

the blueshift journal
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Acacia erioloba (Camel Thorn)

Sandra Meek

Burden

the body, not the beast
of light, grated
glimmer of sand, the desert's
crowned rising: cool apron
eclipsed by noon, by tree rats
and scorpions, barbed leaves
bitter as use—fence, knobkierie,
a place to germinate
mishearing: *Kameeldoring*,
Acacia of the Giraffe:
the way I confused
tlhokafetse, *died*, for tlhoafaletse,
missed, the wind no voice
without you ■

Bone Broth | Mia Leonin

It begins with a recipe. No, it begins with a phone call.

Aunt Frances calls from the cosmos' first flicker –
when animals stood up on hind legs, gawking
hang-jawed at the stars.

Aunt Frances calls
and sighs her breath of blood orange
and sardines into the phone.

Her moon is a blind man's thumb
in a forest. Her star, the rusted spur
of a forgotten Sunday afternoon movie.

Aunt Frances calls, all mush-mouthed and grackled.
Her punctuation, her parentheses even,
sinks between the ellipses of her meds.

After all these years, her mind still can't drown itself.
It bobs to the surface: seven hospitalizations
and thirty-two electroshock treatments in three months.

As a child, I held my bladder to avoid the uterus-shaped rubber bag
hanging in her bathroom, its tubes snaking within the folds
of the mold-splotched shower curtain.

Collapsed sack, moon sickness, hysteria –
Grandmother heckled.
Mother rolled her eyes.

Aunt Frances commanded nothing.
The cockroaches didn't even scatter
when she shook a cereal box.

As steam rises from a boiling pot
and stuns the window, I too will rise
and write my aunt's name against the cold.

I will make her a soup.

I'll roast sturdy femurs of lamb and mutton with dried rosemary.
I'll cover their bones with cold spring water
and stir clockwise until the broth boils.

For three days this broth will bubble
until bones soften to flesh, indentations
appear to the touch.

I will make her a soup.

Bone marrow will congeal and seep strength
into her blood. Minerals and amino acids
will leach into her organism.

Aunt Francis' mind has circled the cure
these many decades:
Lithium, Lexapro, Paxil, Zoloft.

Her Nurse Ratched
was never movie trivia:
They'd just tackle and zap us with no anesthesia.

I will make her a soup.

I'll pour broth and bones
through cheesecloth
and squeeze out the good.

May lymph and liver flush away her woes.
May thyroid metabolize her testimony:

she was the family snow globe,
a transparent sphere, shaken
and set down in a faraway corner.

Aunt Frances and I are the only family we have left.

Into the broth, I will lower precious stones: ruby
to fortify her blood, sapphire to sharpen her mind,
emerald to honor her birth.

I'll pick the partridge clean of its ribcage,
add turnip and rutabaga,
root bags of cruciferous earth nuzzlers.

I'll place gold ducats
and laurel-stamped doubloons
at the bottom of her bowl.

May this soup's estuaries swift her away on a pontoon
of seared sunlight and yellow jonquils.

As a child, Aunt Frances stared
at a strand of her hair, pulling it
like a lost guitar chord snapped into silence.

Baptismal comb raked over her scalp. Liturgical scissors
snipping *kyrie, kyrie*. A cascade of water passed over
Aunt Frances' head, the knotted and coarse made clean.

May her spleen Zeitgeist her most humiliating memories:

she danced the watusi,
her yellow-crocheted bikini
dripping into the snow.

Her cupid lips bellowed operatic
as she threatened my mother with a steak knife.
At Christmas she mailed us exquisitely wrapped TV dinners.

Aunt Frances: I want to stuff your pockets with stones
to see if you float, drown,
or finally save yourself.

Instead, I will drop stones into your soup.

Soaked and scrubbed,
an explosion trillions of years ago, blasted
minuscule craters and unseen ridges

into these stones, like you,
the stuff of stars. ■

Back to the Woods

Tom Cusano

"I'm here because all fairy tales take place in the woods,
King Cole, even those that don't."

– Bill Willingham, *Fables*

It started when an eight-year-old boy was gifted a book as heavy as a tombstone, and equally plain. "Fairy tales," his mother told him. The cover confirmed in black corporate font. It was a book bare of gold-edged pages and fancy frills. It promised *no nonsense* even though it was nothing but nonsense; *just the facts* when it was just fiction. The boy would spend years unknitting the two.

At night he scooped the collection into his chest, letting his heart smack against its stubborn cardboard skin. He wanted to remember its toughness so he wouldn't feel – what was the word his brother used? – "soft," when he read about all the waltzing princesses.

The boy did his reading in a bottom-bunk library-dungeon. A wall sealed off one side of the bed and a thick blue blanket the other. As the boy mouthed the words, the space grew clammy with his breath, and the darkness thickened around his reading light.

The fairy-tale boy read until he forgot himself, read until the book world got too real and he could almost taste the poison apple, sour as a scream, or smell the moldy skin of scabby ogres. Mouth wide with fright, he'd slam the book shut and rip down the blanket wall, letting the bedroom take him back into its velvet hands. He fell asleep to the rhythmic whistle-snores of his big brother above him. That brother, he sometimes thought, could save him from anything. If witches or wolves or giants tried to break in, he would be like a hurricane-force wind, exploding them out the window.

Big brother brings the happy ending: the idea burrowed into the boy like the fairy tales – latent lessons stored for later, folded pages tucked behind his ribcage.

* * *

—“This wood is someone's creation. We stumble through its tendrils, as if we're crawling through the synapses of his mind.”¹

* * *

A story from the boy's book:

Once upon a time there was a boy named Hansel and a girl named Gretel, and there was a mother and a father, and there was a famine. The whole family felt their bellies go hollow as October pumpkins, grim carved smiles turning to bare-tooth glowers as the shells rotted and slumped. The mother felt worst. Her tummy spoke from her throat: “Let's kill the kids,” she said to her husband. “We'll let the woods gobble them up. More food for us.” The father didn't want that, but he was soft and weak like a limp fern, and he let the mother do as she pleased.

So they walked into the woods and – well everyone knows the rest, don't they? How Hansel plunked down pebbles to remember the path home; how the mother tried again, and this time Hansel had only breadcrumbs, which the birds gobbled up; how he and Gretel blundered up to a house with warm cookie walls, and the witch-owner tried to plump them up to eat (mostly Hansel, the nicest-looking meal), but the siblings cooked her instead and found their way home, where the bad mother had died and the father was thrilled and happily ever after.

* * *

witch *lwiCHl* (noun): ¹ a woman thought to have evil magic powers. Witches are popularly depicted as wearing a black cloak and pointed hat, and flying on a broomstick.

- a follower or practitioner of modern witchcraft; a Wiccan priest or priestess.
- *informal* an ugly or unpleasant old woman; a hag.
- a girl or woman capable of enchanting or bewitching a man.

* * *

The fairy-tale boy liked to play with his big brother in the woods. The mostly dead trees carried few leaves, but a lot of fungus, which reminded the boy of the warts that boiled out of his own skin. Both looked like disease. Both made his brother say ew. At least the warts didn't smell like bleach.

¹ Catherine Fisher, *Darkhenge*.

In the woods there was a wrecked tree with lichen-covered bark, scaly like the hull of a sunk ship. The boys made a fort by leaning long branches against this tree. They played a game called jail. One boy knelt behind the branch-bars, his knees dug into wet squishy leaves. The other was the guard, who made the prisoner answer riddles to get set free.

Sometimes the big boy got bored and broke out early. He wanted to explore. The fairy-tale boy would whine and whine: *stop it*, he said. *You have to play fair.*

* * *

– “Hansel was given the best things to eat every day, but Gretel received nothing but crayfish shells.”²

* * *

“Come here you good child come into this cage I will feed you bacon dripping butter and pancakes the size of real cakes and fine hams and foie gras and caviar and so much of the best lobster you have really never eaten so good I am a kindly woman I like to spoil my food I mean my children and you Hansel you are so worth it you are the good one the smart one the best one come here – ”

* * *

suicide |ˈsʊɔ̃i sɪd|

noun

the action of killing oneself intentionally: *his brother committed suicide at the age of eighteen* | *drug-related suicides*.

- a person who does this.

* * *

One day the fairy-tale boy and his brother found a stag’s skull plopped on top of a bed of branches, like an amateur memorial. The head itself, narrow and runty, resembled an athletic cup. What really caught the boys’ eyes were the antlers, quadruple-pronged, reaching up like the gnarled fingers of two outstretched hands begging, *why?*

“Let’s go back,” the fairy-tale boy said.

But his big brother kept staring: “Don’t be a baby,” he said. “It’s cool.”

* * *

² The Brothers Grimm, “Hansel and Gretel.”

– “...for it is ever the way of witches with any two things to care for the more mysterious of the two.”³

* * *

“Shoo Gretel shoo go fetch some meat for Hansel or no you know what how about you check the oven I want to make a real nice loaf of bread yes this time you can have some too just step in and tell me is it hot enough what do you mean you don’t know how you stupid kid it’s so easy here I’ll show you I’ll step in myself –”

* * *

Ways a suicide is like a witch:

They both take victims.

They both prosper in darkness.

They both think poison a very good tool.

They both know how to seduce (*Come here I know what will make you feel better this warm bread this so healing knife don’t you love to hold my hand –*)

They are both hungry for older brothers.

* * *

When the fairy-tale boy and his brother moved, they didn’t have a forest anymore. They did have a tree, though. From far away it looked like a queen rejiggering her robe: wind sending shimmering currents from top to bottom, side to side.

Up close, the tree was perfect for climbing. Hefty sandpaper branches gripped sneaker soles. Broad nooks near the trunk let the boys stand and rest, their armpits hanging on higher limbs for extra support. It felt like being lifted up by a parent.

The fairy-tale boy never made it far up the tree. He liked the resting part—feeling wide green leaves wave in the wind, like a hundred pampering hands working to cool him off. The tree’s coat of dry dirt smelled refreshing after the old forest’s thick fungal muck.

The big brother was different. He went as high as he could—fifteen, twenty branches up. Eventually he’d get to a spot he called “the point of no return,” where the branches became too narrow, and too far from one another, to welcome him any higher.

Both boys would stand quiet for a while, the younger happy to have the older up above him, as if they were in bunk beds again, as if they didn’t live in separate rooms on separate floors.

* * *

³ Lord Dunsany, *The King of Elfland's Daughter*.

– “Even you, my brother,
summer afternoons you look at me as though
you meant to leave,
as though it never happened.
But I killed for you.”⁴

* * *

What made the fairy-tale boy remember the fairy tale, the one about the brother and sister?

Maybe it was one of the last pictures of his big brother: wrapped sideways around a tree branch, gym shorts and t-shirt sinking to the ground, muscles tensed. “It’s like he’s hanging on for dear life!” his mother commented. That was before he died.

Or maybe it was the condolence cards full of wistful cartoon trees scattering seeds, everything in bloom, even though it was winter.

Or it could have been the stuff he read in English class, maybe the Thoreau, who said, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.”

Probably he was looking for someone to blame because he hated blaming his brother. When it comes to scapegoating, witches have always been easy victims.

* * *

Ways a suicide is not like a witch:

It does not brew potions in crusty cauldrons.

It has no time for broomsticks.

It does not live in gingerbread houses, but lurks in the belly of its victim.

It does not come in a cloak sewn full of ugly words – *hag, wart, wicked, nasty, crooked*.

It is hard to condemn because it means both person and action. (“A suicide, that’s awful” – “how dare you talk about the dead that way!”)

If you are a suicide you are a suicide forever, but witches can always quit their craft.

Witches show up in fairy tales but not real life.

Suicides show up in real life but not in fairy tales.

Kids don’t grow up scared of suicide.

Kids don’t dress as suicides for Halloween.

⁴ Louise Glück, “Gretel in Darkness.”

The most important part: a suicide has no body of its own. You cannot shove it in the oven and watch its head pop. It disappears with its victim, leaving you in the woods, alone, undone, doomed to call its name again and again, when it never knew yours.

* * *

The fairy-tale boy went back to his fairy tales, although that first book was long lost. He reread “Hansel and Gretel” because he wanted to hate the witch and to remember his brother, his Hansel, as a hero. He thought of that first path of pebbles glistening like clean white teeth in the moonlight. He remembered how Hansel grabbed Gretel’s wrist and beckoned, *look what I did*. That was the story to him: a little sibling thrilling at such perfect direction, mouth wide and screaming with happiness, hair flung backwards, whole body tugged along by this wonder-boy, this saving brother.

The fairy-tale boy wanted to remember that feeling. What it meant to be led straight out of the woods.

But when he reread, he realized Hansel had not been sure-footed like he thought. His faulty second path, the one made of breadcrumbs, the one gobbled up by birds—that’s how the siblings got lost in the first place. And it was Hansel who led them to the gingerbread house, and Hansel who said, “Let’s stay and eat a good meal,” and Hansel who wound up locked in the witch’s cage, which he only escaped when Gretel shoved the witch into the oven.

So it was up to Gretel after all. It was her job to carve out the happy ending. ■



Red | Jordan Thompson

Apologia | Anthony Frame

I'm starting at the center, a puff of chemical dust
as I approach the hive. And god was here once.

Lately, I've been thinking about hunger, about bees
and pollen, the way a roach will eat a roach

I've poisoned, My hands don't need strength,
residual pesticides, pressurized cans, flush and kill.

Discharge and faith. And I know where to find
the honey bee queen, in the center, deep within

the fractal of the combs. She makes her own light.
If god is here then what am I killing, the worker bees

driving their stingers into my protective suit,
the gush of guts as they fly away to die. I want

to be hungry again, wafers and grape juice,
an apple right off the branch. Following fireflies

as I walked home from church, dozens of pulses
lighting the night. Look close and you'll see

the bees look different. And the queen, heavy
with eggs and stored sperm, never stops moving,

checking. Is it instinct that makes me touch her,
the way I loved to touch the tails of tadpoles?

It's how I learned to find evolution: lungs, gills,
spiracles. And if I kill this queen, the hive will choose

an egg and feed it royal jelly. Instinct and chemistry,
something to serve. Something to protect.

The grand design of the hive. I want to be human,
afraid and frail, soft skin easily pierced. I want

to be warm, the sun on my skin, sweat on my legs.
I want the light of a candle but only remember

the smell of incense. I start here, in the center
of a swarm I started. I crush the queen and wait. ■

A Crow Won't Bite a Crow

Nicole Rollender

– what my Polish grandmother meant was *stick with your own kind*. You can eat crow's breast (first incise an X over the heart), but the meat tastes like charcoal. A lone rook caws from the pines – in Gaelic, he's a *roc*; in Sanskrit, a *kruc* – crying out. In

my grandmother's dreams, a *wrona*. Where the bird lands on her shoulder – makes her a *shewel*, a straw-woman wrapped in colorful rags – propped up in grain-sown fields. She can't remember how to terrify. She remembers Jim Crow –

in Latin, crow opens from *crepare*, to creak and clatter – she told a black woman waiting for the bus, *in Plock, I was a gypsy, chased off walking paths*. Rotted apples thrown at her back. A grackle picking up a core – he's a *hremm*, a storm bird, one who helped

Cain slaughter Abel, the bird-thrown-from-a-ship that led Vikings to a greener land, flying over the young martyr's bones – a dark eye for a blue eye, salt in a woman's hands. A woman spread-eagled to give birth. A *crake*, a prophet of evil on a stone parapet.

Crow peelings, *nga-pin* in Cantonese, or opium – any drug given to my blind grandmother who's dying, who is bathed by a young black nurse who finally finds her expired. He says, *I tried to close her eyes, but the right one stayed open*, a lone crow jaggling

across the blue iris – ■

***Michael Sins* | Brianna Albers**

(After Yasmin Belkhyr)

Michael comes in the middle of the night,
brings her Bible tracts and apples from Jehovah's

garden. Sometimes, on good days, it rains bread.
Others, and Eve is left to scrounge. At night,

she shoots at limping calves, follows rabbit tracks
through drifts of red snow. Memory is unforgiving,

here, Eve is soft and full of rot. Meanwhile,
Eden shrinks. Jehovah's temper settles and swells.

The cottage is small, Eve says, but she has learned
to make do. She strangles birds. Michael laughs

and the doves cry; the birds are yet to die beyond
the town line. Eve sits with her legs crossed

at the ankle, tongue between her teeth. The river red
and currant orange, she bites into one of Jehovah's

apples, leaves her gap-toothed kiss on its bruised
and blessed skin. Sweet, Michael thinks. Sweet. ■



Petals | David Uzochukwu

Vacancy | Franni O'Toole

It was always as Sadie was handing over the room keys that the guests would make their advances. Often flirtations came in the form of wink, a touch to the hand, some grinning wisecrack. In her early years of motel ownership, Sadie didn't mind the impertinence. These were lonely men, she reasoned. Many of them sat behind wheels all day, traveling alone through balding landscapes, longing for female company. Sadie found the men to be good lovers, even if they were clumsy about subjects that didn't involve diesel or engines. Randall was the exception. With the others she had romance, with him she had love.

Randall drove for an academic supplies company. He had hair the color of chickpeas. The first time she met him, he pushed the blonde back confidently and rested his forearm on the sign-in book. A beauty, he called her. She blushed and looked down at her sign-in sheet, surprised to see freckles extending from the man's elbow to his wrist. The freckles came from the road-hours of leaving his arm on the window rest, skin braved to sun—or so Randall explained to Sadie that night, in bed, as she tenderly kissed each browning star.

In the beginning his visits were frequent, two or three times a month. With each stay they'd set goals like, have sex in every room. Like, have sex in the bed of his truck. Like, afterwards tour his delivery—stacks of white boards, pencils, cardboard boxes, classroom globes. With the globe, Sadie remembered Randall balancing it on his palm, pointing to where their travels would bring them.

"We'll honeymoon here," he said, pointing to a dot in California with one hand, tucking her hair behind her ear with other.

"I'd like that," she said, running her finger along the coastline.

Sadie, now, was looking across the lobby at a different artifact from Randall. It was a painting of a cabin on the prairie. In the foreground, a wife pinned laundry on a line while her husband axed wood. In the distance, buffalo backs stood out amidst endless grain. The picture was intended as a classroom decoration, but Randy had taken it from the truck and gifted it to her instead.

On nights like these, Sadie liked imagine herself as the woman in the bonnet, Randy as the man splitting wood. More often, though, she would replay the image of Randy walking into the lobby, carrying the present proudly. The kiss they shared with the frame pressed between them.

A peal of laughter from outside distracted Sadie from the painting. The high school kids were in the pool area, no doubt very drunk by now. From the moment the boy called about renting ten rooms

for his after-prom, Sadie knew what to expect. But, truthfully, she needed the money. Business wasn't as steady as it used to be. Ever since the government built the superhighway through Rochester, it was as if they'd turned off a faucet. The semi-trucks, the family station wagons, the punk rock group vans—all of them, drained.

But tonight Sadie was thinking on the bright side. With the high schoolers occupying every room, finances were looking up. Besides, it wasn't so bad that fewer and fewer people were turning up at her motel. Fewer roaming hearts to break.

Moonlight on water always reminded Annabel of a ballroom dress. She had her feet in the pool and was kicking the water lazily. At the opposite end, a group was by the umbrella table, taking shots and stripping loose clothing. Voices and music from a speaker carried. They were being a bit too loud, Annabel thought. The outdoors, under night skies like this one, belonged to quiet.

A tap on Annabel's shoulder startled her. Behind her stood Diane, who had stripped down to her bra, underwear, and a diamond pendant.

"Anna, I think maybe you should bring Eric back." Diane pointed across the pool at Eric, who was leaning against an umbrella pole, dozing in place. Annabel nodded. She'd predicted that the night might end like this: Eric had been drunk since he put on the tuxedo. It was because he was still a boy. He called it "booze" like a boy. Nursed bottles all night like a boy.

Annabel brought her feet out of the water, followed Diane across the pool and hooked her arm around Eric's waist. He made no protest. As they left the pool and headed to their room, Eric kept slurring how beautiful she was. As she took out her key, he breathed hot against her neck, planting wet dog kisses behind her ear.

She unlocked the door and guided him across the room. After he bumped against the nightstand, she helped him out of his suit jacket and tie. When he stumbled into bed, she lifted his legs on to the mattress and fixed the pillow behind his head. So, this is what it means to be adult, she thought.

Outside, Annabel heard the splash of voices. She left Eric's side and looked out the window at the pool. Her friends had quieted by now. Watching below, she felt like she was standing on the edge of a forest. The long skinny shadows. The rustles of mothlight. The naked boy arms like birch trees.

Eric stirred and tried to sit up. Annabel left the window and gently eased him back. "Shhh," she said, resting his head back on the pillow. He reached for the paintbrush tips of her dark brown hair, now hardened by chlorine and hairspray. She brought his hand back down. He persisted, reaching for her strap and pulling it down her shoulder.

"Stop it, Eric, not tonight," she said, fixing the strap. In truth,

the “not tonight” meant not ever; for the past few weeks, Annabel had been waiting for the right moment to end things. She had dated Eric since freshman year, but she knew with certainty this was not the boy for her. He was, after all, no Moises.

Annabel liked to describe Moises this way: he was five years older, worked at a coffeehouse, and grew his own bamboo. He introduced her to books by Pablo Neruda, and to the alleys and bedrooms where they could smoke cigarettes and debate translations of his work. Next time they were on his mattress, Annabel thought, she’d tell him about her hair like paintbrushes. The boys looking like birch. Moises would appreciate these.

Annabel took off her heels and climbed next to Eric in bed, careful to lie above the sheets. She fell comfortable quickly, and soon had fallen asleep.

This time, when Eric stirred, Annabel was not awake to pull him back. This time, when Eric stirred, he clamored out of bed, opening the door and stumbling into the hallway.

The boy came in wobbly. With his hand groping the wall, he inched his way toward Sadie’s desk.

Sadie remembered him from earlier that night. All the high school kids had flurried into the lobby together, dressed in suits and gowns, carrying grocery bags and talking excitedly. One boy, this boy, came to retrieve the keys.

As he approached, he straightened his jacket and pushed back his hair.

“Waters, Eric. We spoke on the phone. I have ten rooms for tonight,” he said. There was laughter from behind. The boy watched as Sadie counted ten keys. She pushed them to him in a pile. He did a count of his own.

“Here we go, boys,” he said, scooping the metal and turning away without thanks or a look.

Now back in the lobby, the boy was far from groomed—white shirt untucked, droopy. The boy’s hand kept searching the wall until it knocked into the painting. He stumbled forward a little at this, and the painting crashed to the floor. Sadie hurried over while the boy steadied himself against the wall. She picked up the painting and ran her hand over the wood, checking for splinters.

“Sorry,” the boy said, watching. Sadie made no response. The boy leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes. “It’s a nice painting.”

“My boyfriend got it for me,” Sadie said.

“Ohh.” The boy blinked some more. “Where’s he?”

“Not here.”

“Sure he still loves you?”

Sadie looked up. “Of course he does.”

He turned his head side-to-side. “People never love you—” He slumped to the floor, back against the wall. “People never love you forever, even when they say they will.”

Sadie looked down at the boy. "That's not true," she said quietly.

"They stop and they never start up again." He pushed one leg out. "Could care less about what happens to you, I'll tell you that."

Sadie looked down at the boy. He had it wrong. He didn't know anything about Randall, or the years it had been. He probably looked at her, the roots she'd forgotten to dye, and saw a fifty-year-old woman. He didn't see the past she'd had, the future in store, the love that would come back for her. He was just a rich drunk boy, who now looked like he was falling asleep again.

He didn't know what he was talking about, she thought again, touching her fingertips to her lips and then pressing the kiss against the face of the man axing wood in the painting. She hung the painting back on the wall and side-stepped the body. Rich drunk boy, she thought. She was supposed to stay, here, in the lobby, in case the guests needed her for any reason. But tonight had been a long night, and all she wanted was to retire early. Without a glance to the boy against the wall, she collected her things, turned off the lights, and walked across the street to her home.

Annabel dreamt that she was back at prom. Except this time Moises, wearing suspenders over his button-down shirt, was her date. She guided him to the middle of the gym floor. They slow-danced to a Frank Sinatra song. She had her hand resting on his neck and was thinking about the authenticity of their love, when a large moth landed on her ring finger. She watched the perched moth open and close, wings like a lung. Annabel was about to share this with Moises, the lung metaphor, when the moth was joined by a second. Moises, meanwhile, reached for her free hand and raised it in the air—as Annabel spun, many more moths were released from inside the folds of her skirt. Like a plague of locusts, they swarmed the lanterns on the ceiling, the stage with the microphone, the bowls of fruit punch and popcorn. But no one noticed. Least of all Moises, who kept asking to dance with her, smiling as more and more moths haloed around his head.

When she woke, she felt instinctively for a body next to her. When all her hand found was an endless wrinkled sheet, she turned and saw Eric's side empty. Frantic, she scooped up her shoes and ran out the room. Everything was deserted. She searched the parking lot first, calling his name. When she found no signs of Eric there, she hurried around the side of the building.

The pool was wreckage. On the cement were empty bottles, clothing, glints of broken glass. In the water floated more of the same debris, with the exception of a large object, a parachute of sorts, composed of black slacks, a dress shirt—

Annabel's hands opened and her red heels dropped.

Sadie stared from the window. She'd come back early that

morning and, making coffee by the window, she'd seen the figure in the pool. She recognized him immediately. She also recognized that this meant an end.

Her hands trembled as she tried to pour sugar into her mug. The packet fell to the floor.

There were going to be all sorts of court hearings to attend. Accusations of negligence. Suing her for the unsafe pool, renting to an under-eighteen year-old, God knows what else.

Sadie watched the girl wade into the pool and tuck her hands under the boy's armpit, tugging him gently across the surface.

As she pulled the body across the water, Annabel could think only of lines for Moises. Bright-colored bras and panties, the bellies of tropical fish. White and red roses, emptied tea lights. The body was so heavy, heavy of old Spanish coins, heavy treasure sunk to the bottom of the ocean

Sadie knew that if they closed the motel, Randall would never be able to find her. It had been two years since his last visit, but he had promised. He had promised that day in September, before the superhighway, before everyone found homes elsewhere, when they were both standing in the motel parking lot. He was in the driver's seat with his freckled arm on the window rest, and she had her hands stacked on his, and he promised to bring her to the ocean.

Sadie watched the girl hoist the boy over the pool edge, dragging his soggy body onto the pavement. The girl bent over his body.

It was unreal, Eric lying in her arms, this experience in a reality that surpassed anything she'd known, a reality that would meant nothing to the real Moises, the man she had met at a coffee shop on vacation, who had sex with her in the bathroom but had not contacted her since, a reality that didn't include metaphors, an end to all these metaphors.

Sadie walked back to her desk. The motel just had to make it until Randall's arrival. She'd put the motel on the market that very minute, climb into the passenger seat, and together they'd drive to that speck on the globe.

The girl was brushing the boy's hair out of his face. Sadie reached for the phone. The girl kissed his forehead. Sadie dialed two digits, but she stopped before the third.

Randall could still make it in time, she thought.

Maybe if she stayed like this. If she kept her finger there, hovering over the last number. If she waited until the last possible moment, until the weeping girl left the drowned boy's side. ■

Fracture | Sammi Bryan

creaking back to the dim blue
of your body, not morning

exactly, except for the way you turn
from me. I see your face in another's

more often than the past permits,
(data cycle expires the 20th)

your mother's apricot scrub –
I should have asked – tastes vine

on my lips & if I rouse yours will you taste
her too? just thinking ahead here, stuck

with the then & now, when we write
each other in the future, what are you

drinking? what will we say to our mothers?
I glitter my phantoms, make them prancy.

I long too much, symptomatic of trust
which last I heard you would not

touch me in ways like the last.
prognosis: alright, I suppose,

my feet are cold with the night
before tried to rue / burnt out bar

in a cloying mood & yet . . .
dancers in the corner moved

the way I wish we could
instead. I became a taut one fearing

my own sloe eyes and you,
your hair, *beware*, the mounted deer

loomed over us
 & I wished for 90% more

bottle peel to shred. lately
 everything I speak spins you

into dread, back to the haunting
of your skuthery head.

I only want to talk fault
 lines, baby, how once I lived

on the largest in the country,
 how I don't mean to keep

shrinking into that city it's just these
 webs of houses leave me speechless,

like the phrase Post-K, or seeing
glass hit the street for the first time.

speaking of streets, what do you have
 against those swings, or for her

& her & her?

I know there are lines
 you just don't cross so hold off

showing me yours except please
 don't – I'll open my mouth for you;

I'll meet you in the bathroom.
I'll meet your *come here* lean

against the corner counter, wait
 for the door to declare us alone.

we only like me when you're drunk.
these arms of mine shaking & now.

for one thing, I can't believe you never saw
Patrick Swayze, not in that way, helpless

against Jennifer Grey in her summer-
turned skin.

. . *why are you awake?*

who waits for answers like these.
I swear that two can be one,
even if my deer
foams rabid &
sometimes plays horse,
hoofing plans away
don't cut me off *you can exit this poem*
before I can say, *through the window even*
without fire
love – the fine line
between every heaving thing. ■

the other one Farah Ghafoor

I name my reflection after the twin
who didn't make it past the bus stop,
or pearly gates or whatever they call it
these days. my mother tries to make me
eat more before school, at school, after
school as if that would help me grow
another body that looks something
like a child instead of a memory, a ghost
who would at least smile and raise
her hand in class. I wear a phantom limb
as a locket: I know it's a trend because of
the way people I don't know clasp it
tighter every day, seeing if a girl will
pop out with a BOO as the punchline. ■

If you could see where I learned to cook

Emily O'Neill

sousing for my gram & I sing her French love songs I can't translate / she knows
it's about eyes & bones & beds I think / how embarrassing to not speak
the language, to undress parsley of yellow leaves & crave your tile island

how we don't speak when eating / the coal quiet / sage leaves soft as rabbit
fur / shredded over risotto you are probably eating right now
in Chicago / I had rice for dinner too / from a freezer

bag / she's been cooking three generations & is too tired for big meals
two consecutive nights / I take down the big knife, think
I'm helping & regret that I step outside myself so quickly

table where my plate would go cold & wait for me all night
until breakfast / each portion hard & dry & still mine / nothing like
the farrow dish we ordered twice / chestnuts & an open hand

waiting to take whatever is left / Gram carved pork into the pan
from the back of the fridge, pulled paring knife into her thumb again
again / two rabbits in the yard / a hutch she calls The Rabbit Taj Mahal

we had a rabbit meatballs that night, yes? / I can still keep consistent
enough to eyeball a 1/4 cup of diced onion exactly / it makes her proud
to see me snapping walnuts down to dust by hand ■

Strange In-Between

Audrey T. Carroll

Standing in a pool hall in Little Rock at midnight, half of us smoke Camels and candy-scented vape, talking about when those of us hitched plan to have kids — the stigma of being pregnant for interviews and the supreme torture that must be loading up a U-haul in Arkansas in July while growing a little greedy thing inside of you — like having a kids is ever a plan, and suddenly you feel like you slipped on your mother's blue pinstripe pants suit and someone has mistaken you for a responsible adult. One of them takes you aside in the middle of an argument about the evils of advertising that you tried (and failed) to cut off at the pass, an argument that someone says is only happening because water signs like to argue but you know her drunk swagger on heels when you see it, and he tells you how sorry your man was for snapping at you earlier, because the guy you're speaking to was He Who Saw The Fire In Your Eyes when you spoke on the phone, heard the steely edge in your voice that made the other patrons of the restaurant stare at you, and though you can't remember what you said that offended their Southern sensibility, at this point it hardly surprises you that you have. Even a quiet Queens girl can be offensive in the South. You've already forgiven the snapping at you because you're hoping for your own kind of forgiveness, have already started practicing resenting the hypothetically inflating womb you anticipate, resenting the changes over which you will have no control, the fear that the child will break you, make your body weak when the last thing you are allowed to be is weak. Late but never missed, you wonder if it might be possible to plan or if you're just the same teenaged control freak who needed exacts — books by multiples of fives on shelves; symmetrical lining up of cut-out magazine pictures on walls; even footfalls — the only order, the only safety, in exactness. ■

Family Trait | Kelly Nelson

Our emotions furrow
only so deep.

Some see iced-over bucket water.
Some see lots gone fallow. Or the white

skim of frost on the basement's
one window, birch branches cracked

under the smallest bird's weight.
I see bodies falling –

fallen drunk in deep snow, bad water
from the well, stroke by a fence post, melanoma

unnoticed, plunge from a bridge wire,
skid through a guard rail, bled to death, bled

to death, cardiac arrest.
There is no place for fathers.

From this orphan train, we're lucky to be
taken in. Our emotions

furrow only so deep. From these shallows,
we have done what we could. ■

Captive | Cynthia Lee



The Postcard Series

Momina Mela

Postcard from paranoia

I saw a man down on his knees grating smut off a calf's
hooves to bathe the small thumps in turmeric water
his forehead waxed from harbouring reek his wife
bunched her skirt between her thighs set a coconut ablaze
the excited husk circled the sombre head of mother
cow how does one decide what to bless and what to set
fire to?

Postcard from anxiety

M pulled up her trousers to show me the fat segment of
snake bite across her leg; rock-salt warped in
membrane. *I rub two twigs together over the wound and it*
dries up I swear her eyes are spiked grey from
incantation.

Postcard from the body

I don't know what to pour my breasts into anymore
the sky here is wet with reasons the river churns
with kids in the afternoon when their gaunt backs curve
into shimmer the hair on their forearms slackens to a
fleece wish u were here

Postcard from guilt

Every morning a bulb of dawn pushes through a
woodpecker's torn wing one beam sliced for me
the other for a wasp fed moon waning into my
pungent mouth today somebody showed me a close-up
image of the moon I called it ugly and immediately
felt apologetic (close-up image of moon is attached)

How he made me disappear completely

Torrey Smith

(After Jamaal May)

My mother's grandfather was a ghost. After my heart was thrashed about like plum in a casket my hair began to fall out by the fistful. I built a moat around my corpse box made of repurposed wooden panels. I was like a paper doll, dressed and undressed, exposed and easy. Naked. Here I am a purpling figure, fumbling flesh, skin skeins, Venus fly traps. Here where thirst found river, where hearts were extricated, sleep found its owner, where the owner stopped hanging flyers at every street corner in a ten mile radius. This is error, this is what slithers out of the cracks in my walls at night, this is my destiny to ignore. Little me, I wring darkness into my skin until it bleaches me distinct, and I evaporate like tea steam into the evening air. I am patterned and arranged. I become the overlapping blue knots of woven array, a manifestation only fashioned out of the old fashioned. I am a macramé owl. I bind myself tighter than ever before. I become fixed. More adaptable in some ways but fixed in the way duct tape is adaptable. They will be forgiving for my rigidity of spirit when in their menacing presence. They will be forgiving when I long for an opaque bottle excruciating enough to fit into and be crushed. ■

Type, Delete | Judy Hall

You've been IM'ing with the wrong guy for three dizzying hours – about everything, nothing.

It's innocent, you think as you type... as innocent as driving without your seatbelt fastened, going just a tad too fast on the parkway, a fine drizzle starting.

He's sent a picture of a painting he's working on, an abstract painting filled with curved, feminine shapes and almost faces.

I like the composition but why are the colors so muted? I think you should use some bold colors.

Hmmm... he types. Cobalt blue! Like Kandinsky! You're right. You're amazing! That's what this needs. But I already put my brushes away.

You know the wrong guy wants to just keep talking to you, because you connect in this visceral way which makes no sense to anyone outside the two of you. To the rest of the world you two make an ugly rock but inside, you are filled with bright crystals; no one is allowed to break the rock and find out. It is secret, just between the two of you.

Your boyfriend is watching the baseball game as you type on your laptop, your feet on his lap. He pets you absentmindedly, like a puppy he wants around as long as it behaves, while he talks to the players. You sometimes wonder if he thinks they can hear him. The boyfriend is never as passionate about anything with you as he is about the Mets.

You think about the way the wrong guy's lower teeth overlap each other and how the birthmarks on his left ear make some sort of elegant design and you wish you could take a thin-tipped Sharpie marker and connect them to figure out what the design means, if it means anything. There is something about the wrong guy, some mystery, which you want to unlock, even though your boyfriend is a good guy who loves you. That's what everyone says. What a good guy! As if that is all you should look for. Goodness. And you do love your boyfriend even if your mind is on the image

of the wrong guy stretching in the office earlier today while you two talked, his maroon shirt lifting over his taut belly, dark hair trailing down under his belt. Your mind wanders there, under his belt, after the boyfriend is asleep and your hand is between your thighs in the darkness of your bedroom. You are not good.

The wrong guy's not interested anyway.

Even if you didn't have the boyfriend and the wrong guy didn't have a live-in girlfriend who he's sort of broken up with, but not entirely and a Girl he's cheating on the girlfriend with, you are in friendzone, even when you dance together, even when he puts his hand in your hair and sings softly and slightly off key, songs the two of you have talked about, analyzed, sung together in the car or while drinking red wine after work in dim bars, even then. He points out beautiful women at restaurants and bars. Like the illicit Girl, they are skinny and very young with long straight hair and brown eyes. You are what is kindly called voluptuous and your hair is long and curly and you were young once but that time has passed and instead of brown, blue eyes, blue like the color missing from the wrong guy's painting or grey like the sky in a storm and sometimes even green, green as envy and ivy in the fullness of summer.

I could never talk to anyone like this, he types.

Me either, you message back.

We really click. We should get married. Hahahaha, and he adds a crazy looking smiley face with uneven eyes. The impossibly young Girl has taught him a plethora of emoticons which neither of you quite get because it is a language of hieroglyphs for a different generation and you are just explorers, decoding.

You read and reread what the wrong guy has written and experience an aching pain; it is the ache of children you won't have with his intensity and artistry and beautiful ears. It is the ache of futility. The boyfriend is watching baseball as your heart contracts painfully, like the birth pangs you won't experience, the wrong guy holding your hand.

In three hours of not watching baseball, you've messaged the wrong guy about the unusual number of rabbits in his backyard and his fear that the Girl is not in love with him although he's convinced he's entirely in love with her, despite their age difference and that she only reads romance novels – at least two a year – and the way that she plays with him. You point out that she is feline, sweet and wanting undivided attention until she ignores you entirely,

walks away, sits in someone else's lap. You say that he is in love with the Girl but loves the girlfriend, on whom he is entirely emotionally dependent (except for, you don't say, his growing dependency on you), although he's no longer attracted to her. He says you don't understand but you think you understand more clearly than he'd like. You've debated if the term "in love" has any meaning. He says no, it is love or not love. You say "in love" is the time at the start of a relationship when you are actually insane, not really experiencing love. You imply that this is what is happening with the Girl, but skirt away from the issue because he is so sensitive, proving what you say, that this is insanity and not love.

You've quoted from *The Flame Throwers*, the book that you've both been reading, sending lines back and forth. "*That he simply found a girl he liked and incorporated her,*" he types. *Incorporated. I want to incorporate someone.* You type back, "*Enchantment means to want something and also to know, somewhere inside yourself, not an obvious place, that you aren't going to get it.*" You'd highlighted this as you read it, like a textbook, knowing that it was some sort of private missive, meant for both of you. *Do you think Rachel Kushner has been reading our messages?* he types. *She must be,* you type back. You know he is thinking about the Girl and not about how you are thinking about him.

You've made fun of baseball – it's so slow, how can people get so excited? – and he's laughed at the idea of watching sports – he doesn't have a television, can't be bothered with such mundane things – but told you about a time he went to a soccer game during the World Cup in France and how exciting it was, then, in person, like watching people have sex, not porn but real people having sex, almost as though they didn't know they'd left their curtains open to the street.

You've gossiped about a woman you both know at work that he's attracted to, who is predictably skinny and much too young. You've heard that she's dating someone from a different department. He says that whoever it is, he can get past that. You know his bravado is a joke, a way to feel better about the Girl. The young coworker is forgotten because he never meant it anyway; he really only wants the Girl whom he cannot really ever have – just as Kushner knows.

Speaking of Kushner, you've told him how the boyfriend likes motorcycles, explaining why it's so exciting to ride on the back of one – *imagine a huge vibrator, between your*

thighs and going sixty miles an hour? – and he says he's going to get one too, to win the love or at least the lust of the Girl.

And then you write *I love you*, even though he's the wrong guy, and the illicit Girl and the live-in girlfriend and the boyfriend – they are all just *wrong*, but you stare at it on the screen and you erase it before you hit send.

I see what you did there, the wrong guy types.

What? You flush, as though he could read what you didn't send.

You typed and then deleted.

The flush deepens and expands while looking up at the boyfriend who doesn't see at all. *So?*

No big deal. Type, delete. We can't always say everything.

Why not? You are only musing. You know why not.

Like that song – that guy who sings Your Body is a Wonderland?

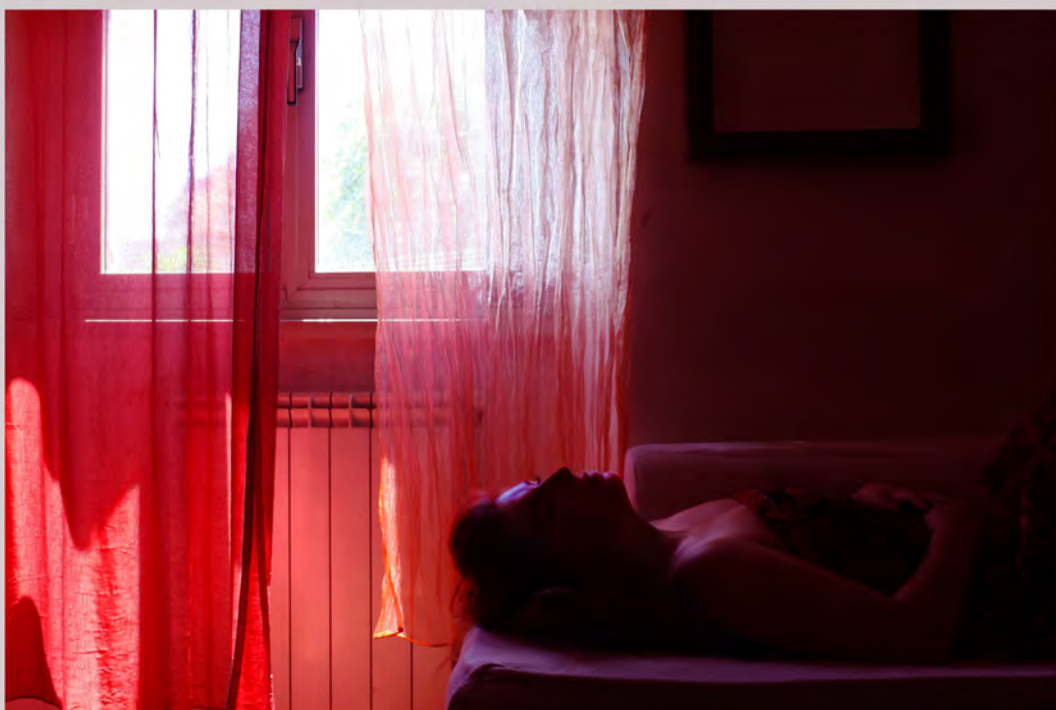
John Mayer?

Yeah. Say what you need to say. You hear the wrong guy, not John Mayer, sing it in your head, noting how he's emphasized the word need. What do you need?

I don't think I should.

If you need to say it, say it. Why not?

You sit and look at the screen on your laptop and over at the good boyfriend, lamenting the Mets losing in the gentle late summer rain. *Type, delete. That's why not.* ■



Rome is the City of Echoes
Gabrielle Montesanti

Stephanie

I.S. Jones

Because it is easier on the American tongue.
You: crown in the middle of the long syllabic history of my name;
when asked who I am,
I conjure you first because no one trusts a name they can't pronounce.

Because when I say my first name, it is threatened for the trash:
Don't you have a nickname or something?
It would make other mouths, skinny tongues,
comfortable if I stop holding onto what makes me a border.

Etymology: Grecian
Traded: English
Sold: American

little sailboat of a name to the shores of my mother's lips.
Leaving Nigeria with two shirts,
Mother sung America with a tongue fumbling its way to prosperity.

In callouses and thigh burns:
Father worked factory jobs.
dreaming in degrees,

Working towards his America.
Center of the Universe.
I come from a long line of people eating their past for another future.

My name was their first song about America.
I sing a different song: A history in the blood.
And what, little dark-skinned white girl, do you even know about Nigeria? ■

SelfPortrait as Derrick Rose's Knee¹

Julian Randall

All i do these days is swell
count the blood trapped
inside me slow to realize
its own jail puffy blues
tapestry of ghosts, i know
tear better than my own
name pray for the memory
of running stubborn flesh
weeping muscle, all i do
is swell complain about
blood silly fragile Black
boy forgot the rules
what makes you holy
is always thinner than
you would like
a curse on all my soft
and i couldn't tell you
who conjured it if i
tried i barely remember
what i was before the
ache and split and swell
maybe i was beautiful 🏀

¹Derrick Rose, an American professional Basketball player, tore his ACL in 2012

Texas, 1998

Greta Wilensky

Texas comes to the party already smelling of Fireball and cherry Coke, and I know we're going to have fun. In this memory we are sixteen and still wearing blue eyeshadow. She's got on cowboy boots even in July, and a denim miniskirt that skims her thighs. She hooks a tanned arm through my elbow and we dance in the backyard of a boy we half-know and won't remember. She wears a necklace of hickeys and I have seen her waiting out late for rides home from the bad part of town. Still I love her, because she smells like vanilla, because she tastes like pop rocks and I want to swallow her whole. This is the fall we will peel off our t-shirts on the Lincoln overpass during rush hour. My breasts will perk up in the October wind and Texas will laugh. *They love us!* she'll say, hair whipping her face, and I'll giggle and try to hide my shiver. This is the fall a boy in Wyoming gets swallowed by a pack of wolves. Texas grins at me with Coyote teeth. *Isn't that sad she says, but you know.* This is the fall I burn holes into the wrists of my sweaters and try digging to China. Texas stops brushing my hair at sleepovers, and all I can do is mourn. ■

Behind Closed Beaks

Ania Payne

The state bird of Arizona, the cactus wren, is an eight-inch, tobacco spitting, whiskey-drinking, foot-tapping con artist. He builds a slew of decoy nests between the prickly thorns of many desert cacti. He is the largest North American wren, and he knows this. Each morning, he flips over dried leaves with his beak, searching for braised pork loin with a balsamic reduction and roasted duck with raspberry glaze and chateaubriand, but finds only ants, beetles, grasshoppers, and wasps, whose wispy bodies he consumes in one swallow. He's learned that he can only rely on nature for practical things like insects and twigs, so he perches outside of Carrabba's Italian Grill, where the sous-chef feeds him bites of leftover lasagna and spaghetti braised beef and sips of wine from a mason jar lid. When he's in a good mood, he'll perch on the chef's arm, tolerating a series of bright flashes, "Say Cheese!" and screens pushed in his face. His patience and posture is rewarded with noodles drenched in alfredo and marinara sauces, but when he flies back to the nest, he has nothing to share with his mate and hatchlings, who wait with open mouths, mouths that only ever receive dry grasshoppers and beetles that get stuck in throats that crackle with dryness when the desert wind blows.

~

Arkansas' mockingbird was named by the early Quapaw, who called her *Cencontlatolly*, a word meaning *four hundred tongues*. Men are excited by this name, so she keeps her beak closed when they are near. As she flies, businessmen, garbage men, and fireman walk on the street below her, following her shadow as if attached by a string. Male birds stalk her at night, following her from rooftop to tree to pole. They primp and preen when she is around. Some bring her twigs and worms, hoping to swoon her; others try to force themselves on her delicate body. Once a month she feels lustful and chooses only the most well endowed male to accompany her

in the nest. Afterwards, cencontlatolly warbles loudly, impersonating the croaking frog below, or the neighbor's dog who cries during birth, or the squeaks of bedsprings that leak out of open windows late into the night. Her trills say: I am not a plagiarist, but a thirsty diva—will someone please refill my glass of chardonnay?

~

Michigan's American robin demands a more unique name for herself. She is patriotic with her red breast, but is vocal about her support for Spain's football team. The robin is the first to sing at dawn, but she sings blindly, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark. She is known to fly into fingerprint-stained dining room windows while groggy-eyed families are still bent over their bowls of oatmeal. When her neck cracks on impact, the inhabitants of the home gather her frail body and feed her a sugar water mixture with a medicine spoon. They say to each other, "We can fix this bird," but with 2ml, 6ml, 9ml of sugar water lodged in her throat, she chokes and suffocates, so they toss her limp body out with the rotting bananas. ■

Plan B

Noah Jung

Stemming from my
throat is the long

handle
of a kitchen knife, the one with ridged

edges on the blade. I pucker
my lips tightly,

so you won't
grab the knife

by where it could gut
small animals. Babies.

Stray
cats. This silence

saves. Water
slips over our hands

as we crouch near a faucet,
the wet

grass pressing
against our ankles

a scenic
illusion. I watch you,

quiet
and dark,

flexing your fingers
under the cold

rush of water,
trying to hold

in your hands Wednesday
night, dancers

with pretty hips,
a softness you're not

capable
of comprehending. You reassured

me at first, explained
it was how boys

resurrected
as men, girls were

sculpted
into women, and I, the letters

spanning from A to Z, could
metastasize. The

knife sleeps
child-

heavy in my
breathing.

I could have been loved in public.

The Muse Appears in Your Kitchen

Tyler Mills

Let's unbraid your hair, wet for bed,
and comb it loose. Let's talk like sisters.
See this photo? The pilot half stands –

summer making shadows
of the grains in his cheek.
His uniform pulls tight at the cuffs.

His sister's here, watching him
like a window pushed open, today
letting air in. He looks at you instead:

his eyes are hooks
inked with little feathers
of light. *See what I mean?*

his sister seems to say,
unscrewing a jar of pickles.
The runway blurs

at 110 miles per hour,
wheels lifting up above a snowy scar
the way the mind silvers, sad.

He's at his mother's house
on leave – where is she? *Mom*
he worries at the lens. *Mom?* 📷

The Girl Who Gets Gifts from Birds

Lenny DellaRocca

an erasure poem from an online Feb. 2015 BBC News article by writer and broadcaster Katy Sewall.

This is her most precious collection: small pieces of brown glass worn smooth by the sea, a broken light bulb, miniature silver ball, blue paper clip, yellow bead, faded black piece of foam, blue Lego piece sitting on the edge of the bird-bath. Each item a gift given to her by crows. Sometimes they give the kind of presents they would give to their mate — dead baby birds. This object is one of her favorites: a heavily rusted screw she prefers not to touch. *You don't see a crow carrying a screw unless it's trying to build its house.* Gabi's relationship with crows began accidentally, a kind of transformation. They understand each other's signals. The crows were watching her. ■

Playing Tornado | Jenny Molberg

The Great Mouth flicks its tongue
and drinks from me: its rootlet,
fingers half-hearted in the plains' dirt.
This is how I wanted to go,
winded, struck and drunk by sky. I am a staff
and the cattle are sea, a water-wall of black and white,
galloping V. But, this never really happens.

A furious beauty, my teacher says, looking through
the skylight that doesn't break.
The Great Mouth says I'm clairvoyant.
It's what I want to hear. He says I'll sing,
but I am no singer. Remember our game?

The haul of towels and dolls and Easter baskets
scattered across the lawn like limbs.
My sister's arms were propellers, her mouth
a fledgling's, drinking from the storm's open wormhole.

She received the greening sky as the needled face
of a prickly pear. I stayed inside. I was jinxed:
I'd seen a ghost, a girl on the merry-go-round;
I was sure she'd seen me. Sure some god
would dip his spoon of wind into the living room.
Sure he would take my body and make it his.

Take it, I thought. Take me, when I watched my sister cross
the street. And later, on the tree swing, when
the branch creaked, groaned, and in the split-second
before it fell, I saved only myself. I hate
this memory; the wind had come shouting
from her lungs, her asking eyes.

Later, I wrote my wish and slipped the paper
in the rubber neck of a green balloon.
That wish, to open the heart's airy cavern: no *more*
to *lose*. I held my broken promise in my hands and blew. ■

Review of Fatimah Asghar's "After"

Katherine Frain

Part I:

The first time I read *After* by Fatimah Asghar in the study room in the basement of my college my breathing went so crooked and so wrong the boys I was sitting with checked to make sure I was okay.

I've had this manuscript for forty-seven days and I still don't know how to talk about it.

Reading *After* is like having the conversation with a close friend about everything that's happened and everything that makes you afraid. Everything that makes you ashamed.

How do you define what's forgivable? Inevitably, there will be voices who are going to hate Asghar. "Dry" is my favorite poem in the work and it's about fucking a man who might be a rapist. It's about fucking a man who might be a rapist after his girlfriend's birthday party. It's about bruises on her throat. It's about not being bruised enough. It's about getting used to being held down. It's about needing violence. It's about violence.

But God, how I want her to hurt me. "sex with you should be painful". "Dry" reads and yes, this is the way an author should hurt me, the way plastic packaging should hurt when a knife goes through it. The poem is the technical equivalent of giving Thelonious Monk a bottle of whiskey and breaking his heart. I mean it's perfect, and it's going to inspire me for years, the way Monk inspired Komunyakaa.

It's so hard not to make this review about me. It's so hard not to answer Asghar's work with my own stories. There are nights when I'm lonely and sad and torn apart and the only people online are people I'm not sure I can ask to talk to me at 4:22 AM and that's what *After* feels like, the entire work, like me when I'm reaching out for someone I'm no longer sure exists in the first place.

“Playroom” embodies the emotional theme, the loneliness of a girl who sees herself reflected in nothing and owned by everything. The strongest work in *After* comes when Asghar rebels against form in the same breath as she rebels against all ideas of “should”; the lowercase letters, ampersands, and right juxtaposition of the stanzas tears apart all possible feelings of polished hesitancy that would have destroyed the intention of the work with a practiced smoothness. The language reflects the style; ‘tits’ in a poem from the point of view of a third-grader destroys any possible veneer of an appropriate life, a fiction Asghar will not sustain.

After is a chronological progression through Asghar’s sexualized life, and I say sexualized instead of sexual because the intersection of sexuality and violence with life – and its often unconscious coupling – is something women rarely get to choose. “Advice Given to Me in the 4th Grade” is the best example of the way Asghar herself feels silenced, her experience the parentheses between someone else’s words.

And the words themselves are almost universally unique and gorgeous. Although Asghar has an appreciation for spines and flowers I can’t share, it is quickly redeemed by the vital integrity and shock of every other moment. Asghar is fundamentally experimental; after all, “Pluto Shits on the Universe” was my introduction to her work, and it was and remains one of the most daring and innovative works I’ve seen *Poetry* publish this side of the century.

After succeeds most fully when Asghar stays true to that experimental vein, and the corrupted hints of forced love and sexuality sift to the top and shine in conjunction with a variable and perfect infrastructure.

Part II:

My editor wants to publish the review the way it is.

I protest. I think the review is too short. I think it doesn’t capture the way after I read *After*, I felt like I wanted to drink. Not whiskey: water. I don’t think the review I’ve written the first time around captures the way *After* makes me feel the wrong shape for my body, or how I took a thirty minute walk in the bitter New Jersey cold without a jacket, repeating lines from “Dry” to myself the entire time.

I’m thinking of the way *After* tap-dances with the blurred line between racialization and sexualization.

I've never had any boy call me exotic. I've never cared about the color of a boy's skin, never thought about crossing the borders of any country if there was some kind of sweetness I heard inside – "YOU: White boy or black boy or yellow boy or any boy not the color of me," Asghar writes in "Seeking Love." I'm thinking that I don't know this flavor of not feeling human.

We get a lot of misogynistic poems in submissions at *Blueshift*. Most nights, I clean them out ahead of time, before the younger readers can see them, because there are things teenage girls deal with too much. I've wondered if we would get so many if the editorial board wasn't all women and queer people and minorities. I don't know what kind of person looks at us and thinks that something like *Revolution John*'s "breakdown" is okay to submit. I don't know if it's ignorance or an intentional violence.

After has never had even the privilege of asking; Asghar knows that there is something in the culture here that sees her and her body as sexualized and disposable – it's hard to know where to put the *therefore* that feels like it should be inside this sentence. Reading Asghar makes me feel guilty for everything I've gone through and every time I've reacted to that wrong, for every moment of a culture that I'm ashamed of that I've been part of and every moment I haven't spoken up when I should.

And yet. Even though the power rests in the anger, the despair, the rage, *After* claims power. I can't forget poems like "Stank Face" and "Red" because to forget them is to surrender my own power, to wipe away the moments when Asghar – where women, especially minority women, who are so often overlooked in America – are fierce and powerful and immutable and true.

And yes, those moments rise in opposition to a culture that views women – especially minority women – as weak and shameful, but Asghar takes care to remind her readers that the rise can eclipse being pushed down. *After* ends in "Red" because Asghar ends in power; the reminder that nothing of being a woman is wrong, and nothing – not sexuality nor the body nor any cultural sense of weakness surrounding any aspect of womanhood nor racial identity – can change that fact. ■

Biographies

Brianna Albers is a poet, writer, and storyteller, located in the Minneapolis suburbs. A student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, she is currently studying psychology and the philosophy of literature. She was named one of the 30 up-and-coming writers under 30 by *Phosphene Literary Journal*. While her work can be found in *Guernica*, *Word Riot*, and *Winter Tangerine Review*, among others. She is currently compiling a collection of her poetry; her debut chapbook, *Why I'm Not Where You Are*, was a finalist in Where Are You Press' "Where Are You Poet" contest, and is forthcoming in 2016. She can be found at briannahopealbers.com, and can be contacted at briannahopealbers@gmail.com.

Sammi Bryan is originally from South Carolina though she considers many places home. She currently lives in Tuscaloosa where she is an M.F.A. candidate at the University of Alabama and an assistant editor for *Black Warrior Review*. Her work also appears in *Potluck Magazine*. How to sail, pick a lock, and keep a cactus alive are some of the many things she's learned and since forgotten.

Queens, NYC native Audrey T. Carroll is an MFA candidate with the Arkansas Writer's Program and graduated with a BA in Creative Writing from Susquehanna University. Her obsessions include kittens, coffee, *Supernatural*, *Buffy*, and the Rooster Teeth community. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Fiction International*, *Hermeneutic Chaos*, *So to Speak*, *Feminine Inquiry*, the *A3 Review*, and others. She can be found at <http://audreytcarrollwrites.weebly.com> and @AudreyTCarroll on Twitter.

Tom Cusano is a sophomore at Yale, where he studies English and works on various campus publications, including *The Yale Literary Magazine* and *The Yale Herald*. Last year, he won the English Department's J. Edward Meeker Prize for best freshman fiction submission. He grew up in Morristown, NJ.

Lenny DellaRocca has poems in *Poet Lore*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *2River View*, *Albatross*, *Seattle Review* and *Nimrod*. He has work forthcoming in *Chiron Review*, *The Potomac: A Journal of Politics and Poetry*, *Blue Fifth Review* and *Quail Bell Magazine*. His chapbook, *The Sleep Talker*, is published by NightBallet Press.

Anthony Frame is an exterminator from Toledo, Ohio, where he lives with his wife. He is the author of one book, *A Generation of Insomniacs* (Main Street Rag Press, 2014) and three chapbooks, most recently: *To Gain the Day* (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2015). He reviews books and chapbooks of poetry for *Weave Magazine* and he is the poetry editor at *The Indianola Review*. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming from *Rattle*, *Third Coast*, *Harpur Palate*, *The North American Review*, *Milk Journal* and *Verse Daily*, among others. In 2014, he was awarded an Individual Excellence Grant from the Ohio Arts Council. His website is www.anthony-frame.com.

Farah Ghafoor is fifteen years old and likes the way "poet" tastes in her mouth. She lives in Ontario, Canada where she enjoys smelling perfume samples and thinks she deserves a cat. Farah is a co-founder and an editor at *Sugar Rascals*. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Alexandria Quarterly*, *alien mouth*, *Whirlwind*, *Moonsick* and elsewhere. Find her online at fghafoor.tumblr.com.

Judy Hall is a writer and itinerant teacher of writing who has lived in such far flung places as Iceland, Sudan, Germany and New Jersey. Her MFA is from William Paterson University. She has been published in *Brevity*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *The Huffington Post* and many other places. Judy is also a fiction reader for *Literary Orphans*. Her as yet unpublished novel, *Max Runs*, was long-listed in the Mslexia Competition. You can read most of her recently published work at www.voluptuousmermaid.com.

I.S. Jones is an American-Nigerian poet located in New York City by way of California. She left all the California Sun behind in pursuit of poetry and the performance arts as a profession and life source. She is currently a TWH (The Watering Hole) fellow, holds an honorable mention from the Academy of American Poets, winner of the "Power Poetry" scholarship, and is a graduate student at Hofstra University. As a performance poet, I.S. uses the stage as a temple, a place of healing, to illuminate critical issues of race, gender, class, and overall societal disadvantages. When asked "What propels you to write and perform", she states, "I write because it is far too painful to sit in my silence" I.S. is a poet who is Black and loud about it while providing her audience poems that entertain and humble. She is currently co-editor at *Chaparral*, an online literary magazine. She is editor-in-chief of *Upcoming Hip-Hop*, a blog which spotlights and works with emerging hip-hop artists as co-host of a podcast *The Encore Radio Show*.

Noah Jung is a writer stationed in Hawaii. Their work has been/will be published in *Hobart*, *Words Dance*, and *Winter Tangerine Review*. Currently, Noah is a fan of indie RPGs, and thinks that Napstablook is kind of cute.

Cynthia Lee is a student currently studying at NYU, majoring in photography. She grew up in California, Bellevue, Beijing and Taiwan. Previously, she had her photos published in *Blueshift Journal* as well as some school or local magazines. In December of 2014, she had her very first solo exhibition at a clinic in Taipei. She had begun taking photos since a very young age but started taking photography seriously in her freshman year of high school.

Mia Leonin is the author of two poetry collections, *Braid* and *Unraveling the Bed*, (Anhinga Press), and a memoir, *Havana and Other Missing Fathers* (University of Arizona Press). In 2016, a new poetry collection, *Chance Born* will be published by Anhinga Press. A fourth collection of poetry, *Fable of the Paddle Sack Child* will be published by BkMk Press in 2017. Leonin has published poetry and creative nonfiction in *New Letters*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Witness*, *North American Review*, *River Styx*, *Chelsea*, and others. She teaches creative writing at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida.

Sandra Meek is the author of five books of poems. *An Ecology of Elsewhere*, forthcoming from Persea May 2, 2016, has been named a "Top Poetry Pick" for spring 2016 by *Library Journal*; her other books include *Road Scatter* (Persea Books, 2012), the Dorset Prize-winning *Biogeography* (Tupelo 2008), *Burn* (2005), and *Nomadic Foundations* (2002). She also edited an anthology, *Deep Travel: Contemporary American Poets Abroad* (Ninebark 2007), which was awarded an Independent Publisher Book Award Gold Medal. Recipient of an NEA fellowship, the Lucille Medwick Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Peace Corps Writers Award in Poetry (Meek served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Manyana, Botswana, 1989-1991), and two Georgia Author of the Year awards, Meek is director of the Georgia Poetry Circuit, poetry editor for *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, co-founding editor of Ninebark Press, and Dana Professor of English at Berry College.

Momina Mela is a Pakistani poet based in Lahore. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The New Yorker*, *The Lighthouse Journal* and *Cake*, amongst others. She currently serves as the poetry editor for *Papercuts Magazine*.

Tyler Mills is the author of *Tongue Lyre*, winner of the 2011 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award (SIU Press 2013). Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Boston Review*, *The Believer*, *Georgia Review*, and *Blackbird*, and her creative nonfiction won the *Copper Nickel* Editor's Prize in Prose and has appeared on the *Michigan Quarterly Review* blog. She is editor-in-chief of *The Account: A Journal of Poetry, Prose, and Thought* and an Assistant Professor of English at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico.

Jenny Molberg's debut collection, *Marvels of the Invisible*, won the 2014 Berkshire Prize and is forthcoming from Tupelo Press in 2016. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Missouri Review*, *North American Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *The New Guard*, *Mississippi Review*, *Third Coast*, *Best New Poets* and other publications. Molberg holds an MFA from American University and a PhD from the University of North Texas. She currently teaches at the University of Central Missouri and is poetry editor for *Pleiades*. Find her online at jennymolberg.com.

Gabrielle (Gabe) Montesanti is a recent graduate of Kalamazoo College, where she studied studio art and mathematics. As an undergraduate, she spent a term in New York City working for visual artists and completed her senior thesis in Rome. Currently she lives with her girlfriend in Bowling Green, Ohio, and she will begin an MFA program in creative nonfiction in the fall.

Kelly Nelson is the author of the chapbooks *Rivers I Don't Live By* (Concrete Wolf, 2014) and *Who Was I to Say I Was Alive* (Minerva Rising, 2015). Recent work has appeared in *RHINO*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Prime Number* and *Another Chicago Magazine*. She hasn't owned a car since 1999 and teaches Interdisciplinary Studies at Arizona State University. Find more at www.kelly-nelson.com.

Emily O'Neill was born on the bedroom floor in her mother's childhood home and has been making loud messes ever since. Her first collection, *Pelican*, won YesYes Books' inaugural Pamet River Prize and her recent work has been featured in *Cutbank*, *The Journal*, *Minnesota Review*, *Redivider*, and *Washington Square*, among many others. She has a degree in the synaesthesia of storytelling from Hampshire College and, when not selling sushi and sake bombs at a rock n roll izakaya in the Fenway, teaches writing at the Boston Center for Adult Education.

Frani O'Toole is a freshman at Yale University. She has work featured in *Polyphony H.S.* and *The Adroit Journal*, and she has been recognized by the National Young Arts and the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.

Ania Payne lives in the Northwoods of Michigan where she is currently pursuing her MFA in Nonfiction. She has or will be published in *The Rumpus*, *Whiskey Island*, *Foliate Oak*, *Third Point Press*, *Perspectives*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *The Milk Journal*, and more.

Julian Randall is a Living Black poet from Chicago. A 2016 Callaloo fellow and two time national college slam competitor, he traveled to the 2015 National College Slam (CUPSI) earning the title of Best Poet. He currently works as a teaching artist with the Philly Youth Poetry Movement. His work has appeared in *Winter Tangerine Review*, *The Killens Review*, and *Pluck! A Journal of Afrilachian Arts & Culture*.

Nicole Rollender's work has (or will shortly) appeared in *The Adroit Journal*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Best New Poets*, *Memorious*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *The Journal*, *THRUSH Poetry Journal*, *West Branch*, *Word Riot* and others. *Louder Than Everything You Love* is her first full-length poetry collection (ELJ Publications). She's the author of the poetry chapbooks *Arrangement of Desire* (Pudding House Publications, 2007), *Absence of Stars* (dancing girl press & studio, 2015), *Bone of My Bone*, a winner in Blood Pudding Press's 2015 Chapbook Contest, and *Ghost Tongue* (Porkbelly Press, 2016). She has received poetry prizes from *CALYX Journal*, *Ruminate Magazine* and *Princemere Journal*. Visit her online at www.nicolerollender.com.

Torrey is a freelance writer, an editor at Cogitate Studios, and an assistant at Spark Wheel Press. She received her B.A. in History and Writing, from Gonzaga University. A poet, writer, and editor, she was the 2014 winner of the Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Award in the category of poetry. Her poetry has been published in *Heavy Edit*, *Toothtaker*, and *Reflection Journal*. Her paper "The Rabbit Inside: Psychoanalysis in Donnie Darko," was chosen for presentation at the 2014 Spokane Intercollegiate Research Conference. She completed her M.A. in the Critical Theory and Creative Research Program at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon in 2015. Her thesis, "Quote Culture and the Community of Mind: Towards a Critique of the Quippie," focuses on specific modes of idealism and elitism in digital language use, in particular, the appropriation of quotations within social media as identity markers, belief signatures, and formulaic acts, and was chosen for presentation at the 2016 OCADU Conference in Toronto. Torrey currently lives in Omaha, NE.

Jordan Thompkins is a nineteen-year-old photographer attending Georgia State University for a degree in Marketing. He received first place in the color category for Shutter Sense's Photography competition and recognition by a local police department for a "No Texting and Driving" ad campaign. You can find more of his work on Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/87594069@N08/>) and Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/jordant.photography/>).

David Uzochukwu is an Austro-Nigerian visual artist based in Brussels, Belgium.

Greta Wilensky a seventeen year old writer from Lowell, MA. She was the 2015 runner-up in prose for the first annual *Winter Tangerine Review* Prizes and a 2015 Young Arts winner in short story. Her work has been published in the *Best Teen Writing Anthology of 2015* and *Souvenir Lit Journal*, and is forthcoming in *Alexandria Quarterly*, the *James Franco Review*, and *Bartleby Snopes*. Her work has been displayed at MoMA PS1 in NYC and in the Department of Education building in Washington, D.C.