Nefertit. (56)

Heaven Lindsey-Burtch is a writer, musician and visual artist from Turlock, CA. As a child of California's Central Valley, she loves to write songs, poems and short stories and is a phenomenally talented painter and illustrator. In her spare time, Heaven is a tutor and is currently working on a collection of children's short stories. She can often be seen around with her Yorkshire Terrier, Dodger. (15-16)

George Longenecker teaches writing and history at Vermont Technical College. Some of his recent poems can be found in Atlanta Review, Santa Fe Literary Review, Penumbra (Union Institute), and Memoir. He lives in Middlesex, VT. (19, 20)

Arlene L. Mandell is a retired English professor who has published more than 500 poems, essays, and short stories in newspapers and literary journals, including The New York Times, Wild Violet, and Women's Voices. (30)

Ricki Mandeville is the co-founder and co-editor of Moon Tide Press. Her poems have appeared in Comstock Review, San Pedro River Review, Texas Poetry Calendar 2013, Pea River Journal, and numerous other publications. As an educator and public speaker, she lives in Huntington Beach, CA, and is the author of A Think Strand of Lights (Moon Tide Press 2006). (54)

Virginia Mariposa Dale lives in Goleta, California, where she follows her love of the arts. She organized a group of open mic poetry readings 1998-2009 at the Karpeles Manuscript Museum Library in Santa Barbara: the Poetry Zone, for kindred poetic spirits. She has had poems published in a Ventura, CA poetry journal, The Askew, and The Sage Trail. (74)

Monica E. Martinez-Escobar is a 22 year old English major at CSU Stanislaus. She lives by this motto: "beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder" and says then we should behold every crevice and crinkly at the brink of your fingertips. (18, 42, 70, 84, 115)

Tula Mattingly has always had a love for crafting, but she was intimidated by the art of painting until she was introduced to “The Painted Cork”, a unique and interesting place to go in Folsom, CA where they give step-by-step instructions and no experience is necessary. After her first lesson she was hooked. The experience has not only taught her painting techniques, but it’s also taught her patience. (93, 96, 106)

Cassie A. Micheletti is a writer, artist, wife, and mother currently living in the California Central Valley. As a proud Jack-of-all-Trades, juggling her college career, personal writing, and family life with debonair, she fondly professes, “you can have your cake and eat it too.” (21)

Val Morehouse a native of California’s San Joaquin Valley, was born in Kern County oil country and attended high school in Tulare. Her family migrated to the state from Texas, Missouri, and Oklahoma in the 1930s. Currently, she resides in Concord, Ca. (33, 94)

James Morris was born in Modesto, Ca and graduated from CSU Stanislaus in February of 2009. For three years he worked, traveled, and wrote overseas. He returned to the United States during the summer of 2012. His daughter Vivienne was born on August 24th, 2012. (46-47)

Anthony Perez is currently a student at CSU Stanislaus, majoring in English, and minoring in Art History. He has an Associates of Art from Modesto Junior College. He currently plans to attend graduate school. (11, 71, 142)

Shirley Powers is the author of *With No Slow Dance Two Steps In Press*, Palo Alto, CA. Her work has also appeared in: *The Women’s Review of books*, *Rockhurst Review*, *Earth’s Daughters*, *Hurricane Alice*, *Iris*, *Out of Line*, *Iowa Woman*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, *California Quarterly*, *The Lucid Stone*, and over one hundred other literary journals. She won first place in the 1995 *Encore Poetry Magazine* contest, and was 2004 winner of *City Reflections*: San Francisco public library, 2005 National League of American Pen Women, Achiever in the Arts Award. (83, 125)

Zara Raab’s latest books are *Fracas & Asylum* and *Rumpelstiltskin*, finalist for the Dana Award. Earlier books, *Swimming the Eel* and *The Book of Gretel*, evoke the rainy darkness of the remote North Coast. Her poems, reviews, and essays appear in *Poetry Flash*, *Evansville Review*, *River Styx*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Dark Horse*, and *Poet Lore*. She is also a contributing editor to the *Redwood Coast Review* and *Poetry Flash*. (109, 111)

Brett Randich graduated from CSU Stanislaus with a B.A. in Liberal Studies and a concentration in Music. In his spare time, he enjoys writing poetry, writing aphorisms, and listening to music. (127)

Bruce Rettig is the author of literary short stories, flash fiction, and essays. He graduated from the University of Colorado with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Arts and Fine Arts History, and he's one of the founding members of Tahoe Writers Works. More information about his published work can be found at BruceRettig.com. (43-44)

Dennis Saleh is the author of books of poetry, film criticism, and art design. He is working on two books set in Ancient Egypt: *The Book of Ani*, a full-length collection of poetry, and *Bast*, a novel-in-progress, and has poetry forthcoming in *Miramar*, *Psychological Perspectives*, and *South Carolina Review*. (144)

Kayla Seabourn who prefers to be called by her fantastical last name Seabourn, has immersed herself into school, receiving three Associate degrees: Associate of Science, Associate of General Studies, and Associate of Oregon Art Transfer from Columbia Gorge Community College in The Dalles, OR, and will be graduating this year with a Bachelor's in English and starting towards her dual credential (single and multiple subject), but she won't stop there. Her future goals are to receive a dual masters in Literature and Writing and Rhetoric as well as one in Communications. She writes to immortalize events, pushing them beyond their expiration, to get through, to indulge, to forget—she stops writing to feed the dogs, wash her fiancé's work clothes, watch *The Walking Dead*, and go shopping with her mother. (*Cover Art*, 29, 91-92, 116-118)

Rick Smith is a clinical psychologist practicing in Rancho Cucamonga, Ca, specializing in brain damage and domestic violence. He is a lyricist and harmonica player for The Mescal Skeiks. Poems have appeared in *Rattle*, *Hanging Loose*, *Water-Stone*. His recent books include *The Wren Notebook* (2000), *Hard Landing* (2010), and *Whispering in a Mad Dog's Ear* (2014) all published by Lummo Press. (69)

Jeanine Stevens studied creative writing at UC Davis, and has graduate degrees in Anthropology and Education. Cherry Grove Collections published her first book, *Sailing on Milkweed* in 2012. She is the recipient of the 2013 MacGuffin Poet Hunt, and other first place poetry awards from the Bay Area Poets Coalition, Mendocino Coast Writer's Conference, Stockton Arts Commission, and Ekphrasis. Jeanine is a member of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. (98)

Mark Taksa's poems appear in Permafrost, Chaffin Review, and Comstock Review. He is the author of ten chapbooks. *The Invention of Love* (March Street Press), *Love Among The Anti-quarians* (Pudding House), *The Torah At The End Of The Train* (won first place in the 2009 Poetica Magazine chapbook contest), are the most recent. (105)

Roi J. Tamkin is a writer and photographer living in Atlanta, GA. He visited Cuba as part of a humanitarian aid mission to supply medical clinics across the island—which is where he took the photograph published in this edition of *Penumbra*. His photographs have appeared in *Folio*, *Nexus*, *New Letters*, *Nimrod*, and *Skipping Stones* (a children's magazine). He exhibits his photographs in galleries nationally. (66)

Bryan Trevena works as a full time Firefighter/EMT and is also a full time student. During his scarce free time between work and school he enjoys fixing up his old Volkswagen and Volvo. He prefers not to leave his ancient cameras on display, but shoot black and white film through them on a regular basis. He spends much of his time in the dark room developing his film and prints. (36, 60, 103, 135, 141)

Mark Trevena is currently an undergraduate student who will soon be on his way to Japan, where he plans to teach for several years. He has a myriad of hobbies, including drawing, painting, and running, and is still expanding his capabilities as an English major. Most of all, however, he enjoys spending time with friends and family. (90)

Jordan Triplett is a student at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo; and is majoring in Graphic Design. She works at her school's newspaper, the *Mustang News*, as the advertisement designer. (32, 63, 139)

Seneca Turner is a retired college educator and a published poet. He has travelled and read his work in the three major cities, LA, Chicago, and NYC. He is a parent, grand-parent, and currently writing a play set in the 19th century. (49, 52-53)

Helen Tzagoloff was born in Russia, coming to the United States at the age of eight. She was the winner of the Icarus Literary Contest and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her book of poems: "Listening to the Thunder," has been published by Oliver Arts and Open Press. She lives in New York City. (12, 86)

***Roger Smith** *no artist biography provided (138, 143)*

***Paula Ann Yup** *no artist biography provided (136)*

Penumbra 2014 Class



Back: Mark Trevena, Regina Marie Droll, Abby Schoettler, Kayla Tabaldi, Jaqueline Hollcraft, Anthony Perez, Christopher Casey
Middle: Nikki Kupper, Janelle Triplett, Tina Lane, Millicent Ashby
Center: Jessica Baiocchi

And Now...



The Fun Begins

