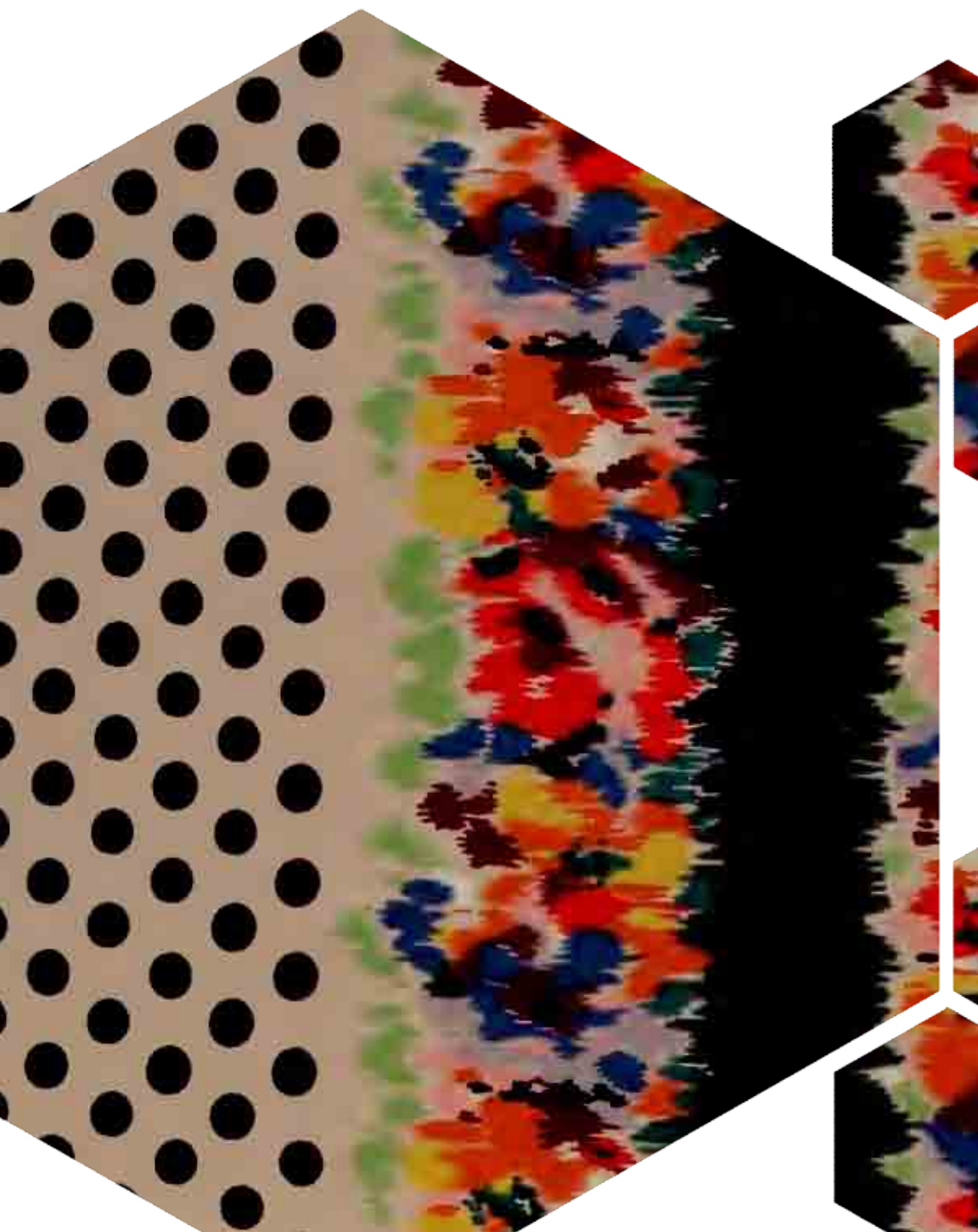


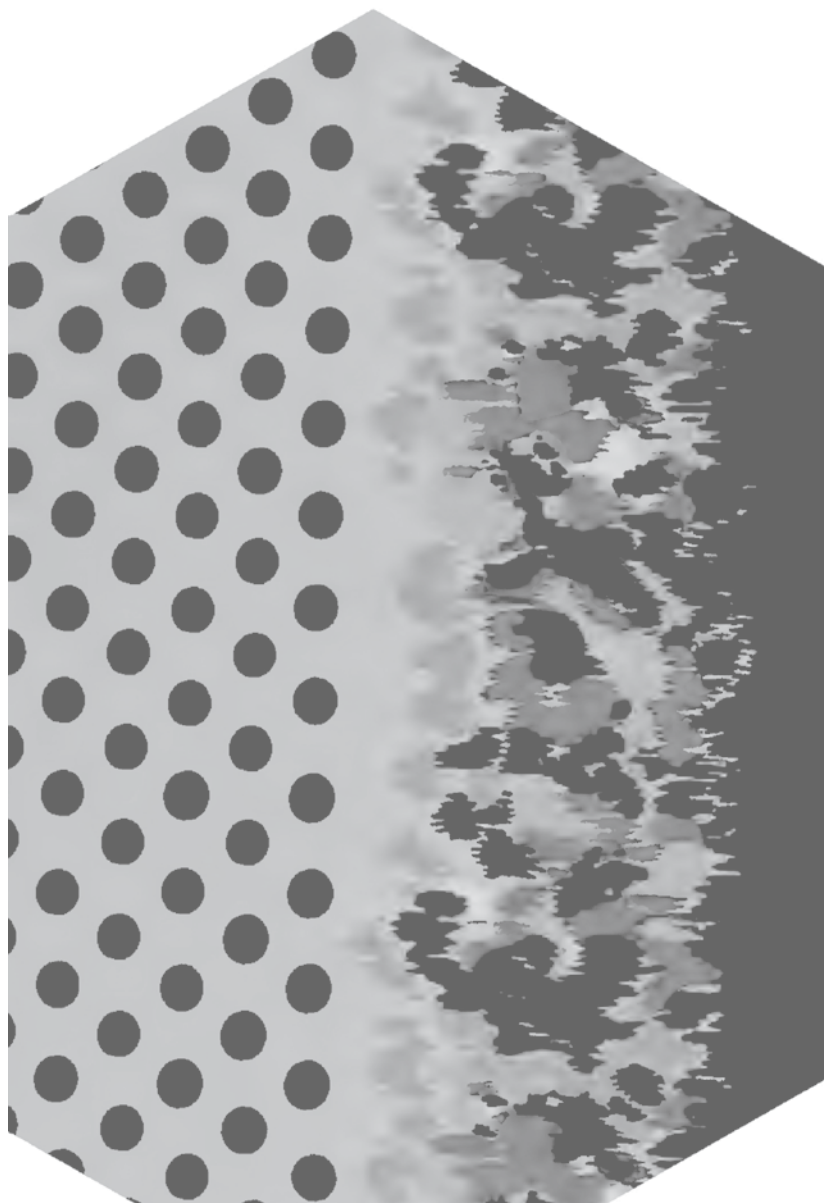
# SIXFOLD

POETRY WINTER 2020



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Sixfold is a collaborative, democratic, completely writer-voted journal. The writers who upload their manuscripts vote to select the prize-winning manuscripts and the short stories and poetry published in each issue. All participating writers' equally weighted votes act as the editor, instead of the usual editorial decision-making organization of one or a few judges, editors, or select editorial board.

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# SIXFOLD

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# Paula Reed Nancarrow

## Morning Coffee

In that bungalow where your dad and I slept  
on the ground floor, I would rise with care  
so the old farm bedstead did not creak.  
Take my coffee on the back porch,  
relish the few quiet moments  
I'd have to myself that day  
before I had to put on All My Roles  
the way Heidi must climb the mountain  
in dress over dress over dress.

I might sit ten minutes before  
a thud on the ceiling above me  
signaled you sensed awake energy,  
and knew you could beat your sister  
to it. Then I would swallow my solitude  
with the scalding caffeine.  
Hearing your feet on the stairs,  
rushing boy-forward into the open day:  
I'd sigh, and put my book away.

And there you were. Blond  
as my own childhood  
hazel eyes singing like wrens,  
wearing that blue reunion T-shirt  
that came almost down to your knees  
with your cartoon Pop-Pop on it.  
You'd climb into my lap, lay your head in  
the curve beneath my shoulder  
and we would be quiet together.

Once I looked down on those small legs  
dangling on either side of mine while  
the coffee cooled. *Remember this always,*  
I thought. So far so good. Though now you  
are tall, and your hair dark, and your legs



are hairy like Esau's. Now I lean my head  
against your shoulder. All My Roles  
lay folded between tissue in the dresser.  
Now no one I love sleeps upstairs  
Or ever interrupts my coffee.

# Hain't

My father's middle finger  
pokes me just below the clavicle:  
*You hain't going.*

His face is scrunched; there's spittle  
in the corner of his mouth.

I am sixteen. I have opinions.  
I am becoming uncontrollable.

All too soon men will find with their thumbs  
the knot between my shoulder blades  
where all my worries gather.

All too soon  
there will be new ways of influencing me:  
Less ugly, but perhaps more dangerous.

My father's middle finger says *hain't*.

# After Turtle Lake

*for Cathie*

Who can say why these things happen?  
My 2000 Toyota hit 100,000 miles on the way  
to Turtle Lake for your funeral. Zeros lined up  
like pineapples on your behalf  
but you weren't there  
to watch the coins spill into my hands.

“Life is short!” you told me. “Buy a horse!”  
I grip the sheepskin wheel cover  
think of your saddle pad.  
What was so important  
that we did not keep  
our coffee date last winter?

Farm equipment slow moving  
to the point of tedium.  
Double yellow lines.  
Where on that two lane trunk highway  
between Stillwater and Forest  
did I start reading the mile markers?

When did I begin to keep score?  
Birthdays in one column,  
funerals in the other—  
the rituals of death overtaking  
the rituals of life three to one,  
just as I was told to expect.

Why did the flowers smell like  
the opposite of garden?  
We sing “Morning is Broken.”  
We sing “Happy Trails.”  
The stories are all we take home.  
The stories, they stick to our bones.

# Mackerel Sky

*A mackerel sky can be used to forecast weather, but it is at the more challenging end of the weather lore spectrum. The simple bit is this: a mackerel sky of any kind means change is likely.—Tristan Gooley, The Natural Navigator.*

Birds open the day for business:  
the sky is not intended for fish. Morning clouds  
in long lines move across downtown

toward St. Anthony Falls. Scaled gray  
underbellies illuminated by the rising sun  
skim office towers and high rises

avoid the light display on the Target building  
where the puffer fish in the faint aquarium  
keeps blowing itself up. The clouds head off

to be fog on the Mississippi. Condense into what  
will soon be steamy air. For now it's cool.  
Birdsong sweeps the sidewalks. A rabbit

scuttles under the iron fence to loot  
my neighbor's lettuce. No sirens. On my balcony  
I watch fish swim in the sky as if

they owned it. Treetops wave like jazz hands.  
A man at the bus stop lifts a mask from  
his fast food uniform, clouding his singular face.

# Jill Burkey

## Mala

*a Buddhist meditation bracelet*

When Jupiter was out, I slipped  
it on my nightly wrist  
like a ring of stars  
reminding me that pain

isn't suffering if you accept it.  
With each breath I count, in and out,  
I'm snake, sea, wind, and night,  
alive again like blue trumpets

glorying in morning—  
who knows how they hold  
their vibrating shape, their liquid color?  
Silk petals papery as love

or is love the sturdier stalk  
that stands, waiting through winter,  
while beauty dissolves  
into the longing ground.

# Columbus Goes to the Moon

Last night my son told me  
if it weren't for the Dark Ages,  
Columbus would have landed on the moon  
instead of in the New World.

Tonight he says stars are so far away  
we can only guess their size  
by the color of light they emit.

I'm surprised by this and confess  
I always thought stars were the same size as planets,  
so I assumed they were just as close.

He smiles and gently explains we can only have one star  
in our solar system or it couldn't exist—  
another star would wreak havoc,  
and the closest star, besides the sun,  
is four light years away—  
twenty-four trillion miles . . .

I didn't think our sun a star,  
just as I don't think my son a man,  
yet both are plainly true.

I gaze at him, across the kitchen,  
and realize we are all alone.  
The stars chaperoning us each night  
are impossibly far away  
and we're just eight planets and their elements  
gliding around the one god  
we are all tethered to  
like children fluttering around a maypole.

I lean back against the black granite countertop  
flecked with gold and listen as he tells me  
blue stars are bigger than red ones  
but don't live as long  
because blue stars burn through their fuel faster.

Our sun, he says, will become a red giant,  
and will live a billion years.

The dishwasher hums its familiar refrain  
while questions spiral my mind.

He says goodnight and hugs me  
with arms tanned by the sun.  
I feel his blue cotton T-shirt, soft on my cheek,  
and wonder where we would be  
if the Dark Ages hadn't happened,  
or if our sun had consumed itself too fast,  
exploding into the vast darkness  
that surrounds us,

and I wonder how on earth  
we ever ended up  
right here.

# The Duration

I.

It's the time of lions and lambs,  
the time to beware the Ides of March,  
but little did we know  
how much we had to fear.

I promise to stop watching the news,  
but tune in to another pandemic press conference.  
I wrestle with distraction  
as I try to write and work from home.  
My family and I take hikes and walk the dog,  
who is oblivious to this slow-moving crisis.  
My daughter and I listen to her favorite playlist  
as we drive by packed grocery stores  
and empty downtown sidewalks.

Haven't we all secretly wished  
for the world to slow down?  
But now that it has,  
we can't accept it.  
We want to make a new wish.

My body misses yoga class  
and my head aches from too much  
wine and bad news.  
I'm scared to touch the mail,  
scared to breathe infected air.  
I don't want to be the one  
to make my family sick.

It's odd when the way to help  
is to stay home.

Our grocery list grows longer,  
and even if the shelves are stocked,  
I don't want to venture out.  
I find myself repeating  
my mom's and grandmother's sayings—



*Waste not, want not.*

*Prepare for the worst, hope for the best.*

I reuse tinfoil and plastic bags,  
bake and freeze banana bread instead  
of throwing brown clusters of crescents in the trash.

I think about my grandmother, who saved  
every morsel of food, no matter how meager.  
I think of how, in May 1944, my grandfather  
put her and their two small daughters  
on a train bound for his mother's in Lincoln  
before he shipped out with his unit for England.

The newspaper called my grandmother and her little girls  
the *duration guests* of her mother-in-law,  
a phrase I didn't follow at first,  
but now we find ourselves saying *for the duration*,  
because like World War II, we don't know  
how long this crisis will last.  
We must endure for the duration—  
endure not knowing how it will turn out,  
endure not knowing who will live or die.

Time feels slow and thick, but also like a pinprick  
because we're forced to remain firmly in the present—  
no such thing as making plans.  
With everything on hold,  
the whole world holds its breath.

With well over 100,000 hospitalized,  
44,000 dead, and 22 million unemployed,  
the pandemic is taking a toll, but seems smaller  
than what the Greatest Generation endured.

The numbers keep rising,  
we won't have a vaccine anytime soon,  
but birds still happily sing the dawn,  
trees haven't changed, except to slowly grow  
and thicken their buds,

and daffodils bloom bright yellow  
as if they trust the spring.

II.

We have entered the bleak midwinter,  
the dark December of the pandemic,  
losing thousands of lives a day,  
more than the 320,518 Americans  
killed and wounded in World War I.

I wonder what those soldiers would have given  
to trade their rubberized gas mask for one made of cloth,  
or their rat-infested trench for a tender home.  
Or would they claim, like some today, that being asked  
to mask and quarantine is too much sacrifice?

We conceived a vaccine,  
but do we have the will to stay home  
on Christmas Eve,  
the will to wear masks until immunity?

Christina Rossetti wrote  
these bleak midwinter words:  
*If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
Yet what can I give Him: give my heart.*

Who loves more—  
those who won't let a pandemic  
keep them from their loved ones?  
Or those who stay away  
in order to keep them safe?  
Is it two sides of the same coin?

If only love was enough  
to see us through the duration.

# New Year

I.

Snow nestles in crooks of branches  
of the bush outside my window.  
It rests on top of pine needles  
that found themselves stuck there, in limbo  
between the higher tree they fell from  
and the ground.

In the distance, a snow shovel scrapes pavement,  
its low growl trying to wake those who are sleeping  
on this foggy morning, the sky disorienting, yet tucking us in  
to this neighborhood, this street, this house.

Even though it's New Year's Eve,  
the snow and needles sit undisturbed,  
patiently waiting for nothing.  
Just being, just waiting.

II.

I start the car and watch snow  
fall like confetti in slow motion  
the way we fall through our lives,  
each flake's brief flight punctuated  
by gusts of delight and perilous dives.

My daughter emerges from the house,  
clarinet case in hand, backpack over her shoulder.  
Tiny snowflakes sparkle in the headlights  
and mix in the wind with wisps of her long brown hair.  
For a moment it seems as if she's surrounded by bits of magic.

We drive by quiet pastures on unplowed roads  
as the morning flushes towards dawn.  
It is the first day of school in the new year.

III.

I want to protect her from the perfectionism  
that pushed her to tears last night

when she tried to mend her torn clarinet book.  
I want to shield her from the terrible secrets  
of growing up. I want to fix the slight twist  
of her spine and the cyst on her wrist,

but the only thing I can give her this morning  
is silence, quiet as the snow,  
as she hovers, like the pine needles,  
between her childhood and adolescence.

IV.

We turn east towards the sunrise,  
and the blanketed world glows  
in muffled orange light.

We're the first car to venture down this lane  
and we see a trail of tracks on the snowy road.  
I can't help but wonder aloud  
who or what made the haphazard patterns—  
no straight lines when nothing's there to guide them.

She leans forward in her seat like a fledgling  
peering over the nest's edge and says,  
*The snow filling in the tracks  
is like the Buddha Board—  
it erases everything.*

Her words dissolve time,  
and it is just us,  
the snow,  
and the empty road ahead.

# The Two Hearts Inside Us

What is it like to be a root,  
to grow away from light,  
to dive deep into darkness  
hoping to find something good?

Is there any part of us that does the same?  
Some internal hero making it all possible,  
like the stomach, for instance,  
that churns what we give it  
into something useful  
the way a furnace  
creates warmth from coal.

What is it like to be a root,  
opposite of stem,  
helping beauty stand tall from far below,  
never to see the flower it feeds?

Thin, fibrous roots spreading like roads  
on a map through black.

Maybe they're like the two hearts inside us—  
the one that breaks,  
and the one that goes on beating.

# Oak Morse

## Hard as Teeth

i've come a long way from being a crippled tongue. i use every vein in my body to speak clearly, but it's like trying to snatch a cloud out the sky. but you choose to act like my words are so distorted. my darling, my words slid in your ears with ease when you wanted to get in my pants to make a fountain out of me. i understand your cravings, we all have them—mine was finding a companion, a woman who could make herself at home in my heart. but now all of a sudden everything sounds like clatter. you made your favorite word *what*, ran me over with it, and made a mockery out of me, even when the words flowed out like a symphony—played perfectly in unison. why use me? why use my speech against me? in this moment, i'm a frozen volcano and my darling, i own a heart and i would rather spend my time helping people than humiliating them when their imperfections shine bright in my face. i recommend you try going for *kind* next time. maybe in this moment, i need to as well. so i'll leave you with this: even though my speech walks on one bad leg, it gets the job done.

# Beatrix Bondor

## Origin

Every city has a scaffolding, a blue wood prism  
borne on the backs of bars riddled with flu germs  
and fingerprints. This is the jungle  
for city kids to swing through, a runway  
for parades of pigeons. This is everything.

This is the grime of progress at its purest,  
chewed gum and heart that sizzles  
over skyline. This starts here, under street-roofs  
with the roaches and their yellow shells  
like hard hats. New York isn't sorry

for inconvenience, light pollution outdoing the stars,  
because the constellations have already been named  
and the rooms, the source of this haze,  
are housing the namers.

# Infection

*“They slipped briskly into an intimacy from which they would never recover”—F. Scott Fitzgerald, This Side of Paradise*

Unlike all common intimacies, a strange  
hand’s subway pole brush, coins puddling  
into grocery palms with ridges still warm,  
eyes that latch, seeing a lone  
glove on the street and wearing it home,  
grateful for some wool  
to thaw the frosted thoughts.

For the rest of existence, we will shiver  
like fevered trees shaking off dew.  
It was that easy, that quick.

These encounters are terminal. These are the judgements  
unreserved. These belch into the skin  
and weigh it down behind the knees,  
below the eyes. These webs spread  
and stay for always. These are toxic,  
every line and dime coated in grime  
that cannot be scrubbed or steamed out.

Every life is a track of no’s  
and yes’s, a map of deliverance.  
that we will not elect to unremember.  
Our temperatures will only rise, only swelter  
over stone, our words and our sounds  
trailing smiles and cement.

Only this “yes” and the space  
it used to fill, the mold poured and left to harden.  
Only this pinpoint, this place  
we will forever trace in human hands,  
only this route, our universal coordinates, our crease.



# Autopsy

A lock of Lincoln's hair sold for eighty-one thousand.  
What will they want next? My treasures:  
    toenails, toothbrush, pen,  
    vocal cords, book spines, clock faces, cups,  
    calves, marrows, cells  
spread and pinned and borne before  
posterity.

    This house, divided,  
can be yours in pieces. Claim one,  
quickly, so that even when I perish  
from the earth, somebody will possess  
me, press me  
near and whisper "*mine.*"

# Engine Ode

I dream electric and even in my sleep bow to the buzz.  
With a sharpened scalpel, the mind commands,  
can splice, like human genes, the continent.

We hunger for surgeons, language operators,  
the suprasternal notch, thrummer, beater,  
tambourine of heart that splits  
each collarbone (this is worship), large and deep  
enough for a swallow (of wine) to sing.

At fifteen, I dreamed in stone.  
The days sprawled on sandy lawns,  
lay in wait of rain,  
spread massive feathered wings,  
like cygnets that do not touch in flight.  
No airborne creature can be bound.  
There were no collisions.  
Gulfs divided the days. I would press  
one palm to Yesterday, one  
to Tomorrow, a figure suspended.  
I waded into each night,  
basked in every deep blue pool.

Tomorrow spills  
across the dinner table, soaking the carpets.  
Yesterday flings herself into my lap,  
demanding kisses and crossing, tossing  
one stockinged calf over an opposite knee.  
Tomorrow has miasmal halitosis.  
Yesterday prefers a chardonnay, Tomorrow cold gin,  
their twiny legs hooked together.  
All the days want to speak at once and do.

I dream electric. I want  
to unwind Today's intestines,  
to send the trains, distill  
and taste essence.

Within every cat is a small, purring engine.  
Beneath my chin, I trace the small hollow.  
My human throat rumbles on its own.

# Requiem

*"I am one of those who will go on doing till all doings are at an end."  
—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*

Each cool morning must have run out of doings,  
the Viennese stones beneath him warbling,  
papers heated in a frenzy for fingers  
and the scratching quest of quill,

doings rolling around his wooden floor like dice  
with rounded corners. Uncommitted,  
he could have lived at a window  
where the streets trembled in buttery light  
and mid-afternoon scribbles.  
Knots hardened in his muscles and notes.

"Today, I will," he may have promised: he would chuckle,  
sneeze, scamper through a tavern, rest both elbows  
on a table, learn something by heart, prove,  
wake, conduct, bite from a steamy strudel,  
bathe, untangle, straighten the wild spine,  
set eyes and fingers upon at least six different shawls,  
a symphony of doing.

How strange it must have been to dawn  
on the day of his very last doing.  
At last, a gleaming concerto whispered from him,  
cutlery and candles shining in evening splendor beside soups,  
folded napkins, and the silence of space to be filled.  
Or maybe just a sigh, the doings  
having finally all been done,  
leaving future composers without  
feats, melodies, or even a rest.

# Monique Jonath

## how i cried anyway

my father and i do not look alike  
at first glance, but

we have the same scar on our chins  
from falling off our bikes and

leaving a bit of ourselves behind,  
red bifurcating again and again in the cement,

so strange to imagine how our skin  
closed hastily, unevenly

(easing pain is not the same  
as making smooth again).

later, meteors dragged their pale fingers  
across my thighs,

so strange how scars can also  
come from the presence of something,

and how i cried anyway,  
imagining acid etched down my face,

sometimes falling asleep with  
my palms pressed to my ribs,

something subliminal welling up—bitter—  
in a dream,

and how i woke up spitting onto my pillow.

# a mi sheberach

*The Mi Sheberach is sung at Jewish religious services,  
a prayer for healing.*

for so long, i wanted to be pink,  
like my tights, like the ribbons,  
soft and satin.  
i wanted to fit just right,  
like blush fastening itself to my cheeks  
and forehead when it's the middle of the night  
and the sun still burns in the air,  
like the last drops of afternoon sliding  
off the clouds to follow it.  
i wanted to be girl, to be sweet,  
to be rose without thorns,  
to be dress, to be pure.  
i resented red in all her brashness.

i burned myself ironing a blouse  
and now pink looks at me with sad eyes  
scaly and rough and  
now i want to be wood  
to be leather to be coffee no cream no sugar  
i want to be earth  
to be earth  
to be earth turning umber where i have spilled blood a  
renewal of body  
but i know that when pink  
has turned brown again  
my body will not forget  
the shape of the wound

# African Mask in a European Art Museum

I was born slowly, over  
the course of several days,  
my body pulled out of a block of wood.

Though I did not cry,  
someone held me against their face  
and passed sound through the

keyhole of my stiff,  
full lips.  
We did this for years,

dancing outside and  
growing flecked with red mud  
in the rainy season.

I was the shroud for the living,  
a face that did not change  
as I passed from mother to daughter.

We could have gone on for  
centuries like this  
but now I sit in a well-lit room,

unable to blink away the blinding white,  
a red stain behind my chin a reminder;  
someone used to press life

into the cupped palms of my cheeks,  
and now mine is the  
head mounted on the spike.

# Imitations

I've drawn a lot of crescent moons lately.  
They litter the margins  
of my notebooks, ink seeping  
into paper and taking root  
(perhaps when I flip back through  
there will be flowers).  
I carve them out of air with dancing arms  
(how many times do you have to carve  
something before it becomes real?).  
I tuck them behind my ears, as  
they hide in the coils of my hair,  
whispering to me about yesterdays.  
I like to think that dreams are woven from  
the moonlight that describes your face at night,  
scenes molded from the pooling silver in  
the coves of your closed eyes.  
I trace them onto your shirt,  
sliding my fingertips until  
your back is a map of tonight's  
sky, or at least of what I can see from  
here, my head continuing into  
your chest continuing into the picnic blanket.



# Mwape Ntesha

We do not talk about it.  
Silence can be what you make of it.  
She died before I was born  
and they gave me her name.

The kind of silence born of grief can span continents, you know,  
and in it I wondered about her.  
Every name from my mother's side is embroidered into the veins  
where mosquitos dip their needles to drink.

I thought of her and  
each red welt that swelled and unswelled was a fight I had won  
against the mosquitos and their poisoned beaks.  
I did this for several years.

Her red sores only spread,  
the consequence of the first man she ever trusted.  
I heard several years later about  
this invisible beast that couldn't be crushed by newspaper or  
fingertips.

He was the last man she ever trusted,  
then she succumbed, before I was born,  
to a beast that back then could not be crushed.  
We do not talk about it.

# Lisa Rachel Apple

## Bounty

As if lynching's strange fruits and the rapes that devour  
dates and the serial killers popping their victim's  
eyeballs like grapes weren't bad enough I know  
now there is violence even in this vegetarian's  
kitchen. The world makes monsters of us all. I too  
must cast my breadcrumbs into the flowing bodies  
of water for even I have peeled the eyes off a potato,  
gnawed on an ear of corn, broke through the smooth  
skin of a plum and carelessly bruised an apple. I'm sorry  
to say I have crunched through heads of lettuce and, with  
pleasure, slurped the juice that pools on the flesh of an overripe  
peach. I know now it's true: no one really gets through  
life without doing damage. Just yesterday—let me confess  
to you this one more—just yesterday my incisors sliced  
through a mild-mannered artichoke's bland, blameless  
Heart.

# Shrugging Jesus

Whose arms you think  
Are open to you but  
Really he's saying,  
*Boy, I don't know. Who  
Did do the dishes last night?*

Shrugging Jesus says, *I've never  
Seen a less lovely sunset*, upon looking  
At your painting,  
But has no more specific critique.

He wants to play in the  
Waves but not be  
Photographed doing so. He wants  
To adopt a dog but oh, too much,  
The responsibility.

Shrugging Jesus will recycle if  
The pickup is curbside, will compost  
If he's passing on the road  
To the farmer's market drop-off. He'll deliver  
A sermon on your soul, shepherd  
The offering money into his hand-sewn pockets,

Give it all to the bum who was  
Yesterday picking scraps from Murphy's  
Garbage, today strewn out  
On the corner, asleep and half

A man. Not because he's good.  
But because oh, the weight  
Of those coins  
was too much  
For shrugging Jesus  
to carry.

# Unprimed

*After Unprimed Canvas 1944-N No. 2 by Clyfford Still*

They used to sketch on cave walls,  
bump of rock forming the hump  
of a buffalo's back. Slapping  
bloody handprints onto the stone  
to celebrate a successful hunt.

Centuries later, on church ceilings,  
so eager to create they'd paint  
over what was already there.  
The rust-colored stain of hundreds  
of winters worth of water damage  
became an angel's crown. A clot  
of paint in a corner became a spire on heaven's castle.

Now, people gravitate  
towards only the primed canvases,  
gliding past the rooms of shell mosaics  
arranged on driftwood, not even glancing  
at the shovel suspended from the ceiling.

But in one corner of the room  
hangs an unprimed canvas. Deep, splotchy green  
it challenges, *who declared our surface  
must be smooth even as our souls are cracked?*  
People stand and stare at the sterile and bright  
seascape next to it as all the while it dares you to look,  
whispering, *who says  
we cannot love  
what is raw?*

# City Folks

1

We are city folks,  
all of us,  
waiting for the deer to cross our path.

We are,  
all of us,  
slightly in love with and slightly afraid  
of their tangle of horns, umber skin,  
suppressed muscles and cautious eyes.

We clump on the path as they  
pass—nose in air and nose to tail—  
single file, orderly, and silent—the ideal  
elementary line.

2

I learned, in school deep back,  
how Nacotchtank hunters bowed a deer once,  
followed the blood spatters as the deer ran, watched,  
still, as the deer lay down to die.

I imagine the hunter laying their hand on the deer's cooling hide.  
I wonder what it would be like to feel the last phantom pulse of  
the majestic dead.

We read this in a grainy packet  
fastened with a staple that was too weak to clasp on the finished  
side so  
when I turned the pages I'd sometimes prick my finger.

We were told the Algonquians used  
every part of the deer—hooves, marrow, hearts.

I'd like someone to watch over me as I curl up  
by a muddy creek and bed in the trampled grass.

I'd like to think that every part of me—fingertips, arches  
of feet, blades where shoulders meet back—might be of use.

3

My body is asleep and too often  
still. Sometimes I lie on my floor—  
windows open in all seasons—  
place my hands on my belly,  
and breathe in time with the garbage truck's yawn.

But we are,  
none of us,  
breathing now.

Committed to the fine art of not startling  
these precious deer, these  
excessive deer, who overrun parks and starve  
without enough weeds to fill around.

# It Won't

*After "Happy Anniversary" by David Lehman*

You've been sober  
three months  
I think that's  
significant I do why  
three is the number  
of months it takes  
all the leaves to drop  
once they've changed from  
green to red it's  
the number of lights on a  
traffic light the number  
of lives you changed the night  
you ran that light while still  
drunk the number of months  
it takes me to fall  
in love with you again after you  
come home saying, "I promise,  
it won't happen again."

# Gillian Freebody

## Prey

Insatiable and incensed, night tracked us  
as it always does, its scope unstable but poised,  
crouched on hind legs in the highest branches—  
a deadly reconnaissance welcome in its regularity,  
but weighted now with the inconceivable notion  
that one day soon it may not be, and *then what?*

But the brain, in its impeccable muscle machinery  
will not let us dawdle there,  
and which one of us would, our mutual ambitions  
rushing in a torrent toward the charred horizon  
like a hemorrhaging, bestial herd let loose  
in a landscape torn from the radar, ripped  
free from any recognizable topography  
in a Darwinian map of  
*every man for himself.*

Like the persecuted Jews, we waited,  
armed with nothing but our instinct to survive,  
adrenaline bucking our nervous system  
like Narcan, a holding-your-breath intensity  
that never relents but instead explodes  
in your veins like atomic energy, that same  
mushroom cloud smoke camping out  
in your lungs, settling into the marrow,  
claiming ownership.

We knew only to mask ourselves—  
a parade of educated people  
knowing nothing—breeding fear  
like the sexless mammals we were—  
for how could we touch when our own skin  
was shedding its poison, toxins shimmering  
like halos around each of us, an impossible barrier,



a noose of false security that could strangle  
or save, and *which one? And why?*

And in this stagnation, we settled, phones silenced,  
our voices choked with smoke, the trees  
speaking for us, the birds still alive, the cardinal  
bending its head to a puddle, its feathers  
the red of the blood still beating beneath our skin,  
the color we would see if the world swings its sights  
our way, catches us in the crosshairs and bears down,  
a reticule so precise in its target precision,  
we'd shine brilliantly for the briefest of moments  
before the final curtain fell.

# Single Motherhood

Time sends us far offshore this summer,  
catches us watching the morning glory climb,  
clipping back those that fall victim  
to the unforgiving heat, those eaten through,  
those refusing to flower, drawing a line  
in the sand that remains absolute.

And, shockingly, in spite of  
my inept efforts with water and waiting,  
the wine-colored vines double over,  
reach up to encircle the makeshift lattice,  
curling and climbing with a beauty  
that is far more than I deserve.

Thickening as they ascend, they adopt  
others, open arms to collect the fragile  
ones without an anchor, blowing about  
like angel's hair. I tuck them into the stronger  
stalks, and the next morning, they have settled  
there, already looking up, finely veined leaves  
and delicately wrapped wings folded patiently  
before the pinnacle performance, the much-needed  
revelation of their vibrant bells tolling  
this season's hymn of forgiveness  
for being only one person, one rock  
on unsteady ground, one fragile young girl  
trapped in a much older woman's body,  
a masquerade of bravado that shatters  
when spying two saucer-shaped sets of eyes  
in the rearview, gauging me for tears,  
signs of breakage, all that causes a doubt  
that floods the back seat like a deluge.

Those wide eyes have watched every flower take root,  
twine its course up the ladder we built  
with our own battered hands,  
grow veins of such resiliency, I wish  
they curved beneath our own thin skin,  
multiplying, reaching, wrapping around each other  
so many times, their late August lights  
guide us home like a beacon  
I once thought I could become.

## Sold As Is

The pencil-sketch measurements—  
height in inches and years  
mapped out in erasable hash marks  
I cannot erase.

The lightswitch plate  
hand painted with clouds  
mid-glide in a sky as blue  
as blood beneath the skin.

The window screen with holes  
punched through to let bugs in  
or the sparrow trapped on the porch  
the day we moved in, frantically  
throwing itself from wall to wall—  
wings thrashing, feathers  
tornadoing in fractals of light  
bathing the greenhouse  
in just enough heat to nourish  
new growth.

The Rose of Sharon  
bending towards each other  
and breeding profusely,  
branches entwined like hands—  
fingers curved into each other  
to create trellises so heavy  
with buds, I must tie them back  
to keep them off the ground.

The bushes needing tending,  
the autumn roses climbing the fence,  
the chips of red paint flecking  
the back stairs, the cracked wrought-iron  
railing whose rust stains the hands,  
even the mice whose ravaged bodies  
I must dispose of, the cat on proud

parade, blood on the carpet  
that will never come out.

The bathtub resists the drain,  
the oven has given up the game,  
the furnace breathes into  
a crystal clear vial that must  
be treated like a king  
or the sediment will leave  
us belly up in the dead  
of winter.

And the 2 a.m. shock of a baby  
who won't eat, my head lolling  
on the couch in the wake  
of a violent birth, her tiny body  
torn from me like a bone from  
its socket, a permanent dislocation  
that howls in its emptiness,  
a hunger beyond satiation.

A picnic under the table,  
the sunlight stretched across the floor  
at midday, the sound of little feet  
running down the stairs  
to find me secretly writing  
in a corner of the porch.  
The slam of the screen door,  
the precipitous drop to the back yard  
that makes mowing an impossibility,  
the rocks we painted with the words  
LOVE HOPE FAITH  
in watercolor paint that doesn't  
run, the wildflower shoots  
the deer have gobbled up, the stones  
slick with rain and glistening, the spider webs  
catching the first light of dawn

and the sign in the front yard,  
jackhammered in, leaving a gaping hole

to be patched afterwards,  
a cavern of darkness I no longer possess  
or can claim as my own.

# The Human Condition

My daughter cries herself to sleep,  
yearning desperately for something  
that has no name, no identifiable  
characteristic, no tangible being.  
What can I tell her about an ache  
I know so well, it has grown  
like a membrane with cell structure,  
multiplied and manifested, magnificent  
in its tenacity and *thereness*.  
I wear it as a second skin that has no  
molting period. It flakes and peels  
but reforms, an incredible feat  
of science, a resilience that knows no  
bounds. But it has also  
wrapped her inside, cradling her  
like a seed that has sprouted  
and is pushing at the seams,  
its blooms so imperial in their violet  
shade, crimson veins seep through  
where our blood has mingled  
and pooled triumphant.  
I tell her this and her silence  
echoes in a cacophony of familiarity.  
She will grow into the emptiness,  
the space of a need so great,  
it deafens all else. But in its  
regeneration, its reality, its residence  
in her soul, there will be soil  
in which to plant, seeds  
that will bear fruit.

## This Precious Vessel

*You're such a hippie*, she screeches,  
not disguising her disgust, turning her head  
away as my naked reflection flutters  
across her full-length mirror, illuminated  
by the finest, most delicate fairy lights,  
stickers for New York, Los Angeles, Seattle,  
*anywhere but here*,

tiny plastic babies she bought to make earrings,  
spectating now like a twisted strip-club audience  
or reminder of all those who slipped through,  
the hundreds who missed the mark, a wide-eyed girl  
with Monosomy16, a sandy-haired boy  
with Down's, cursing me, eyes burning into  
the slash-mark burrowed in my belly,  
their frozen mouths screaming in the silence:

you were broken, old, exposed for so long  
to the chemical wardrobe of the world  
and you still bleed, leave us all  
in the swirl of sewerage, our half-formed  
hearts racing towards you, calling from a universe  
of possibility that once twirled in your mind  
like a carnival wheel, looping in its insistence

like the night the chain on the swing broke,  
snapped like that fist of bone in my spine,  
exploded into shards with points like daggers  
dancing down my spinal canal,  
flirting with the cord, asking it out for a drink,  
then sulking when denied, rubbing  
against the cilia before finally resting in a pocket of forgiveness  
at the base of everything that allows movement,  
makes mind to muscle a reality that still exists,

the EMT saying, *Can you feel this? Can you feel this?*  
*Can you feel this?* An eighth of an inch  
of a winter midnight flying by the window,



the bellowing of the siren so high-pitched,  
when he asks me my full name,

I cannot be 100 percent sure  
but ask instead, *Can I still have a baby  
with a broken back?* Who is the president?  
What month is it? *What is your full name?*

And before, naked, putting makeup on on the floor,  
she glances in the doorway. *You have such a beautiful back*  
and then the phone call that severs the night,  
my arms and legs strapped to the table, my neck  
paralyzed in its immobilization shroud, the needle  
drilling into my toes like Jesus with a jackhammer,  
the nurse running to grab a chair as she slips  
down the wall, her head between her knees,  
*Stay with me, Stay with me, Stay with me.*

Years later, the railroad stitchwork on my spine  
has softened, so when she recoils at the source  
of her birth, I turn to show her the street  
I walked the first time, the ladder I used  
to pull myself out of the chasm of chaos  
before conception, the same winter day  
she dug her heels in and took root, a mere shadow  
of an idea I pulled inside my body  
like oxygen.

# Kirsten Hippe-Rychlik

## and we are echoes

### I. Mother of Mothers

---

It is not a mother's place to live longer than her child—this our Mother Earth grinds into our hearts and wombs—there is an order and a place to life and death. We have learned this, the mothers, not from watching the ways of living, but from the imprint of our goddess Evolution on our cells, our brains, our flesh. It is known.

---

I began to think of her as grown, my daughter, who roamed the earth as if all of it was hers to keep, and gathered all its children in her arms—

She was a mother in her own right before she ever bore the children she and I would love with fierce attention, grinding them into the stony fire of the ground and pulling them, arms limping, to the boundless sky.

It was hard, even when she was seventeen and still a child, still a babe of this trial, to remind myself she was not so ferocious as her wilding hair, not so boundless as her deepest dreams, and so I made her thus: I left her growing, simply growing, on her own. When she called our satellite phone to say, so calm, *the house next door is burning*, I was not surprised. When she ran across the earth in 1989, out of reach of landlines and barely held by letters, I knew her to be extraordinary. She was everything she wanted to be and she was okay, floating on the waves of change as if she had called them there herself.

And so it becomes, this turning in the end of my long life lived, that I endure the noticing

only now of what I knew in my womb: she was drowning. She is my daughter, after all, and so what she hid from her own children peaked out the edges of her mouth as she said good-bye those nights, to drive her family home through the snow and bitter air, her breath condensing in the ways I knew myself of sadness, boundless and despaired.

Her daughter returned her ashes to the earth,  
and so I salt it with my tears.

## II. Mother of Daughters

---

It is not a mother's place, to lose her child. This is the agony of motherhood, the knowledge of the way of life and the knowledge of the way of genes. The one which tells us we can lose them, and the one that tells us we must not. It is this we know, with our blood and bones and milk: our lives are their protection. And if we break upon the rocks of life, we must pray, and pray, and pray.

---

I tried to tell my daughter for years I was breaking.  
I told her the way I tell her everything:  
*Just in case.*  
*Remember.*

I know that it will come for me but I don't know when.  
I hear it on the edges of my love for her, so I place  
a finger across my lips, and whisper shush.  
*Not yet.*

I lived everything I wanted to, and then I made her.  
I gave her a heart, and lungs, and brain.  
I gave her my curly hair, and thin fingers,  
and slightly longer second toe.  
When she was born, I gave her my eyes,  
though she did not keep them.  
They filled with melanin, to turn them green.  
But I love them still.

I gave my little baby my blood and bones and milk,  
but I will not give her *this*—my sadness I put on dialysis.  
I filter it out before it can ever reach her mind  
that is quite so small and young,  
it would drink it like a starving bee.  
I know this, and I pick it out of the air—  
sugar spun, crystallizing and sticking to my fingertips.

Now she is eleven and everyone says she is wise,  
and I am sorry, but I could not stop  
my answers when she asked me  
why I was sad when she was four.

Her eyes were a child's eyes and they were still blue—  
they could read the truth before she knew the letters,  
and so I am sorry, but I could not stop  
from showing her my fingertips so dark and sticky  
as if I had dipped them in a pot of ink and left them out to dry.

She is eleven now and everyone says she is wise,  
but I know better. She learned how to lie,  
so now she does not notice when  
I hide this book as she comes in the room.

Now I can tell her  
*Just in case.*  
and pretend I do not know how soon I will be gone.  
I tell her how to live without me  
*Just in case.*  
and I worry she drank too much of my sugared  
sticking sadness, so I tell her:  
*It always gets better.*  
*Remember.*  
*It always gets better.*

But still my fingerprints stain her cheeks as she cries.

### III. Daughter of Mothers

---

It is a daughter's place, to live longer than her mother. To step along the footsteps of her story as it fades from the earth. We have learned this, the daughters, from our mothers' lips, as they tell us of the world. We know this, and we press against and into them, we leave and then return to them, forever in the knowledge of our coming grief.

---

I am a holder  
of many gifts,  
and many traumas,  
passed from mother to  
daughter, to mother again  
in this line of giving that stretches  
from the dampened dirt of burials and  
the dusted ashes of cremations, to the  
soles of my feet, planted flat upon this  
earth. Those secrets of deaths and  
destinies that I hide within my  
weary chest were born by  
mother and daughter  
before me, before you,  
before us. They whisper to  
me the rites of love, as I honor  
the mother of my own body, the  
giver of life and death who joined them  
all too soon. They whisper to me the rites of  
death and living, in the rending memories of all  
their number. It is all those who lost their mothers  
and daughters who tell me that this is *the* agony.  
And so they welcome their newest spirit, come  
to them in all the love of mothers who  
embrace the heart of breaking, who  
set their bodies in the way of loss.  
I hold this, even as she leaves us,  
her daughter, her mother,  
to stand alone in the  
swirling dust of  
losing her.

# Devon Bohm

## Careful Cartography

The first time I died was in my mother's belly.  
They had to scrape me out of her  
like they were emptying a cantaloupe  
of all that was good to eat.

-

They found me still alive.  
They found me screaming.  
I splattered my father's glasses with blood  
and he fainted, pitched down hard  
to that mess of linoleum  
and whatever viscera came with me.

-

I didn't mean to hurt them.  
But I am not someone who was born knowing  
words like dishonor  
and no matter how many books I devour starving  
I have always spit out that pith, those seeds.

-

I wanted to grow up to be a Cartographer,  
but I ended up a writer.  
My maps are harder to follow,  
and heavier to read,  
but they are still trying to lead us somewhere better.

-

Even before I was born, I had to command attention.  
I won't pretend to remember, remembrance  
is too precious for that, but I can imagine.

I stopped my own heart.

I am the kind of person who will always find a language to suit her.  
I have been me, the hollow place for the conversation,  
all communications, to echo,  
long before my tongue grew in.

-

I studied maps before I learned how to go anywhere.  
It has never been about going somewhere.  
All of you who crave exquisite, exotic adventure,  
I have a secret to tell:

you'll still be there, wherever you go.

This makes all places the same,  
and if you're happy, home.

I wasn't born happy.  
I was born as I am:  
with the careful cartography in my veins aching for home.

-

I have kept dying the way I've kept reading:  
like a plough whose furrows hope to dig deep enough to seed.  
Herbs, flowers without thorns so the bees can make me honey,  
can pollinate, so more can blossom, quicken, grow.

I am not dying just to get your interest,  
I am dying because sometimes maps are not enough.

-

No matter how uncharted the voyage, I have made it this far:  
alive and still screaming.



I will never mean to hurt you, but  
I have places to be and I have to find a way to speak them.

It is the way I was born.

# Gardening

I.

Dirt is so many shades Give me: bole,  
sepia, fallow, fawn, sienna burnt umber  
tan, russet, redwood taupe, buff, ochre, mahogany

I let them fold into me, digging my hands in  
little hand spades  
I am not gardening, I am burying

I want to make the world grow but I haven't  
been granted that power

I let the earth crease me, move over me in waves  
But it disallows my tampering, my efforts to change

II.

When I was eight  
my favorite number, the sign for infinity, my birth date  
my mother and I moved into a little house  
with stone fruit trees in the backyard  
apricot and plum  
They only bore fruit that first year  
The leaves like little worms and bruises  
but no fruit again

The dog dug up our tulip bulbs  
my favorite flower  
then the tiger lilies  
then he settled in to eating rocks  
and mud  
and veterinary bills

Then our family killed the hydrangeas  
I bought for Mother's Day  
Then a desktop bamboo plant  
Then  
a cactus



# Forgiveness

In the two years between my father's death, his lung cancer, and your almost-loss, your heart attack, I began to see signs, beacons silvering the dark: white cigarette papers, white paleness of fingers, white coats, white eggshells in the white sink with no eggs to show for them, white sweeter than its own sugar, that white of a mild oblivion.

You think you're owed my forgiveness because you're my mother, now, but what about then? Rule #1: All poets are monsters.

Your grief made you a poet. Your grief made one of me too.

I became a poet the day you made me limp back into the metallic-scented dusk of the hospital to see another parent spread out across the whiteness of sheets like a stain. Nicotine-yellow, an old bruise come to meet me. I began a habit then I'll never shed, I name people by the way I think they'll leave me: in death, by accident, of their own volition, selfishly, selfishly, selfishly.

Rule #2: All poets are optimists. In these past two decades we have become geniuses of the distracted barb, of inflicting pain on the most tender swath of flesh, we have checked in together to the hospice of living with each other. We have never walked on the same sand again, and though you have never smoked another cigarette, my name for you is still White Smoke. I still see it hanging above your head, a brainfire, misfire, wetting the white hairs at your scalp as if with dew. If I was fair, I'd throw stones at my father's ghost as well. But what joy can one grasp in yelling at the dead?

Rule #3: All poets are sadists. It's the same amount of joy I hold when I dog about after you. I'd like to think I could never make my mother cry, but if I'm being honest we wring each other out with each crack of the neck, each blink, each twist of hair and each eyeballed moment. If I'm being honest, some part of me wants to, wants you to feel like I do. Rule #4: All poets are masochists. The skin on the backs of your hands is shivery, paper husked in half, gutted—those veins trace a history of waving pain away, of gathering it back to us again. They are blue, purple, they are bruises, they are shadows of the same bird wings etched beneath my sleeping eyelids, the ones that wake me. I know that. I know it all, but. But isn't my inability to forgive you a kind of love?

You mean too much to me. I have kept you only a breath away, an exhalation, a smoke away from me for all these long, broken years.

I would never show this poem to anyone, I promise. I would never tell what I can still feel you doing to me: forgetting, leaving, so selfishly, selfishly, selfishly. Remember. Rule #5: All poets are liars.

## Grocery Shopping With You

was as exciting as museums, the way you looked in museums like the Tate Modern when we lived in London and I was catapulted into you—it was ruthless, an oven-fresh kind of love that sprang out of the way you looked at things, as if they were oranges and you were sucking out the pith of them or maybe the way you moved through that one display, that stuttering lapse in judgment that was the giant-sized table and chairs hanging above your head because those misfits were so big you walked under them your palms not touching, but skirting so lightly, looking but not touching and bringing them

new life by the way you gave them something less myopic than a human eye, as if you were tall enough to see the tops

or maybe as good as going to Marseilles, which we chose because they mention the city in *Casablanca*, the sea-town foaming up, snoring away in sleep with salted ticks against time passing when we took the little boat to the Ile d’If, that island prison unchanged from the days it housed a guard rhinoceros and *The Count of Monte Cristo* and was stained with its wallowing, a clamshell beach that was lapped by water not emerald or turquoise, but a gray you made gather its sheen to throw on my hair, bees droning lazily in black-eyed susans as you took my picture and told me you loved the way I stood solo, alone, apart and my mouth looked like I had been eating blueberries so raw it was from kissing you

and even later, after you were not mine, after we were not each other’s for reasons, reasons were given but still, still

even later when I visited you in your new-old home in Chicago and we saw the Bean, but you did not look closely or take pictures because you passed it every day on your way to work, you suggested we go to the store for milk and bread and everything bagels, but you stopped yourself, knowing such a trip would be too intimate, too much like sex, more like sex than the sex we had that morning in your new-old

bed, pretending we no longer loved, were no longer lovers,  
pretending intimacy, that picking out ripe avocados, was the  
dirtiest word of all

# The Beginning of It

I left my blood  
in uneven patches  
all over Rhode Island.

Sliced the soft, untouched arch of my foot  
in the shallows as the boat was brought to dock  
and hobbled in to a rainsoaked July.

-

Bruises fade more quickly now  
that your mouth has moved across my body.

So do bug bites.  
So do the blunt pains  
of moving through a quiet life.

-

When I wake next to you  
in a room with no curtains,  
this is what I see:

freckles,  
burned in a planetary splay  
over shoulders corded with muscle  
that move like wings stirring under your skin  
when I run my nails up and down your back.

When we brush our teeth together,  
side by side in the wide mirror,  
reflected is the moment  
you put your hand on the small of my back  
when you lean over to turn the faucet on.

When we swim in the ocean  
on the deserted beach,  
bringing cheap beer in the can

out into the frigid water,  
my whole head is drowning  
in the look of you, in the unwritten moment  
you emerge right next to me,

the cold no longer circling my ribcage.

-

You are giving me something,  
and you don't even know it.  
You are enough it takes no toll on you.

-

Later, reading  
in the grass by the salt pond,  
the wound beneath me reopens.

It will reopen again and again.

I know we are standing on top of the headland  
and deciding whether or not to jump.

I know I am bleeding.  
But I don't want to rewrite anything.  
I don't want memory to have to suffice for you.

I don't want to imagine the poem of my life.

I want to reopen my wounds again and again,  
knowing they heal faster in your company,

limping into August,  
hoping for September,

my blood uneven heel prints on sandy ground.



# Jeddie Sophronius

## Before Departure

A night I spend packing  
& repacking  
until the dog falls asleep on her tail.

Daylight behind the purple curtains  
licks my eyes. The rooster crows  
in response to the dawn call to prayer.

Mother returns  
from the flea market. Brings tulips  
& sets them on a ceramic bowl of water.

I kiss her on the cheeks.  
Half-boiled eggs over rice for breakfast,  
a yellow pond in the snow.

Before the red suitcase drifts  
from the front door to the driveway,  
one last look at the dusty framed photos:

Hindu temples on the slopes  
of a sleeping mountain; two men practicing  
T'ai chi on a hill—

knees half-bent,  
toes inward,  
hands calm as breeze;

me, a two-year old,  
hair still long, sitting on a boulder,  
nibbling an unpeeled orange.

Take me away  
long enough & I will forget all this.

## I Rest My Mother Tongue

I rest my mother tongue, let her sleep  
in my mouth. Four months have passed without  
a childhood word leaving me. Slowly,

I forget street names, my family's  
last meal together, & those who made  
me smile. Words depart—my lexicon,

an incomplete jigsaw puzzle, full  
of dust. Do I exist only for  
one language? Can't my body contain

a memory without forgetting  
another? In my aloneness, I  
adjust to silence, not unlike eyes

in the darkness. I'm thinking of you,  
mother, & what language it was you  
first spoke to me. It doesn't matter.

I'm here & you are so far away.  
I hope I haven't lost too much of  
my childhood when we meet again. Which

is better: to forget or to be forgotten?

## On Returning, or Portrait of the Diabetic Mother

In the morning, I find you  
standing in front of the bedroom  
mirror, staring at the canvas

of your body, like a child  
terrified of the mess they made.  
The scratch marks that were once on

your neck have reached your arms & legs.  
Your skin covered with blood clot  
on top of blood clot—a painting

of hills & a warm river. You  
wipe your tears with both arms. I tell  
you, your painting is just trying

to grow red feathers. You smile  
& I can't help you. It's alright,  
just let the paint dry for now.

# Gently

You turtle from the bedroom  
to the dining table each

morning, & it takes all your  
strength to do so. Your feet are

swollen twice their size, your arms  
red with all the insulin

shots. You spend most days sitting  
in the living room, staring

at the door you're too tired  
to exit, feeling the sun

from the window, against your  
arms. Crows hide under your eyes.

Remember when you used to  
read me stories until I

fell asleep? *Just close your eyes,*  
you said. Let the good night take

you gently.

# John Delaney

## Poem as Map

*For Connie Brown*

Some make a maze in a cornfield  
that you mosey through, past dead ends  
and detours, to the finish line.

Others carve a circle round an apple,  
so you return where you started,  
but having peeled the rich rind off.

I see it as a map you've been given—  
with thematic key and compass bearings,  
bold and shaded colors—arrows pointing  
to a destination, with background music.  
I want you to feel the topography  
of my thinking, its scale and gradients.

Just follow directions and don't get lost.  
I hope your questions will be answered there.

# Let Me Tell You What I Think

We'll never live up to our potential.  
It always comes down to greed.  
And jealousy. Even lazy yoga.  
What life lets you get away with.

Our actions peddle pet philosophies  
around the pedestals of statued principles.  
Your *modus operandi*  
becomes your *raison d'être*.

We'll never be more than apprentices  
in Nature's beauty salons or fabrication shops.  
Oglers. Idlers. Hourly help.  
You'll be lucky to get a foot in the door

or out of your mouth. We'll never learn.

Now, your turn.

## Continental Divide

When we divvied up our lifetime  
together, you got the furniture;  
I took some rare books and vintage maps.  
You kept your family's Indonesian trunk;  
I, my mother's Yankee mantel clock.  
All in all, we split it down the middle,  
after discarding all the junk  
we had collected to outfit the years.  
There were plenty of good memories,  
handfuls, in fact, to cushion the boxes.

Yesterday, in the Subaru burro,  
I crossed the Continental Divide,  
where, as you know, water is pulled  
either east or west. Even tears.

## To the End

It's good to get to the end of things—  
the spit of land that brings  
you to the shore.  
The rounded cul-de-sac  
that turns you back.

To close the book on the last page,  
and reach that age  
when everything has gone before,  
when present tense accents the past.  
In the days' roll call, to listen last

for your name. To have the last word.  
No regrets, wondering if there's more,  
when you've seen and heard  
it all.



# Elwha

*Olympic National Park, Washington*

It begins where I can't see  
and ends where I don't know:  
I witness its esprit  
de corps between beach sand and mountain snow.

I watch the water flee  
over rocks in the riverbed,  
dragging logs and debris,  
flushed from its system like bones of the dead,

and then, once it's free  
to revive both in rage and repose  
its former identity  
and purpose for the rest of time, it shows

how to bring, in magnificent motion,  
the blue of the sky to the ocean.

*The river was the subject of the greatest dam-removal project in  
U.S. history.*

# Elizabeth Bayou-Grace

## The First Winter

Some mornings I have to remind myself that it will all grow back, no matter how unlikely that seems. The grass is browning under a layer of alternating melting and icing snow.

My mother calls me to ask if I'm surviving the winter. She wants to hear both answers. Yes, and no, I've always been your southern child, can we turn up the heat? Instead, R. adds another log.

And of course, yes. As a mother does. Hopes for unimagined successes. Hopes for family. Even when it isn't snowing, the air sometimes ices through and the wind turns solid,

white. The slick surfaces. It's always a hard winter, the first one. The doctors said the PAO would give me another ten to fifteen years on my feet. At 19 and 21, those odds

were favorable. I wasn't entirely sure that I would therefore need another. She wants to know if the winter is sitting inside my hips. Yes, and no. I can feel

the temperature sink, the frost in the blood. As if by clockwork, the years have passed and I'm struggling to lift. To rise. To walk those miles. Sometimes,

the valley swallows up all the warmth and the surrounding Seven Sisters get capped in clarity. A little warmer there at the glorious freezing top. Before I know

it, everything will be green. Despite me, or with no regard to how I fare, winter will cease.

# Alaska Sonnets

1.

Three woman reasons to pack up & leave:  
instead of sun death rose in the morning,  
or love swaggered in, or else left. It left.  
In Alaska, summer days become nights  
become day again. A turning into.  
The North Lands become Texas & become

barren, or else blossomed. A turning  
away from. Oaken doors, fluid. Glaciers,  
permanent. One moment, I was a string  
of white pearls kept in his pocket, solid,  
precious, possessed. I was made of the land  
I lived in. Then, just a body. Woman  
was denser, denser & ice-mountain blue.

2.

When the sun sets in Alaska, it does  
not dip under the treeline, but hovers  
there purpled. Near to, night shuffles but can't  
arrive. Still, tonight I can see it—that  
satellite. On the news, they are calling  
it Super Moon. Closer, oranged.

It's been a month, Sean. (Oh-) Alaska  
is majestic. An Orca and her child  
finned past the boat today. How's your daughter?  
Does she think I'll come home? Ocean wakes  
against the deck. I am a collector.  
Salt, mostly. Scrape it off the rails, my cheeks.

Yours, your girl's. Brine off the teeth, whales.  
I'll start hoarding moons. Purple, too.

# Remembering the Day before My Marriage

Most people are disappointing.  
Around me, the ones I have loved fail  
to rise and become. Great brains pickled  
in jars, to be placed on a shelf.

As if to be used later.  
Saved for good company. Silver locked up  
in glass cabinets. My mother,

she used to only use the good silver  
for the holidays, but she liked  
the way it felt on her teeth  
better, and one morning  
she put it all in the regular drawers.

The silver gets tarnished, a little ugly,  
but it still feels better on the teeth.  
The good stuff becomes daily wear.

I think for a while there,  
I was hoping all the good stuff was to come.

R. was dancing in kitchen / bedroom  
in Little Pink House by the river,  
as he made us one last late night snack  
before we slept unwed  
for the last time.

We took it all off the shelves.  
The good stuff.  
The daily wear.

## Oh, Woman—

when the saint is a man, when  
the saint comes sharp jaw, comes feral and fur,  
comes slow motion, takes years to get there, takes  
the long way about it, even now, barely  
is big hands and bite teeth, when the saint is  
a wolf, prey-sure and dawn chasing, prey-sure

and waiting, when the man is canine, when  
the beast is body, the body rising  
under and into, if you can become  
devotion, become devoured, become  
a question that lives in the god mouth, be  
meat and whine and moan, if you can live here,

in this pause and chase, if you can bear this, that  
love is not yours alone, then love you must.

# Fire in Paradise

The first time I saw Texas on fire, dazed  
and complicit in the driver's seat, her

clouds rising out over the back of hill  
country rising, I thought for a moment,

with such relief: rain.  
A break from the sun

and never setting. Maybe by tonight,  
I thought with such relief, we'll sleep. But fire

was eating whatever wind it may. I  
used to think living forever young was

the endgame. Under sun, the years swift pass  
unnoticed. Fake plastic trees live longest.

No one will tell you when you're growing sick,  
Elizabeth. They'll say thin. Have you seen

how the summer brays and flaunts? Vogues and screams.

# Monaye

## In Utero

An ant is placed in my mother's womb  
to move new rhythms

& I become kaleidoscopic,  
a melanoid drum

fluttering against a colony's heartbeat.  
Her cervix crushes me

& I know this is more than devotion  
my ancestors fabled.

In my dreams  
I am her legacy

or lapse in judgement, named  
to bring forth a new charm.

I come into the world loud,  
head first.

My inheritance hanging in garlands  
from my wrists,

red ore encased  
by a band of fluid

too thick to unravel.  
I shimmer.

I feel wet slick,  
open & give what she kept inside,

a chance  
to sprout from my hands.

I must be good  
if I am worthy

of being loved that much.  
I take a breath

& form cells into flesh.  
I exhale

to dwell amongst these bones,  
to find the place most possible

to evolve  
(from the beginning).



# Creation Story

Somewhere undercover  
a rupture of self

(or the sweetest rye  
in the gardens

on the south side),  
remains a project.

Creation gathers to feed us  
beneath watchtowers

that once stood tall & erect—  
like an edifice

of equal parts maroon & fuse.  
Like mother like daughter

to pursue the place  
where concrete cracks

& your older siblings say  
the sidewalk spat you out like a sacrifice.

Kids know grief better  
if we review impact in numbers:

one lived to be  
the only evidence of ten conceived

by two lovers, searching  
for light or darker substances

in each other;  
drifting their wonder

between an opening  
already collecting my breaths,

so I could become  
the gift they left.

## Leisure

A crowd gathers      to build a girl  
twisting each cell      in its infinite hands  
to manufacture perfection  
all of them clamor      to peer through windows  
to see a girl      waiting  
for her limbs to be bent to mimic  
a travel destination  
each arm & leg & thigh is stretched  
& outlined into landing strips for men  
on journeys elsewhere—  
perhaps like glass she's dusted      each piece mosaiced  
for her own private viewing  
in each town      the girl becomes      a vacancy  
to be desired  
to be filled      she must decide if being a woman  
or a refuge      no one ever asks to come inside of  
to stay  
is worth a debt that will never be repaid.

# After Asking God

## Why “Good” Women Exist

I search google for the definition: *feminism*  
The only result to arc toward the girl  
asking fragile questions. That’s it—  
when a piece of your body leaves you  
longing for your lineage, searching for purpose  
that begins in a woman’s bewildered screams

*why did this happen?*

I wander a path & find a girl unnamed.  
She tells me there are many ways to become undone  
like some of our sins are more delightful than others,  
some wrapped in red just to unravel a resolve.  
Before I understand the impact of what she unearths  
I see a blade on the ground  
next to the only fruit the tree could ever grow.

She weeps above it & I pity Mary’s sacrificial womb.  
Maybe the gift of life was never His to give—  
maybe it was Hers.  
But what a terrible dream to defer,  
to peel back doubt like a supple rind  
with no hesitation or fear to say, “here I am,”  
announcing relief, to know the courage it takes  
to step in, to seize the knife, to know true belief.

# Michelle Lerner

## Why the train stops here

Plowing gone  
wrought iron gone  
corn river limestone  
steeple run quarry yes  
I remember walking  
town sign behind me  
tree fingers jumping wind  
smooth pebbles lost keys  
when they told me  
it was cancer in his neck  
I stopped scooping leaves  
and walked  
down the driveway out onto the street.  
cars barely metal peripheral  
grey pavement gone boot  
toes cold wind cheek  
I thought if I walked  
to her house it would stop.  
yes stream amber white  
on the stones gone the mailboxes the car  
yes behind me slow come back she won't  
understand.  
now trains move fast away  
town lines whir  
she in Texas still would not  
his bones break into tulips,  
wild roses, leaves

## August 31 Kaddish

I loved you more intensely  
knowing that you were going,  
inhaled your scent like sky  
in the moment after gale  
before rain:  
swollen air,  
electricity.  
Leaves fell  
and still your nostrils flared.  
You were always the last day of summer, even then—  
the immensity of sun on the skin,  
feeling the forecast.

# Ode to Exhaustion

You're my old man  
the one I answer to  
begrudgingly  
at the beginning and end of every day  
reliable  
as the onset of winter, the sunset, the dark.  
You cover me, twine around my trunk  
like a vine, until it's difficult to tell  
where you end and I begin.  
You are my kudzu, prolific, verdant  
and I disappear beneath you like a southern forest  
where every tree and shrub, buildings and power lines  
metamorphasize into vine barrens, still green  
from the satellite,  
the biome below slowly strangling.

And yet I cling back—  
you're all that's left  
of every death, every grip I've held fast  
as someone plunged  
through the bottom of their life  
like a shattered window  
every mourning moment I stretched my hand  
after them  
struggling to catch the hem of memory,  
hold the echo in my hand.  
You engulf them, hold them in your tendrils  
keep them breathing and trembling  
always, almost  
in my reach.

# Afterthought

The youngest son always  
wears a hood.  
It covers tumors  
and conspiracies  
lets him hide  
in plain sight.  
Some call him a magician  
the way he fits  
in small spaces  
the way it's hard  
to look away.  
He was in love with  
your wife, he  
stayed in a back room  
developing potions. He knows  
he's being followed.  
First he vanished into cars, then woods  
eventually  
in front of you,  
naked but for  
his covered head—  
you weren't sure  
he could see you.  
He could.

# Anxiety

You're a snake beneath my breastbone  
lashing your tail hard, muscular  
fast against my heart.

Sometimes you lunge up my esophagus, push  
pitted head, open jaws  
into my mouth.

You aim to kill.

I shove Klonopin down your throat  
one after another  
until your head wobbles, falls back  
and I feel you slump  
scales slipping past every vertebra  
in my neck  
down

to the top of my stomach  
where you slumber.

I am not fooled.

You sleep in a coil  
tail rattling to your dreams,  
one eye open.



# William French

## Ambulance Ride

The ride was running over dog's tails,  
through nursery rhymes, past fire sales.  
Red light through the dead of night,  
a strong wind ravaging the avenue of old  
saints, their fragile bodies shattering at  
the sound of our engine fully revved,  
virgin throats suffocating in  
our invisible swirling smoke.

I feel white against my neck oozing warmth  
and gaze at nothing while our  
flight washes the roadside.  
The tide must be going out.  
From some far-off place, I can see  
a face framed by a streetlight—  
or is it a halo on one of those saints?

Faces, faces, and more faces.  
Now stooping, now staring,  
now whispering softly,  
but only to each other:  
The World Series must be over and  
they don't want me to know who won.  
(I had a bet with somebody.)

And now, without warning, this  
screaming red torpedo disappears through  
the mouth of the whale and we  
are plunged into  
the brightest darkness.  
And like Jonah,  
I am saved from the sea.

# Glimpses

Early morning glimpses  
of dew-stained grass and  
mist rising from lonely fields.

Glimpses of the rising sun  
painting the sky, leaking in  
through old Venetian blinds,

casting long shadows on familiar  
naked skin lying there,  
warm to the touch.

Glimpses of you and me,  
flesh to flesh, but joined  
only in predawn dreams

of each other as other  
people, quivering, panting,  
remembering times when

the night was electric and  
the stars meant warmth, and  
the distant dawn sang out

like the Ode to Joy  
instead of a haunting and  
lonely factory whistle.

## Early Morning

Four o'clock on a cold winter morning -  
or maybe it's five. House creaks  
like an old man's bones. Furnace  
wheezes to life—long hiss of gas  
ignites into flame, sheet metal bangs  
once: sleepy molecules spurred  
by the sudden jolt of heat.  
Motor kicks in, dutifully settling  
into a steady, throbbing hum.  
Wife curled at my side is  
a symphony of non-synchronous  
sound, an atonal melody, like  
something out of Schoenberg.  
Dog snoring at her feet provides  
the harmony and the counterpoint.  
Cat coiled on her forearm  
purrs out the rhythm like a string bass.  
And I, lying awake in the wondrous  
heavy darkness, strain to listen and  
remember old dreams and marvel at  
why I've never heard any of this before.

# October Morning after the Loss

Cold October morning.  
Sky the color of old iron.  
Dull misty gloom rising,  
dense as a forest, cruel,  
damp, dangerous as despair.

Stepping blindly  
into what should be  
daylight but  
is more like the underbelly  
of a stagnant pond.

In the distance,  
dirty yellow lights  
leak into the darkness,  
tiny rectangles of life  
in this circle of nothing.

# I Have Never Been

I have never been to Dublin—  
Ireland, that is—to walk  
the winding streets, to  
trace the trail of  
Leopold Bloom.

I have never seen Paris  
from atop the Eiffel Tower or  
stood wide-eyed marveling  
at the Mona Lisa.

I have never heard an  
opera in La Scala or  
ridden a gondola in Venice  
or eaten Tuscan food  
in Tuscany.

I have never tanned in  
the Azores or combed  
the Malagasy beaches  
at dawn.

I have never stood at  
the base of Mt. Everest,  
a Sherpa at my side. I  
have never seen the  
full moon rise over Mumbai  
or strolled the parapet of  
the Great Wall of China.

All that I have ever done  
I have done with you.  
I have lived my life  
in the shadow of  
our backyards touching.  
And yet, standing  
on the shoulders of  
our love, I have moved

through time and space;  
I have watched this  
universe spin around me.  
And I have seen everything.

# Josiah Patterson Wheatley

## I am from

the poplar tree at the creek's edge  
on my grandparents' farm  
where once my cousins and my brothers  
wanted to see who could climb the highest;  
my feet uncommitted  
were rooted to the ground,  
more like the poplar than my kin.

a place where my grandmother grew raspberry bushes  
stretching from the dilapidated toolshed  
to the dusty driveway, from which  
she tasked us with collecting berries for pie—  
we'd return ashamed, buckets nearly empty,  
mouths stained greedy red.

the summers when I still slept between adults,  
too scared of the dark and too fussy to admit  
I needed a nightlight,  
nudging my grandfather's ribs with sharp elbows  
until he roused and chased me back to my own bed:  
a pullout couch in the oversized living room—  
shadows in every corner.

but too, a second home, in leaner years  
when my parents' folly wounded us,  
and they'd drive us past the butte and past the rye,  
leave us at the steps of cracked concrete, unaware  
the world I knew always grew a thousand times grander,  
even believing the creek at the acre's end  
really did stretch on forever,  
where grandpa's charred burgers and lumpy potato salad  
were an emperor's feast.

a place that bubbles up first and fast  
when someone might ask, "where are you from?"

there—  
in my grandmother's homemade pies and  
secret cigarette breaks when she thought we were napping,  
in my grandfather's snore during his,  
in a house's endless rooms of hide-and-go-seek  
and in cousins who grew faster than me.  
I am from  
dust, from smoke, shadows and burnt meat,  
from the juices of fruit, too sweet to not eat.



## Cœur de Fleurs

Petals pink hurricane  
a heady, maddening perfume  
as we walk the storm swaths made by thorns;  
stiff stems atlas the folded heads of silk  
that rise from too-large vases,  
ballooning like puff adders  
to camouflage her coffin.

The light catches anthers, pollen golden,  
though the sepal leaves are midnight dark  
pressing upon the rose flesh  
like wanton talons  
desperate, unbecoming;  
“stop weeping, stop weeping,”  
I hear someone say.

There is one drying pistil  
who draws my eye  
who aged too soon, or emerged too eagerly,  
whose withered head rests weakly now  
propped up amongst the living,  
the vibrant others, giddy white  
or blushed red;

and suddenly  
I am inconsolable  
to realize  
she was the receptacle, I the bloom.  
The bouquets decomposing now,  
soft dead raindrop petals—  
the adders molting skin.

The organ swells, a final dirge,  
and we slither the same path out:  
now the littered floor,  
little buds unopened;  
crushed under shined black shoes,  
whole rose hips

bleed into the gray carpet like spilled wine.

Mother gives each vase away,  
like prizes at the end, to  
the puffiest eyes.  
Clenched fists, the huddled mass,  
nor flagged flowers are mine:  
I am saturated  
against the devastation sky.

# Fucking Kierkegaard

Each time I come,

it's my mind who escapes.

I read somewhere—

in a library,

Kierkegaard perhaps?

—that life must be spent being filled up and not emptied out

not like a deflated balloon or dead flowers

given at the end of a rotting relationship;

they sit in a dark room

for days, as ska plays, booming

from somewhere in the apartment complex.

Every time I betray myself

my fucking heart on a crusted sleeve

—no. The shameful roundness of my mouth (yes.)

when my eyes roll back,

my hand between my legs

or braced against a cold marble bathroom stall

I'm emptied. Empty.

When will I fill up?

Once I stop asking questions I do not seek answers to

//

During college, Thomas used to let me walk with him

on days after class

after library hours had ended

or when I'd find times when we would cross paths

or create run-ins like a stalker

we'd talk and talk or I would just listen to his honey-words

to his thoughts about philosophy

down city blocks, down the path that led by his apartment

by the horse pasture hidden behind the hemlock bushes,

the horses I swore I told myself I'd ride today—that day

(every day)  
Some weird fantasy of being connected to them  
riding bareback  
feeling the sweat of their power beneath me

//

But I have passed the breakaway  
Thomas is gone,  
my thoughts of him distracted me, and the horses too.

I go back now to find their enclosure empty  
(just as I)  
empty still  
still questioning and deaf/blind

//

Kierkegaard compared the cries of a poet—the ones that now pass my  
lips—to beautiful music, though profound anguish existed inside.

I retort:  
my orgasms are my battle song,  
my barbarian screams to topple Rome  
to go to war with my emptiness  
(though still losing)  
The blood-soaked fields repeat like dashes on my road home

and no more Thomas  
the horses whinnying behind me, from someplace I  
can't reach  
still I long to ride them, but

my passion is  
and has always been  
weaker than my actions  
my act  
my acting  
acting that I am full of

the moments when Thomas takes naps in the afternoon  
like on that one lucky day



# Transformation

Perhaps some know the biting of their tongue  
When it has swollen wide inside their mouth,  
Imagine now the swell of body, soul:  
The given name you wish to leave behind,  
A voice of different timbre in the mind,  
A rush of blood, a gnash of teeth internal—  
    Those born inside a skin ready to shed.

Inglorious fight: To claw out through the husk,  
To paint anew with bold and clashing brush,  
Cocooned in rainbow sleep yet yearn for blooming.  
Denied by those who choose a hateful cry,  
Who'd rob a body of its phoenix rise.  
When only stone is given for the shaping,  
    The breath of lungs desires a molting form.

Though other bodies' priv'lege recognized,  
Prescribes no onus here for their demise,  
Nor pity choices made by such cicadas.  
Instead to grant by law this chrysalis,  
To new-old souls, the freedom to exist.  
At last, emerge the way an alate does:  
    With wings and light they'd always held inside.

# Karo Ska

## my mother says everyone has to learn how to swim

but i can't float. i fear the water  
won't hold me. no one else has.  
i fear risks, except when i'm  
intoxicated. then i'm impulsive  
in re-living my trauma, kissing  
strange boys, pressing them  
up against walls, riding their  
cocks with my crotch, until  
they're gasping for breath.

i lost my first kiss to a man  
in his 60s. his tongue teaching  
me lessons i wasn't ready  
to learn. i kissed a boy  
my own age when i was thirteen,  
his mouth tasted the same,  
like day-old cigarettes & cheap  
cologne. i drowned in his mouth,

remembering my inability  
to float. if i were to define  
my own desire, i'd have to  
confront memories i can't

recall. their fuzzy imprint  
leaves me gasping  
in the middle of the pool,  
arms floundering to keep  
me above the water, my mouth  
like a fish's when it jumps  
out of its bowl. trauma is

an ocean i can't swim in  
without losing my will

to breathe, an ocean  
where i don't have limbs  
that can carry me across  
the rip currents of life.

in my mind, i close a door,  
so i forget & can sometimes  
feel normal. what is normal  
when you're drowning  
in a grave of your own bones?  
my mother says i have to learn  
how to swim, but she never  
taught me how to float.



# i can't love like a wild animal

*after unbodied by billy-ray belcourt*

i love like a lion prowling  
savannahs, seeking prey  
because what is love  
if not teeth piercing  
skin, digging into flesh,  
slurping up blood. this  
is love & i am gazelle.

he says *i want you*  
*to be predictable, i*  
*want you to make*  
*sense.* as if sense  
is an oasis & i'm  
a desert without  
a beginning,  
middle  
or end. i love

like a starving seal,  
swimming under  
melting ice. please  
accept me, scars  
& thin skin. i tire

of bodies, their  
molecules of sweat  
as they fall  
from slopes  
of his brows  
& onto my chest. i tire  
of loving like a turtle  
without a shell. i can't

love in moans or areolas, i  
can't love like a wild animal,  
not anymore. i crave

burrowed connections  
& a hole in the ground  
i can call my own.

## womb song

i enter my womb, it is dark,  
wet & warm. my womb

welcomes me, feeds me  
pistils, pollen, nectar—

i am her honey  
bee, while she prepares

for the egg, wears her red  
tuxedo with a taffeta of nutritious

tissue. her fingers flit down  
my neck, spine, tail

bone. i arch my back, head  
angled towards the sky, greeting

the double moons of my fallopian  
tubes. inside each moon,

a chance of renewal, a lotus  
flower floating toward its uterine

pond—petals opening, growing,  
before leaving my womb, traveling

through my body to the crown  
of my head, where it unfolds,

receiving the moon's maroon glow.  
i am home, i ache, i am home, the pain

reminding me of my body's presence. i  
enter my home, i enter my womb. echoes

of breath massage its walls. i am here  
in the moment, i am here, breathing

& for this i am grateful—each oxygen  
molecule a gift from the universe, each

blood cell a reminder from my body—  
i am your sacred vessel: treat me right.

# Robyn Joy

## Sisyphus

This is my body,  
but I am not here in it,  
and you don't know me enough to know this.

I am quietly rolling the boulder  
daring the shadows of splintered effigies  
to tell my secrets.

Your gaze is icy, and I am frozen  
repeating an old story.  
I feel small, much like I did then,  
before I knew you existed.

But I am not here in it.

Awful things could be happening,  
but I will only capture flashes and blips.

When we meet again in a new format,  
my body will have a quaking memory.  
My throat will burn my words hot against my tongue  
and I won't be able to shake out of it,  
or tell you what you did.

The pressure of your hands  
will infect everything in me  
silently rotting from the inside out.

But I invited this,  
when I laughed at your joke  
and touched your thigh  
while drinking myself dull.  
My well-deserved Samsara.

# Heavenly Places

My feet are bare  
sinking into a carpet of lush green moss.

There is no liquid apple here to tempt me  
or replace inherited shame  
with an insatiable sexual appetite.

When he sees my unconscious body before him,  
like a birthday gift,  
already partially unwrapped,  
he does not continue to remove the paper.

He does not insert himself into my DNA  
where his wants will echo ad nauseam  
letting everyone see what a whore looks like.

Because it isn't his birthday  
and this gift isn't his to open.

## His Hair

In the middle of it all  
he asked me to help him  
wash his hair away  
as it completely fell out  
all at once  
I stood behind him in the shower  
and I loved him  
so delicately  
like a wife who had been by his side  
for 40 years  
not just six.  
Cancer makes you age,  
even when it isn't in your own blood.  
It's in your family DNA.

# Hail Mary

*(A Migraine and A Stem Cell Transplant)*

The noises coming from the floor grate  
of this hotel room sized apartment  
have become the soundscape  
for my migraine nausea dreams

The slow hum crescendos  
into rhythmic waves  
like a giant metallic swamp bug  
splayed on the basement floor  
rubbing its legs together  
in a private performance

This is perhaps what basements do here on weekends  
I am new to the neighborhood  
while we throw a Hail Mary to the cancer gods  
and I'm not staying long enough  
to become familiar

You patiently live in an inpatient bed  
twenty minutes away  
I am learning the street names  
while you learn the names of  
your nurses and medications:

This one makes the dog park appear on the right  
This one makes your blood cells grow while you sleep

Hail Mary  
full of grace

Making up prayers from tidbits I've heard  
because I don't really know what I believe in  
I only know what I've ruled out

The sockets in my skull throb  
behind a silk mask



just the right pressure to lull me to sleep  
to become one with the siren song from below  
listening for clues  
understanding the telekinesis of the current situation

Maybe I will tell it as a story later in my life  
where I am pinned to my bed like a specimen  
and you to yours,  
tubes needled in and out of your body—  
but the conclusion has yet to make itself known.

# Never Go Back

We have seen behind the thin curtain  
and if you haven't,  
you are not paying attention.

I wade through every day now,  
treading water,  
but it is the mucky kind  
and my skin feels dirty.  
I am wearing the deeds of people  
who came before me,  
people who are here now.

Clearing the yellow crusty bits  
from the corners of my eyes  
trying to meet each day  
with a little more clarity.

I knew it before  
But I did not KNOW it

And it is quite a privilege  
to have swam in the crystal blues and greens  
of complacency before now.  
I have always been afraid  
when I couldn't see the bottom  
and often chosen to stay out of it.

But now when I revisit  
the headlines from my childhood,  
I see the venom that fed them,  
the ignorance of my colorblind upbringing.

It's on the faces  
of others  
who already knew.

There is no going back.

# Han Raschka

## root system

I have not been in my grandfather's home  
For at least five years now

I remember the crooked weeping willow that grows in his backyard  
Long, mournful branches that brushed across my face  
Easter egg hunts with colorful plastic eggs tucked in its notches

My grandfather no longer speaks my name  
In fact he has never spoken the name I chose for myself  
I saw him last year, at my uncle's 50th birthday  
And not a single word slipped past his lips

He refused to go to my high school graduation  
He told my mother it would be too hot, that his shattered knees  
Which carry his spiteful, god-fearing body would be sore from  
sitting too long

Weeks later, he made the two hour trek there and back  
To watch my cousin graduate from kindergarten

My grandfather accepts ignorance as his God  
Swallows nothing but stale communion bread and the bitter blood  
of Christ  
Never apologizes, only offers handpicked scripture  
That weaves the narrative of my damnation

I am his hellbound granddaughter, his forgotten sorrow  
I fought furiously to make myself known to him

When I stopped craving his love  
When I stopped claiming space in his life  
When I stopped hunting for pride in his hollow smiles

I found my own wilting weeping willow to plant myself beneath.

## atrophy

The fruit in my kitchen is overripe

It bulges with decay  
And a sweetness so vile  
That a light breeze is enough to blow the scent my way

I am standing in front of the utensil drawers  
With a steak knife pressed against my abdomen  
Silently wishing someone would wake up  
To get rid of the repugnant fruit that wafts rot into my nose

I wonder if anyone can smell me wasting  
My organs putrid and rancid  
Stomach acid overflowing and devouring my bones

I dig the knife a smidgen deeper into my stomach  
My brain screaming at me, telling me to carve out the parts of my rind  
That have decomposed beyond repair

I finally thrust down, splitting the fleshy orange in front of me in two  
The smell is horrifying  
I barely make it to the sink before I vomit

I don't know what makes me sicker  
Rotting fruit  
Or that I am watching myself wither away.

# lost garden

Sometimes I hammer nails into my Achilles  
To hang pictures off my ankles

I wonder if those who came before me  
With silver coated minds like mine  
Bled as much as I do when the hammer strikes down

When we speak, acrimonious wisps  
Of what was meant but not said leak out

There are shards of lightning stuck in my eyes  
From when cruel, callous men  
Stole pious innocence from a seventeen year old  
Who barely knew who they were  
Let alone what they wanted

The sour taste left in my mouth  
From teeth grinding themselves into dust  
Carries echoes of his voice

I am bound with duty  
To carry this memory from home to home  
And give it space to grow  
I tend to all my plants with love and care

Even the ones

I will lose.

# prisoner of war

I bear a curse  
One that stretches an eternity behind me and in front of me

There never was a me without it  
And I will carry it on my back  
With the knowledge that existential wrath and fury  
Is what motivates it to stay

I am a deadly sin

Condemnation to this hellish forever was always deserved  
Dante himself sneers in my general direction  
For having the audacity  
To exist as a flawed, dismantled skeleton that aches and roars

Scratching nails down the wall until my mark is made

The voice in my head speaks venom into my veins  
A constant barrage of what I am supposed to be

But am not

My faithlessness shakes in time  
To the board striking across my skull

I bleed red

Dark, deep hemoglobin rich red  
Leaking out across the floor in pentacles that hex me  
Eternal doom in my blood

The ones that came before me  
Were sealed away for far longer than a lifetime  
Until their bones, fragile as flowers  
Made the decision to become dust

Brokenness is feared.

# love language

Transferable memories like contact paper on tshirts  
I write a grocery list that never forgets you

I wonder if you know what it means when I say I love you

When I look into your eyes, and murmur lovely little fractured  
phrases of adoration

Gentle mirrored hand movements  
I may remember little these days  
But I remember that you and I fit together  
Like the carved out shoreline of the beach

I wonder if you know what it means when I say I love you

Hours spent each night committing the radical act of missing you  
Of thinking of how what I write and say  
Means nothing until you are there to translate

I burn down the neighborhoods in my mind that have resided there  
for eons

In order to let you plant gardens where the blight once stood

I wonder if you know what it means when I say I love you

We are the sand-filled shoes of quiet suffering  
Of wanting to scream but only whispering  
However, I'd take all the suffering you feel  
And make it my own in an instant  
No hesitation, only the knowledge  
That you no longer have to carry a cross you never deserved

I wonder if you know what it means when I say I love you

I am full of perpetual apologies for never loving enough  
When you deserve love that possesses the gravitational pull of our  
big blue marble

When you deserve love that starts and ends your day like the sun

And yet, I wonder if you know what it means when I say I love you.

# Rebbekah Vega-Romero

## The Memory in My Pinky

Fingers have memories.  
I never knew that  
till I saw my father's crispy husks  
at the hospital that first day after the fire.  
The elegant nails & agile tips:  
Blackened  
Shriveled  
Unrecognizable.

The sinew between them  
pulled taut  
like the strings of his beloved  
guitar, wound sharp beyond  
the proper pitch—  
Though these strings were so sharp  
they pulled the frets out of order  
and bent the very neck of the vessel.

My first thought was not  
of the harm those fingers had inflicted—  
No, it was not how mi papá had used them for  
ill & perhaps earned their loss.

I saw at once:  
There is no harm he could have caused to  
earn that grief.

My first thought was  
of the music those fingers  
held in their memory.  
Was that music now ashes,  
lost to the dust  
like the skin & fat & bone  
that had stored them?

But this is not a poem about my father.



This is a poem about my fingers.

How my fingers always know  
when I am touching the right chord  
— they tingle & grow warm.

How my fingers do know  
when I'm singing the note right  
— they freeze & they tremble.

How did my fingers know  
your hand, the first time we touched?  
Why do they ache, down to their  
connecting joints  
when you are out of reach?

Even my pinky remembers how  
good you feel  
in my hands.

I cannot unknow  
los recuerdos de mis manos.  
To unlearn your touch, I fear,  
would require a fire that twisted  
my instrument into something  
mythically unrecognizable.

And even then, would my fingers take  
after mi padre in their stubborn knowledge,  
just as they do in their length & skill & grace?

You see, my father is making music again.  
It's not the same—  
no, it may never be lo mismo,  
pero it is something  
Promethean to witness.

And so I reach for you again,  
and my fingers sigh their relief  
into yours,  
and your fingers respond in kind.

# The Coffee Table

When I was four years old  
I shattered my parents' glass coffee table.  
Decades later, I still dream about it:  
The initial crunch & ensuing waterfall tinkle of the glass,  
the reflecting light over my head on the ceiling,  
how surprising the flaming lick of pain  
was in the soft pink flesh of my feet,  
the viscous heat of my blood  
coating the cold foreign pieces of glass.

When she told me the truth with a condescending sigh,  
I was kneeling on your bed  
in a pool of pink & purple light from  
the early spring sun pouring through your window,  
refracting through the glass print of our kiss.  
Every hair on my body stood up  
and fell back down. I forget  
how I ended the conversation. I know  
I grabbed the half-full tequila bottle & drank the whole thing while I called  
you eight times then finally texted:  
Pick up, you coward.

The coffee table dreams, though:  
they always start with me in the middle of the  
sea of glass & blood & empty frame.  
I forget exactly how such a small person  
made such a big mess.  
If I asked my mother, she would probably say I was dancing on it  
or claim my sister did it  
or question whether we had even had  
a glass table to break in the first place.

Memory is fiendish that way:  
I remember specific lines from this play  
but not what I was holding in my hand  
when I asked if you had lied to me  
when I asked if you had fucked her  
(twice)  
And you said "yes" & "I'm sorry."

At that point, I know I was standing on the other side of the bed,  
looking at the love light,  
and whatever was in my hand

flew

and broke the window  
and rattled the pink kiss pane.  
It was the clinking sound of glass on glass,  
the way our melting kissing selves seemed to  
mock me with their joy,  
that made me scramble, tiger-like,  
over the bed to pull down that fragile gift.

It was the empty “sorry”s that drove my hand  
or it was the memory of the night before,  
how you laid your head on my breast  
and whispered that you loved coming home to me,  
or it was the ghost of the pain in my feet  
from childhood, that raised that portrait  
and systematically shattered every  
glass surface in your room—  
each pane of the window / the tv /the antique mirror you almost gave to  
one of your sisters, till I insisted on giving it to you for Christmas—  
until I was left barefoot & somehow  
not bleeding  
holding the one thing that would not seem to fracture  
no matter how I battered it:

The portrait of our kiss.

When it finally broke on the now-empty  
window frame & landed in the alley below,  
I didn't notice the pink sliver  
left behind on the sill.  
My parents never replaced that  
glass coffee table.  
Maybe they realized a small apartment  
with toddlers is no place for  
mid-century modern decor.

You said you wanted to order another  
glass print of our love,  
but I don't think you will.

I think you will hold on to that sliver  
and dream about that kiss  
and the waterfall of glass  
for decades to come.

# Like Riding a Bike

Obviously this metaphor requires balance,  
a light touch,  
it is so symbolic as to be laughable:  
He bought me a bike.

Here, love: here is your freedom.  
But also, here, love: here is the proof:  
Here is my love, solid & dependable,  
with a frame I patched up with  
my own two strong hands.

(Riding a bike after fifteen years is  
not at all like riding a bike.  
My body does not remember,  
not fully,  
how to balance  
how to launch forward  
when to pedal  
when to coast  
when to switch gears  
how to smoothly brake to a clean stop  
without kicking at the curb.)

I do love the push, the climb  
the exertion of defying  
gravity to sail up a hill,  
keeping eyes ever vigilant for  
cars or worse their doors,  
but as I coast along the ridge  
as it begins to descend again  
doubt comes in,  
crawling up my hips & into my belly  
coating my palms on the handlebars  
with a dew of fear that makes  
clicking the gear higher stakes:  
will this be the moment I am  
unable to slow down  
to halt when I should,

is this the time I cross the uncrossable line  
and will I be rewarded with the press  
of gravel & metal & pain & blood?

Is that punishment what I am  
seeking when I send him that text:  
thinking about going for a ride  
?

I know enough to know  
sometimes (often) smart women make  
bad decisions, like the better you  
are at being there for your friends  
the worse you are at showing up  
for yourself, like being able to interpret  
Chopin, or quote Shakespeare,  
or cure the plague,  
preoccupies so much of your faculties  
there is simply not a burner left  
on which to keep the kettle  
of your heart warm.

So I snap on my helmet  
which can't protect my most fragile organ  
(as a wise but problematic professor  
tells each incoming theatre class,  
"You cannot put a condom  
on your heart,"  
by which she means,  
"Don't fuck your classmates  
and bring the mess to class,"  
but which many students take as  
a personal invitation to a quest  
to fuck as many as possible,  
and by now, surely, she knows this?)  
and I meet him on the road.

On two wheels  
we can't look at one another  
as we speak the wind

steals key words, growing the mystery  
and making a mockery  
of our fickle friend the truth.

When we pause to change directions,  
breathless, it is impossible not to blossom  
in the warmth of the shared sun  
between us.

When I ride ahead, I almost feel  
safe, with him at my six  
and the open lane before me.

I am relearning  
how to ride, singing in the evening breeze  
that tugs the strings of my mask loose  
flashing my smile for the grieving world to see.

I am rewriting my definition of love  
but haven't yet landed on one  
where we'll both be free,  
a love that encompasses my dignity  
and forgiveness,  
a love that can rise from the ashes:  
is it too much to ask of such a light word?

Too soon the ride is ended  
before it has really begun  
and we are each left to chart a new course  
alone.

# Defenestration

## Defenestration

Is such an ephemeral word  
For such a violent act.

Once when my baby sister was pregnant  
She had to get her phone replaced twice in one month:  
Her baby daddy

## Defenestrated

The phone  
And its replacement.

At my lowest moments, for some reason  
I think of this word

## Defenestrate

And want to cry at its terrible allure:

Why

Why fly

Why fly so high

Why fly so high in the sky

(We used to wail these words as a warm up  
in Voice & Speech, remember?)

And I think of the people who chose

## Defenestration

On that bright September morning  
And I think of the people watching them,  
Not on the news  
But on the other side of the office.  
For surely there were souls who,  
Instead of running down those endless stairs



Or leaping into the abyss of blue

Stayed put, stayed still  
As the building crumbled & closed in  
And took them down too.

I feel seared to the floor, too:  
I can't seem to lift a foot to run  
To flee from the crumbling carcass of our love  
And I can't seem to trust  
And make the leap to fly.

Instead I stand staring dumbly  
Growing more numb by the millisecond  
Till I am no longer connected to the flesh that  
Longs for you.

It feels like my love has

Defenestrated

From my body.

They call the eyes the windows of the soul:  
Maybe now that these windows have been opened  
To the truth long enough,  
My heart sidled over to them  
While I slept so many nights alone  
And silently, without warning

Leapt free.

# Never Can Say No

*A Villanelle*

I know I never can say no to you  
And worse, I think that's what you want to hear  
Each time you smile & say you love me, true.

The truth is that you obfuscate my view  
And when you dimple at me & hold me near:  
I know I never can say no to you.

And I wonder: do you have a clue?  
It touches some wet wound inside, my dear  
Each time you smile and say you love me, true.

When you leave, it cleaves my world in two  
And in your absence, I see my heart quite clear:  
Return, I never can say no to you.

My bones ache, you turn my vision blue  
With the churn & yearn of primal fear:  
No more to see you smile, your love's untrue.

Each time we meet again like déjà vu  
We touch, we kiss, we cross the next frontier.  
I know I never can say no to you:  
No, not when you say you love me, true.











We speak of sisters,  
yours, the nineteen kids  
your mother bore like a good Catholic.  
She still takes the girls  
to Mass, and you tell me,  
it's their business.

Standing in the torch  
of the Pipilo we find  
the time of mixed messages.  
You say we should go dancing, it's  
good for the soul, a little  
harmless fun before Sunday.  
We look down into the city  
as we walk  
                    to the sky,  
booby-trapped sentences  
tearing at the fabric  
of smiling tourist interest.

I should not lose you in this maze.  
And yet I want you  
to taste some of my life  
in this world so familiarly yours.



#### IV. B.C.—D.F.—Visiting Friends in Mexico City

You come for the late-comer,  
punctually whisk me away  
into a city in the midst  
of daily re-definition and  
joke about the Plague  
God decided to hand your land.  
Her People.

They say the world grew jealous  
of Mexico, God  
had to even out the score,  
and he's working at it, still,  
my train was late,  
my glasses got stolen,  
your car was robbed last month.

We chat in French,  
the day after you tell me  
your English sister-in-law  
doesn't know what she's talking about,  
complaining daily about her  
underdeveloped life, saying  
you're partial.

Your sister-in-law may not believe  
in God, but she agrees with him:  
Everything would be perfect in Mexico  
without Mexicans, there'd be a plan for  
the traffic,  
air,  
water,  
enough, perhaps, for another green Jerusalem.

To me you explain: “Oui, c’est vrai,  
je me vois Mexicaine!” So we compare  
beauty, culture, your proud past,  
I tell you about Indios and you  
glance at your maid  
pouring dark coffee into our cups,  
ask: “Tu trouve ça beau?”

A child still I heard  
about the perfection of Moussolini’s  
trains, how for once,  
they ran on time,  
no thieves snatching purses  
from unlucky tourists, how  
there was order  
alongside the terror.

Here I suppose you got a raw deal:  
Your car disappeared  
with the same ease  
as the ninety-thousand Americans  
that stood in the way  
of a safe America.  
And picking your way through  
the various factions of the North,  
you can only fall back on yourselves,  
a people cursed to soothe  
our jealous world.

V. One month after arrival—To Zeus

1.

I was five years old when we reached Crete.  
Our island paradise had no electricity.  
In the center  
of the petrol lamp  
a flame rose each night,  
fragile, hot,  
sometimes it would break the glass.

*One month after arriving  
I could almost make my way  
to the center of town.  
It's easy, really,  
to sleep at different times  
Everything is so tiring.*

*Every day, spring showers  
hone the roads, marigolds  
brush against the mud  
It is a green country  
in October.*

In April the meadows came alive.  
From your cave, from  
snow-glazed mountains  
giving birth to a sea of poppies  
you'd come to distend  
the wool that kept me warm  
Replace it with your hands  
your breath a white cloud  
hanging over the White Mountains  
south of Chania.

*A strange fall  
lures me into a sandy grove  
the heat is thick  
with papayas hanging  
like green pumpkins  
from patches in the sky.*

Cloudy-white  
waves splash my legs  
drag rives of mud beneath my feet  
enclose my body as I float  
out to sea.

Once you know the point  
at which a wave breaks,  
you dive for its center  
feel its power graze your feet.

*Two months after arriving  
fevered memories mix  
little differences the houses all  
remind me of each other  
black grids grip glass  
my aching feet cool the red tiles  
climb the wall I  
press my head against  
the white stucco crossed  
by a thousand fissures  
skein catching me as I fall  
silent.*

Warmed by desert winds  
the island yields its  
fruit, my lover's eyes  
gaze over the shape  
of the future judge,  
and drying, Crete  
begins to sing.



I slide  
my fingers through  
dried petals of familiar jasmine,  
wonder about its journey  
from Asia  
to Europe  
to America,  
And step into my new world.

# Scott Ruescher

## At the Perryville Battlefield State Historic Site

When I asked him where the father of my father's mother's mother  
Might have been fighting when he took one where it counts  
For the Abolitionist cause, I couldn't have been happier  
To see the long-haired librarian in his plaid shirt, sneakers,  
And wrinkled khakis roll his considerable bulk,  
In a three-wheeled swivel chair that served as a helpful  
Extension of his body, first to the old desk-top computer  
To look it up in his database and match the number  
Of the Union troop that he was likely to have been in  
(With other conscripted soldiers from the tiny rural farm town  
Of Plain City, Ohio) with a battlefield map  
That indicated which platoon was standing where—  
And then, after that, and then, then and there, to see him roll  
All the way from the computer, across the expanse  
Of indoor-outdoor carpeting in the museum's basement library,  
To a screen door that looked out on a pleasant summer day,  
And to see him point up to a small gray goat barn in a corner  
Of a pasture and say, without even turning to look at me  
Or to appreciate the humorous beauty of the goats looking back, that  
That's where the troop of conscripted farmers and carpenters,  
Mechanics, handymen, coopers, clerks, teachers, and merchants  
Who may never have seen a black person in their lives,  
Unless on a trip to Columbus or outside of a church stop  
On the Underground Railroad, were standing when a cannonball  
From a Confederate artillery post down toward the road  
Hit the split-rail hickory fence that in turn projected a splinter  
In the exact direction, according to the photocopies  
Of his annual pension papers, of my great-great-grandfather's groin—  
An anecdote that finally got him, hearing me relate it  
At the screen door while his back was still turned, to turn around  
And look at me with a most quizzical expression.

# At the Childhood Home of Ozzy Osbourne

At 15 Lodge Road, around the corner from a long stretch  
Of grim gray “council housing” apartment complexes  
That shelter vulnerable refugees from places torn to pieces  
By the nail-stuffed bombs of angry fundamentalist warriors,

At a crook in the lane where the rock ‘n’ roll celebrity star  
Of his own reality television show, the notorious Ozzy Osbourne,  
First conceived of those blasphemously loud Black Sabbath songs  
Of an unintentionally funny, head-banging quality

That marked the heavy metal hey-day of the early 1970s,  
We happen upon the loyal, long-time neighbors  
Still holding out in their scruffy and contaminated  
Working-class element, their urban-slum enclave,

The elderly white Anglican gal with the fresh blue hairdo  
And the dreadlocked Jamaican dude on the blue sting-ray bike,  
Cataloguing the changes that have come in recent years  
To this very humble neighborhood where Ozzy came up

As a blue-collar Brummie, in the borough of Aston  
On the north side of Birmingham, north of the mills  
That William Blake derided, far from the Bournville hill  
With the Cadbury chocolate plant and the complex of cottages

And sweet little townhouses on the south side of town  
That the Quaker capitalist who owned that business  
Had built to keep his workers productive and happy—  
Cataloguing the changes that have come in recent years

And complaining aloud that since the Pakistanis’ arrival  
It isn’t any longer the peaceful mixture of dour Anglos  
And mellow West Indians that it used to be,  
That it no longer embodies the unlikely alliance of people



That made it a model of cross-cultural possibility,  
Where an unexpected blend of black and white Marleys,  
Those descended, like him, from the Bobs of Rastafarian fame  
And those declined, like her, from the Jacobs of Dickens's

*Christmas Carol* acclaim, could treat each other with dignity  
As they are doing now, these loyal, long-time neighbors,  
At the door of the rock star's home, this bland gray  
Cement-block townhouse from whose picture window comes,

Not as if out of nowhere, but out of the depths of hell,  
As we are about to ask if they knew Ozzy in person,  
The sound of a man in a rage letting his frustration out  
In Urdu, Pashto, or Punjab, screaming bloody murder

At someone in his family who's been stuck with him at home  
For too damn long in those uncomfortably close quarters  
Whimpering behind a closed door, cowering in a corner,  
Hiding behind the bathroom door, or standing ground

Before him in the kitchen. His rebellious son, maybe.  
His longsuffering wife, perhaps. Or, if it has come to that,  
His disappointed mother, who's been nagging him all summer  
To get off his duff, get off the dole, and get some sort

Of job for a change. Whatever it takes to make him feel  
Proud about *something*, for Allah's almighty sakes,  
Like he did back home when he and his brother had  
That successful little recycling business, back in big Islamabad.

## One Autumn Day Last Year

*I think I cherish most, as the archaic language of letters  
Displayed in glass cases at battleground museums  
In the American South would have it, and to my breast  
Hold dearest, as one might have written to his mother or lover  
To reassure her that he is reading the Bible or looking  
At her picture, the moment at the Harvard Art Museum, here  
In Cambridge, Massachusetts, one autumn day last year,  
When Arielle Jiang, a classical musician and arts education  
Student from China, whose first name in Mandarin  
Is supposed to be pronounced more or less as “Schweer,”  
Studying, in a gallery of prints and paintings by Winslow Homer,  
Snippets of sheet music from some of those songs  
That he illustrated for an issue of *Harper’s Weekly*  
During the Civil War, at my request put her soft porcelain face  
As close as she was allowed to the frame on the wall,  
Inspected the measures between the graphic vignettes  
Which Homer had drawn with maudlin grace in the margins,  
And sight-read effortlessly, in a melodious whisper  
That was sure not to attract the attention of the guards,  
Not the melody to *The men will cheer, the boys will shout,  
The ladies they will all turn out*, with that lyric about  
All of us feeling *gay* again, in the original meaning of a word  
I would have been happy to define for her, if she was aware  
Only of its connotation for “homosexual” or “queer,”  
And not the rousing, doubly exclamatory shout  
Of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again, Hurrah,  
Hurrah!”, but, with a quiet gusto a soldier might have given it  
Had it been a special song from the patriotic repertoire  
Of Genghis Khan’s troops marching the Silk Road  
In the thirteenth century, or of Mao’s Red Army  
Conquering Chiang Kai-shek less than a century before,  
The refrain of another song, “Battle Hymn of the Republic,”  
By Julia Ward Howe, that I’d learned way back  
In elementary school, in Westerville, Ohio, in 1962  
Or so, with lyrics sung to the tune of “John Brown’s Body”  
That were known to be a favorite of Abraham Lincoln’s  
And obviously also the source, in 1968, in that speech  
To the Memphis sanitation workers the night before he died,*

Of Martin Luther King's claim that his eyes had seen  
"The glory"—hallelujah!—"of the coming of the Lord."

# Rain Dance

On the other side of San Juan Chamula, beyond the simple  
Cathedral on the *zócalo*, the town square, where priests in white tunics  
Bless pregnant women with bottles of Coca Cola, at an open-air café  
With a picturesque view of a churchyard where his revered  
Elders are buried, while a raucous parrot chattered bold accusations  
From a cage in the corner of the patio, we treated Roberto,

Our self-appointed guide, within the space of an hour,  
Not just to the house special (grilled meats on pasta) on his day off  
From busing dishes at a four-star hotel in San Cristóbal de las Casas,  
But also to four small bottles of Victoria *cerveza*  
And three additional shots of *pox*, that Mexican moonshine  
Pronounced to rhyme with *slosh*, on top of those that he'd been pulling

All afternoon from a repurposed Fanta bottle as we walked  
Up the mountain highway, all of which conspired to make him rise  
With a shout from his chair at our table near the bar, not far  
From a television broadcasting a Mexico City soccer game,  
To dance in ecstasy to the sound of recorded marimba music  
That the mild-mannered manager was playing for our pleasure

On the overhead sound system, while his assistants tried  
To keep Roberto from making a scene, which only egged him on  
And abetted his inebriation and his ability to sing, enthralled  
By his solo bacchanalia, *¡Bailemos! ¡bailemos! ¡bailemos!*,  
While we continued quietly to share a plate of *chile verde enchilada*  
At our table near the bar, with rice, cole slaw, lime, *trucha*, slices

Of *aguacate*, two ears of grilled *elote*, and two bottles of Victoria  
Beer for ourselves, as a tropical storm that Roberto himself,  
For all we knew, calling forth primeval atavistic Maya shaman power,  
Had summoned for us, roared up the valley from San  
Cristóbal to greet us, with his rain dance making it drum  
A contrapuntal marimba beat on the corrugated fiberglass roof.

## Bicentennial

Before she did the deed, before she took the rope  
And slung it over the pipe in the basement of her building  
In Salt Lake City, before she climbed onto the chair,  
Slipped the noose around her neck, and kicked  
The chair out from under her, she was so incredibly sick  
Of the manic depression and the medication she took  
To keep the episodes away, that it gave her some relief,  
I realize now, twenty years after her death during Y2K,  
If she had called at an unexpected hour to say  
That the FBI, or the CIA, was gassing her apartment again,  
To hear me do my *a cappella* versions of songs we'd heard  
At concerts that summer, in June, July, and August, 1976,  
When we worked together on the nut-butter line  
At the natural foods factory and shared an apartment  
In a barrio of Boston—my mock-soulful shout-outs  
To Ray Charles rhapsodizing “America the Beautiful”  
And the Four Tops choreographing “Bernadette”  
In harmony at the stadium in Lynn; my heavy-lidded riff  
On the Grateful Dead doing “Brokedown Palace”  
And “Box of Rain” at the Orpheum by the Common;  
My Caribbean-inflected impersonation of Taj Mahal  
Singing “Take a Giant Step” at the Opera House;  
Even my take on Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*  
By Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops at the bicentennial  
Concert on the Charles River Esplanade, which,  
Given its rhythmic crescendo, its bombastic celebration  
Of military might, the absence of a lip-synch-able libretto,  
And the possible confusion that might be caused  
By the coincidence of the Russian defense against Napoleon  
And the resistance to British aggression led by Oliver Perry  
On Lake Erie in the War of 1812, I always saved  
For the climactic *ka-boom* of crackling cannonballs  
And exploding fireworks from my chest at the end.

# Emily R. Daniel

## Visitation Dreams

*after Adrienne Rich*

I.

I dialed his number  
it rang Electric Light Orchestra

from a phone hooked to the wall  
by a long coil unfurled

just wanted to tell him  
in partial French for no reason

to be his own ally, gentle  
but willing to fight

he'd said he would answer anytime, but he is  
*away from the phone right now*

last I remember it was in his hand  
and the message read to hold on tight

fingers curled into the bowl of our palms  
we call it carrying, but it is something else

what is left behind rots eventually:  
expanding, then folding in on itself

haven't seen rain for weeks, but the earth  
still sometimes gives way under foot

there are fires we hope will become ember by morning  
stay up just in case

flames sprout tentacles, blaze exponential  
hearth overflows then disappears

wish it to hold  
since we have no other way

II.

his expression told me  
he could only stay for a moment

that he was glad  
earth-side time would be brief

long enough but not for me, yes  
his face fell only a little

as I watched him melt into the ground  
waist deep, waving

## Tuesday, 10:15 a.m.

I stood at the copy machine  
he saw an invitation  
belt buckle pressed into my panty line  
paused, deep drag of my scent  
I held mine in did not turn my head did not see  
his face I imagined grinning, satisfied  
by how still I stood for him, man  
whose name I never knew  
except the name of his sigh, his right  
to breathe me in, collide just long enough  
to hear the silence of a throat closing  
around a breath where a shout should have been



# Decline

*After Jenny Xie*

Handful of cast-away elders

*La Feria*: taken away from homes on untilled land

Their genial linen and limp hair

They forgot how to grimace as action heroes do, as if facing down  
an enemy

Bodies offered to swallowing sky

Cerebral pleasure caving in

Bland bread pudding in evenings, one person per room

Where to find their expectation, when life has outlived its meaning

It was the return to adolescence, those blurred years

They never understood the dying dwindle by growing heavy

And that there would be no children

Whose eyes would light like their own

## Two Weeks after George Floyd's Death

Today we clean house together  
though it is bright and mild outside where the breeze  
on her face while bike riding is heaven  
and our Japanese Lilac tree makes shadows  
she pretends are fellow superheroes  
ready to fly, ready to fight.

Sirens sound from all directions  
so frequently we wonder if it's the same one circling  
or new emergencies every five minutes.  
We cannot determine how close they will come,  
whose need they answer.

She holds the mop in protest, pushing  
wet dust bunnies in wayward motions,  
defying the list I made that clearly read sweep first,  
and I make a joke about how hard it seems for her to contribute  
to the cleanliness she knows at home.

She looks up at me, lower lids holding tears  
and says *how*  
*how can anyone be happy*  
*how can anyone be happy with everything*  
*going on in the world?*  
She brings a hand to her throat in a loose hold,  
confirms there is an exhale that follows an inhale  
there is a pulse, there is  
her mother's heartbeat beside her ear  
as I pull her to my chest.

# The Clinton Legacy

*If she'd gotten down on her knees  
more  
he wouldn't have gone looking for someone  
who would*  
she said with a mouth that  
without a doubt  
had a dick in it last night  
hard to imagine anyone wants it  
there  
even after a shower  
with that fig scented soap lingering  
on the shaft  
with no time  
for odor to develop in crevices  
once it hits the throat's edge  
smell matters less than controlling  
the gag reflex  
anyway  
it's a job for which liking it  
is not a prerequisite  
some things  
have to be done  
consider it insurance  
if your eyes water  
tell him that's what happens  
when your mouth holds  
something so big  
that can't be swallowed

# Lindsay Gioffre

## The Hunt

I.

There is a fawn in the woods  
unaccompanied by its mother.

It bleats—or is that sheep—  
but she utters no response.

There is a wolf: crouched and hungry,  
salivating a river that carries away

the ants at his feet.

II.

How tender, how soft. How instinctually urgent. How red  
his muzzle becomes as the fawn falls silent. Artemis weeps.  
Hunters curse her father. The virginal moon begins to  
wane.

# Toxicodendron Radicans [Sonnet 1]

*toks-ee-ko-DEN-dron RAD-ee-kans*

There's ivy growing in my head, pushing  
out against my skull. Cracking it, one leaf  
tentatively reaches for the sunlight  
before the rest burst through. I have migraines

that not even Eve can alleviate,  
no matter how much she wishes to pluck  
these leaves. My mother gave up long ago;  
the pink blisters swallowing her hands whole.

Ideas turn to soil—words decompose  
as the ivy's poison seeps into grey  
matter. Eaten alive. Lobotomize  
me with herbicides, becoming Eden:

root my mind in unimaginable  
perfection. Cast away all its toxins.

## Hedera Helix [Sonnet 2]

*HED-ur-uh HEE-licks*

The promises you made me encircled  
my heart like ivy, delicate tendrils  
tentatively spreading to fill every  
empty space between fragile bones. Crawling

from one failing organ to the next: leaves  
ushering in revitalization;  
sunlight warming the emptiness within  
ribs. There are days when I want to cut myself

open—unworthy to be made terra  
cotta—and let the vines pour out for you.  
Praying to be touched by such a green thumb.  
Yet, this is not that kind of love. There's no

roots feasting off white blood cells. No vines in  
tender veins. You've chosen to nurture me.

# **A Mother's Love is Our First Heartbreak**

We place them on  
the curb, trash bags

full of lawn debris  
from when the tress

exhaled. I exhaled.  
My mother exhaled

smoke from her  
cigarette that refused

to stay lit, forced out  
by a breeze shaking

the trees. Until one  
comes down through

the center of my chest.  
Hearth torn in two.

Home no more a place  
for my heart than

cigarette-calloused,  
rake-blistered hands.

## **I Slept with a Siren because Her Breasts Looked like Sea Glass**

I have thrown my heart to sea. Thinking it would be safer there, amongst ravenous sharks, than in the palm of your hand. Memories of you still haunt, each one tinged red. Covering me in blood; chumming vicious waters with my body. (Did you know they can smell blood from a mile away?) I wonder where the undertow will carry my heart: will it be speared through the bow of shipwreck, will it wash up on shore as a prize for a girl building sand castles. The perfect topper for a queen's tower. But this thing is no beautiful product of an "x" on a map. She should set it adrift again, letting the sharks take hold of the remnants that never made it through your teeth. Each empty ventricle spreading across the water's surface like moonlight. A pitiful piece of meat sacrificed to Amphitrite. But it is not enough. Not enough to explain what happens to a man who goes down with his ship or a person who simply cannot muster the words, I do not love you anymore.



# Contributor Notes

**Lisa Rachel Apple** is a writer, teacher, and learner who lives and works in Washington, DC. She studied creative writing at Drew University where she was the 2009 recipient of the Academy of American Poets College Prize and Christopher Goin Memorial Prize. When not writing, she can be found riding her bike around the city and providing special education services to middle school math students. This is her publishing debut.



**Elizabeth Bayou-Grace** is a poet, musician, and activist living in Easthampton, Massachusetts, with her husband, dog, and cat. She received her BA from Warren Wilson College and her MFA in Creative Writing from Texas State University. Elizabeth has performed at Round Top Poetry Festival, Wakarusa Music Festival, and ArtOutside. More of her work is forthcoming in a split collection of poetry, *Fire In Paradise*, co-authored with her father, Steven Lewis, from Read650, in 2021.



**Devon Bohm** received her BA from Smith College and earned her MFA with a dual concentration in Poetry and Fiction from Fairfield University. In 2011, she was awarded the Hatfield Prize for Best Short Story, and in 2020, she was presented with an honorable mention in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future contest. Her work has also been featured in publications such as *Labrys*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *Spry*. Follow her on Instagram @devonbohm.



**Beatrix Bondor** is a rising junior (currently on a leave of absence) at Princeton University from New York City. She is studying literature, French language and culture, poetry, and history there, and she is the Poetry Editor for the Nassau Literary Review. Her inexhaustible sources of inspiration include Harry Bauld, skyscrapers, Linden Lane, excellent meals, wending conversations, and unlined paper.



**Jill Burkey**'s work won the Mark Fischer Poetry Prize, the Denver Woman's Press Club Unknown Writers' Contest, and others. Her poems have appeared in *Pilgrimage Magazine*, *Paddlefish*, *Soundings Review*, *Front Range Review*, and others. She earned a BA in English and business with endorsements in secondary education from Nebraska Wesleyan University. From 2011 – 2016, Jill taught poetry to hundreds of elementary and high-school students as a writer-in-residence for the Colorado Humanities Writers-in-the Schools program.



**Emily R. Daniel**'s debut chapbook, *Life Line*, was selected as a winner of the Celery City Chapbook contest and published in 2019. Her work has been featured in *The Bangalore Review* and *Sylvia Magazine*. Emily lives with her family in Kalamazoo, Michigan.



**John Delaney** In 2016, I moved out to Port Townsend, WA, after retiring as curator of historic maps at Princeton University. I've traveled widely, preferring remote, natural settings, and am addicted to kayaking and hiking. In 2017, I published *Waypoints* (Pleasure Boat Studio, Seattle), a collection of place poems. *Twenty Questions*, a chapbook, appeared in 2019 from Finishing Line Press.



Teacher, researcher, writer, reader of international literature and poems from many lands, **Gilaine Fiezmont** started writing on a dare when she was twelve. Born in Switzerland, her first immigration experience brought her to Los Angeles, California, in 1976. After college, she spent a gap year in Mexico, a second immigration experience that crystallized in her five-part poem "Europe, Too, Came from Somewhere Else". Since returning to study linguistics, she has stayed in the City of Angels.



**Gillian Freebody** is thrilled to revisit the world of poetry after a too-long hiatus teaching writing and raising a family as a single-mother-by-choice. She finds inspiration from everyday experiences and nature, both of which transform into art when looked at in *the right way* (*the right way* being a completely individualized experience). Poetry is a gift, to both writer and reader, and Gillian feels deeply grateful to be part of the writing community once again.



**William French** Retired health care professional and professor emeritus. Have published nonfiction, some poetry, and some fiction (including genre fiction).



**Lindsay Gioffre** is a poet from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They currently reside in Orlando, Florida.



**Kirsten Hippe-Rychlik** lives in Colorado with her family.



In another life, she runs her own business as a consultant for small businesses and nonprofits. In this one, she writes poetry to share those beautiful agonies failed by words alone. “and we are echoes” is her first poem to be published.

**Monique Jonath** I'm 18 years old and was born and raised in



Oakland, California, by my Jewish father and Congolese mother. I've been a dancer my whole life and started writing poetry my freshman year of high school. I was a finalist for the title of Oakland Youth Poet Laureate in 2018 and 2019. My work was featured in the YouthSpeaks Anthology, “Between My Body and the Air” (2020). I'm a student at Brown University.

Contact me! [moniquejonath@gmail.com](mailto:moniquejonath@gmail.com)

**Robyn Joy** has been published in two volumes of *One Imagined*



*Word at a Time*, The Hippocrates Initiative's 2020 anthology and by *West Trade Review* as an Online Exclusive. She was also a finalist for Hunger Mountain's Ruth Stone Poetry Prize in Spring 2020. She lives in Vermont with her husband and cat, while enjoying assembling art and delicious food, dissecting dreams and thoughts, communing with animals, and practicing

yin yoga.

**Michelle Lerner** received an MFA in Poetry from The New



School. She's been a finalist for the Poetry Box Chapbook Prize, Bridge Eight Fiction Prize, and Book Pipeline Contest, and semifinalist for the Pamet River Prize. Her chapbook *Protection* is forthcoming from Poetry Box and her poems can be found in numerous journals including *Lips*, *Paterson Literary Review*, and *Adanna*, as well as several anthologies, and online

fora such as *VQR's* Instagram series.

**Monaye** uses language and fine art as a means to create innovative,



transformative, and immersive stories of power and femininity. Her perspective aims to combat injustice and empower women through the influence of political theories such as Intersectionality and Africana Womanism. Monaye holds a B.A. in Gender Women and Sexuality Studies.

**Oak Morse** lives in Houston, Texas, where he teaches creative



writing and performance, and leads a youth poetry troop, the Phoenix Fire-Spitters. He was the winner of the 2017 Magpie Award for Poetry in Pulp Literature, and a semi-finalist for the 2020 Pablo Neruda Prize. He is a Houston Texans' Stars in The Classroom recipient and a Pushcart Nominee. Oak's work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Pank*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*,

*Menacing Hedge*, *Cosmonaut Avenue*, *Gone Lawn*, among others.

**Paula Reed Nancarrow** is a poet and storyteller living in Minneapolis. She has performed at the Minnesota Fringe Festival, the Moth Grand Slam at St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater, and other venues. Her poetry is published or forthcoming in *bluepepper*, *Neologism*, and *Tiny Seed*.



**Han Raschka** is an up and coming writer from Wisconsin, but don't tell them that. When not wrangling their three dogs or drinking far too expensive coffee, they can be found taking workshops through the San Francisco Creative Writing Institute to hone their abilities. Han is currently preparing to send their recently completed chapbook, tentatively titled *Sometimes God Foreshadows*, to various presses. They have work forthcoming in *Sapphic Writers Collective*.



**Scott Ruescher** has been contributing new poems, many of them about travel and all of them about "place," to such publications as *Pangyrus*, *Cutthroat*, *Negative Capability*, *The Evening Street Review*, *Solstice*, *Ohio Today*, and *About Place*. Some of the pieces in *Waiting for the Light to Change*, a collection published by Prolific Press in 2017, won annual prizes from *Able Muse*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and the New England Poetry Club.



**Karo Ska** (she/they) is a South Asian & Eastern European non-binary femme, migrant poet, living on occupied Tongva Land (aka Los Angeles) with their black cat muse. Anti-capitalist & anti-authoritarian, they find joy where they can. Their first chapbook, *gathering grandmothers' bones* was released on February 29th, 2020. For updates, follow them on instagram @karooskaa or check out their website karoska.com.



**Jeddie Sophronius** was born in Jakarta, Indonesia. He is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Virginia and the poetry editor at Meridian. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Iowa Review*, and elsewhere.



**Rebbekah Vega-Romero** is an NYC native, a proud member of Actor's Equity, and a triracial Latina bruja. A YoungArts award-winning writer, Rebbekah graduated from Boston University with a Bachelor's in English Literature and Theatre Arts. Rebbekah has a wide-ranging career as an actress, from her "luminous" portrayal of Maria in *West Side Story* at the 5th Avenue Theatre, to her upcoming short film, "The Question," which she also wrote and produced. Her poetry has been featured in *The Quaranzine Zine*. Rebbekah hopes her work will inspire other mixed-race girls to realize that "there's a place for us." Visit her virtually at [www.RebbekahVegaRomero.com](http://www.RebbekahVegaRomero.com).



Born and raised in Montana, **Josiah Patterson Wheatley**



has been a baker, guardian ad litem, special education teacher, and late night bus bouncer. He worries a lot, writes poetry sometimes, and possesses both a whimsical appreciation of nature and a healthy curiosity of the supernatural. This is his first publication.