



LOTUSEATER

ISSUE 18

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lotus-eatermagazine.com
lotus-eatermagazine@hotmail.com

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Editors: Diana Mastrodomenico, Marco Costantini

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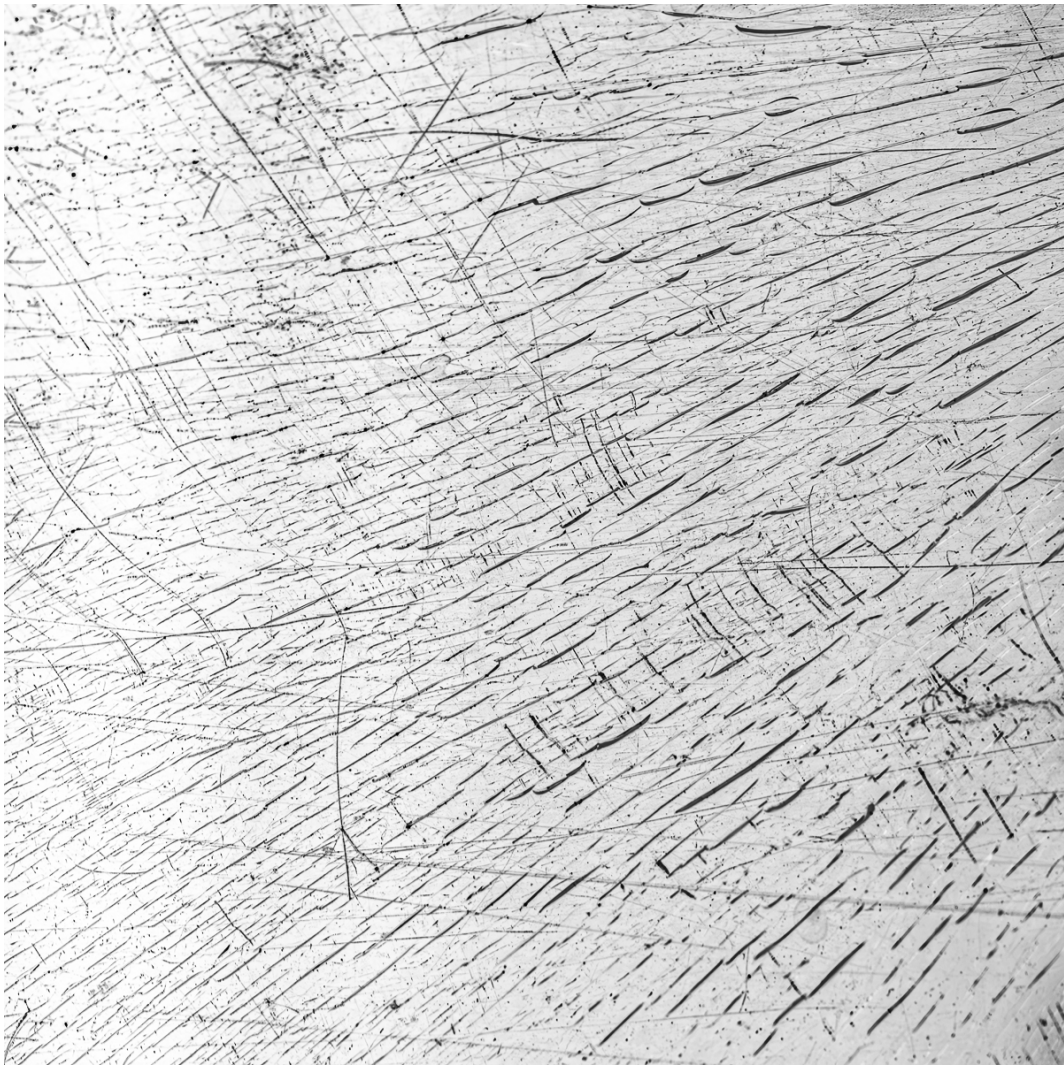
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Prose



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ALICE J MOONE

The Sea

It was as we came round a sharp right-hand bend, just before the campsite, that we'd hit the small hump-back bridge. My father always took it too fast, and the car would fly into the air. A moment of weightlessness, where you felt suspended in time and your stomach did a little flip, was followed by an abrupt shudder as four wheels landed with a thump back on the tarmac. We in the back would egg him on, urging him to quicken the pace. The higher the car flew and the harder the bump when we came back to earth, the better we liked it. It was always just at that moment, as we bounced out of our seats, heads hitting the roof, that we got a first glimpse of the sea. A deep shimmering blue, under a heavy sky. Calling to us.

we didn't always know what was expected

We were all to run into the sea. Waves ripped over the horizon, while the wind stippled the surface of the blue-black water. Before I knew it, I was alone with just the shouts of the others, whipping away into the distance on the back of a ferocious wind. Standing on the edge, with the hiss of brine at my toes, I thought of turning back. I could see my father beckoning me, though, laughing mirthlessly, but making an order of sorts, a challenge. It was a swirl of gritty ice that hit me head on, as I plunged into the surf. A strong surge threw me up and tossed me into the sharp air, then reclaimed me. The dragging tide yanked my body under and forced a mouthful of saltiness into my lungs. A rock seemed to come out of nowhere and scraped its nails across the numb skin of my back, before the sea hurled me, shaken, onto the naked shoreline. There, the ceaseless chilling refrain of laughter broke over me, again and again.

or what the right answers to his questions were

One night I dreamt I went collecting shells. The surf shuddered at my feet as I walked along the shoreline in the half-light of early morning. Conch, junonia, lightning whelk, murex, tulip banded, cockle, cerith, spotted slipper, sand dollar. Their names felt sun-baked and salty in my mouth as I said them out loud. Smooth, rough, plain, or intricately patterned, some with the most complex of patinas. Each one a unique shape, colour, texture. When dawn had fully broken, sending honey

rays over the sand, I meandered slowly back to the beach house. My father was up early. In my dream it was just the two of us. I tipped the shells onto the deck at his feet to inspect and, picking them up one by one, named them for him. A smile crept across his face as he looked closely at every one, and I smiled too. Each shell in turn reflected back to me from the dull pools of his eyes. I collected them all into a pile; Conch, junonia, lightning whelk, murex, tulip banded, cockle, cerith, spotted slipper, sand dollar. When I looked back up, the smile still on my face, he was gone.

often it seemed that there wasn't a right answer at all

The rocks were alternately rough then smooth. As we made our way over them, sharp splinters of slate dug into the soft skin of my insoles, which were then soothed by a sun-warmed silkiness. My father led the way, jumping from boulder to boulder, leaving me to clamber, crab-like, in his wake. Looking up, I could see him ahead, bent over, staring into a sparkling pool left by the retreating tide. Balancing precariously, one hand clasping a plastic bucket, and the other a net, I edged closer and peered in. A livid pinkish-red anemone, tentacles wafting in the cold clear water, clung to the side of the rock while a small brown fish swam lazily to and fro. As our shadows loomed over it, the little fish all but disappeared into a crevice, just a flicking tail marking its presence. My father took the net from me and jabbed at the fish, forcing it from its sanctuary. It darted around the pool in a frantic zigzagging dance. I tried to grab the net from his hand, but he wouldn't let go, just kept prodding, silently, while the fish swam faster and faster, in ever more intricate patterns through the water, its eyes wide and staring. The sky darkened as a cloud obscured the sun and the stinging needles of a sudden squall sent a chill through me.

even saying nothing could be wrong

Money was tight when we moved house, so mum altered the curtains from the old lounge and hung them in my bedroom. They were a dark bluish green, almost black, but with a strange gleam that you only noticed when they caught the light. They reminded me of muscle shells, or the glittering phosphorescence seen in the wake of a boat at night. The fabric was dense with a thick lining, so kept the room completely dark. When I was lying in bed unable to sleep, usually when my father was punishing me with silence for some confusing crime that I didn't understand, thoughts of the sea would come to comfort me. Then I'd pull the curtains open a few inches and flap the material so that it floated in clumsy waves, just to see the streetlight illuminating that strange iridescence.

sometimes I just lay in the sea,

Popcorn. Do you know that tune? It was recorded in the 1960s, before you were born, so probably not. According to Wikipedia, it's the fifth track of the album *Music to Moog By*. And it's the 131st best-selling single of all time. Of ALL time. Unbelievable but true. It's hard to describe music in words, but it's a kind of rhythmic popping, with a background vibrato sound. Repetitive. There was a café-bar opposite the campsite that played it all the time. Over and over. And it was really loud. Even when we were in the caravan with all the doors and windows shut, stifled, you could hear the bass reverberating, relentlessly. It was just by the beach, that campsite, that café-bar. Soft white sand led down to a warm mirror of water. That day, I didn't want to go in splashing and shouting with the others. Quietly moving away from them, I found my own small space in that vast languid sea. Lying on my back, arms and legs splayed like a starfish or a star, I closed my eyes to the searing sun and began to drift, lost in my own imaginings. The throbbing popcorn beat was a distant persistent refrain, while superimposed over it was my father's voice, calling me over and over again. Endlessly repeating. Competing then merging with the never-ending thrum, as if my name had always been the single repeating lyric.

floating adrift

Do you remember that one night? The day had been cool, and in the evening, a few clouds began to scud across the darkening sky, before separating out into ever lengthening trails of pinkish grey. Row upon row of them. Cirrocumulus, cirrus, altostratus, altocumulus. You told me it was called a mackerel sky, or sometimes buttermilk sky. Rain would certainly come soon, you said, followed by a warm spell. A moist heat had already begun to invade the air as the first heavy drops of rain wetted our bodies. There were eight of us altogether, the cousins I mean, and it seemed as if we all had the idea to run into the sea at the same moment. We crept out of earshot of the campsite and stripped down to our underwear. Our shouts and laughter were sucked into the humid salty air as we skidded in single file down the steep slope to the beach. Then we were over the rocks that hugged the tideline, before scattering into the brimming surf. A wild screeching rebounded off the rocks and I wasn't sure if that was us or some savage creatures we'd disturbed. Anything seemed possible. Suddenly we were all in amongst swirling waves and splashing against the incoming tide. We swam until we reached a point where the waves were just huge swells that lifted us off our feet, so that we bobbed like buoys in the cold inky water. It was all blackness by then, with sea and sky indistinguishable. The shouts died away until all that could be heard was the roar of the wind and the seething sea all around us. No one said a word, we just let ourselves be

carried back to shore, while the warm summer rain drenched the dark crescent of sand before us. But as soon as the tide washed us back up onto the beach, we ran back in again, screaming as loudly as we could, wanting more. Wanting for this freedom never to end.

not knowing what to do

Have you ever looked a barracuda right in the face? No, I mean it. Stared straight into its eyes, unflinching? It's a predatory and fearsome creature, you know. When I first caught sight of him, snake-like, lurking under the boat, I looked quickly away, afraid of the brutality in his gaze. Conscious of my overloud breaths, amplified through the snorkel, I took in a lungful of air and held it, not wanting to let go. As darkness began to invade the edges of my vision, a flash of memory came to me unbidden. My father, mouth set, eyes a cool green, one hand round my brother's throat, pinning him to the wall, the other punching the door. There was spittle on his lip, and he threw out a gabble of words into the air, so loud that I couldn't make out what he was saying. I blinked the memory away and wondered, well, what is a barracuda after all? It's only a fish. I exhaled and returned his stare. With a shiver of glittering scales, he was gone.

other times I wrote messages in the sand

Back then I would often dive down and skim along the seabed. Then I'd try to lie very still, with the bare skin of my stomach touching the gritty sand and stay there for as long as I could. I'd cling to a rock embedded in the ocean's floor, if I happened to find one there, or clutch on to a clump of seaweed, to anchor me. I don't know why I had such an intense longing for the sea's bed. It was Wittgenstein, I think, who likened religion to the tranquillity at the bottom of the sea. He said that, at its deepest point the water remains calm no matter how high the waves on the surface might be. Maybe that was what I was searching for, that sublime level of spiritual calmness. Perhaps it requires a particular kind of faith to achieve that though, because for me, every time, my lungs would begin to scream and my body ached to float, so that I'd burst through the surface of the water, gasping for breath.

but the tide washed them away

It was a few years later that we chartered that catamaran. The day we planned to set sail for the Channel Islands, strong winds were forecast but our course fell just on the edge of the front, so we knew it could miss us altogether. None of us wanted to idle away time in Plymouth, foregoing a day's holiday, so we decided to chance it.

Skimming through the water with a stiff breeze behind us, we passed the point of no return just as a heavy belly of purple-black clouds closed in on us. The boat was all at once catapulted into the oncoming surf and jolted lopsidedly as one hull hit a breaker, before slamming back onto the churning mass of water beneath us. There was no longer sound, or there was too much sound, until a snatch of words was flung out from someone, but it fragmented in the wind and got lost in the sheets of rain. I slunk into the cabin early, leaving the others to it. For hours I lay on my bunk, repeatedly sensing each time the whole vessel flew out of the water, halted momentarily in the air, and then smacked back onto the solid surface of the water. I was convinced we were going to die, but it also felt comforting somehow, maybe because it reminded me of that hump-back bridge. Out loud I found myself reciting Hölderlin's words, 'Let ourselves be cradled, as on the swaying skiff of the sea', over and over.

before anyone could see

The box jellyfish is considered to be the most venomous creature in the world. It has 60 tentacles, all equipped with millions of stinging cells that have little harpoons attached to poison-filled bulbs. They look so innocuous, as they waft past, very serene, whereas in fact they are quite evil. They wait for you to lower your guard before they go in for the kill. The guide told us all this as we sat on the boat, chugging our way out to the barrier reef. Although there would only be a fatality every four years or so, they weren't taking any chances. We were all required to wear neoprene suits that covered 80 percent of the body, the remainder being dealt with by way of the diving mask and snorkel equipment. For weeks leading up to the trip I'd imagined diving into the sea with only the bare minimum of flesh covered. In my dreams I'd felt the cool-warm waters lapping against my skin. Instead, I found myself flopping over the edge of the boat, wrapped from head to toe in a plastic film. But imagine being naked in the water, surrounded by such elegant, lacey creatures as the box jellyfish. I think I would just have to reach out and caress one, allow it to wrap its long tentacles around my arm in a tingling embrace. Do you not think it would be better to swim straight into the silkiness of that swarming bloom than to tread water, dreading the smack of the sting?

there was no one we could tell

For years I had this recurring dream. I was running through the dunes, scared and alone. The sand sucked in my feet, so that everything seemed to be in slow motion. My breath came in hot waves, though the air around me was cool and clammy. When I reached the top of the last dune, I could see an ochre sandy pebble-strewn

beach stretching out before me, with the sea just a vague glimmer in the distance. I knew I had to reach the water, to plunge into its cool depths. There was something of vital importance there that I needed to find. According to Jung, such dreams signify that it takes great bravery to attain the treasure that lies hidden in the huge ocean of the unconscious. I still don't know what it was I yearned to uncover, but my courage wasn't enough because, no matter how fast I ran, I never got any closer to that mesmerising shoreline. I didn't look back, but I could feel hot sticky breath on my neck.

we thought no one would believe us

The year he died we hired the cottage in Waterford. There was a drought that summer and the reservoir had run dry, so we had no water. Do you remember? For a week we went without bathing and a sour smell hugged our bodies. One day we clambered over the rocks, the four of us. Salt-baked skin, sweat cooling and drying in the sea wind. The cove was an empty arc of beach, with rocks closing in on the periphery. Just as the day was turning to evening, and a crispness had crept unnoticed into the air, we stripped naked and ran laughing into the cold clear waters of Kilmurrin.

we only really had each other

I'm standing on a blustery outcrop of rock, looking down at the commotion of river below me. Heavy rains have swelled the waters that, only a few days ago, were quiet. The flat glass-like façade carries along enormous branches wrenched from the trees by the storm. Slowly, majestically, they glide downriver. Who would guess at the turmoil unfolding beneath? There the current exerts its full force on the riverbed, dragging small rocks and vegetation from their anchor points, and driving them along a reluctant hectic route. At the river's edge, the frothing waters simmer and bubble on the rocks, before hurtling onward to their destination - the open sea. Unbelievable to think that this mass of seething liquid is actually made up of billions upon billions of tiny droplets, moving relentlessly forward before they lose themselves in the vast, unfathomable, complicated sea.

MICHAEL CULLINANE

The Space Between Words

We watch you on the train, your quaking hands fumbling, attempting to pry open a bag of sour cream and onion flavored potato chips. We glance up from our phones and wonder what kind of person eats chips at nine in the morning, while you stare at the map, maybe wondering where it ends. We're glad we're not you.

You repeat 'Belmont' under your breath almost violently, and we consider turning up our AirPods to drown you out. But we hesitate. You drop the chips and press your fists into your temples hoping to charge the burnt out lightbulb that is your brain while we tap screens and press ourselves to pity you—an obsolete model from a bygone era, battery in the red, maybe three percent. We are the Galaxy Pixel Pro X, some of us Mini, most of us Max, all brand new, unboxed, battery life eternal.

We want to call you crazy, but that word is taboo, and we've grown cautious with what we say and even what we think. It would be easier to pretend you're not there, but you make it impossible. On the platform, waiting for the train, we bore witness and cringed at your son's antipathy for you with his repeated shouts of 'Belmont! And don't forget again!' from the speaker on your phone. And now you whisper and stare and pull at the ends of a potato chip bag as slippery as your mind.

You're easily distracted in a way that we are not. Our brains work to pretend the train ride isn't happening, while your brain searches for light to fill the emptiness. And you seem to find light in the man in the seat facing you. He's well-dressed with his woolen gray overcoat and cashmere maroon scarf tucked into the lapels. You leer, desperate and needy, like you want to invite him to sit across from you while you drink coffee. Can't you see you're making him uncomfortable? He had been one of us. We're glad we're not him.

He sits cross-legged with his foot on his knee. The toe of his polished brown shoe nervously dances, and you watch him wildly scribble a blur of shapes—triangle, question mark, oval, diamond.

Then something curious happens. The man's toe slows, crawling, creating not abstract art, but a purposeful form. Up, halfway down, right, up, down. You visualize the shape in your head, and we see it too. The nice-looking, well-dressed man drew an H.

We see your eyes are mystified, and we, too, are mystified, though we don't show it. Because, really, what's so mystifying about a well-dressed man on our train drawing an H with his shoe?

He's not finished. Down, up, across, back, down, across, back, down, across. He drew a capital E.

Your eyes. So sweet, so naive. We see inside your poor little mind, believing the well-dressed man is messaging you. But something is off. We too saw the H and we too saw the E, and now we can't help but wonder if, indeed, the moment has turned strange.

Our subtle glances x-ray; our imaginations wander then run. Deep in the hollow we see a memory consuming you—an unrecorded home video of your precious little boy creeping behind you while you cooked dinner, hugging your knees. Then, even deeper in your mind, you remember the bedtime game you played, him on his belly, you tracing letters on his back. He, always so bright, never mistaken, even discerning your lowercase 'a' from your lowercase 'd'. You penned secret messages and laughed. The memory—so crystalline. We see your panic. You have traveled back in time. You wonder if you left him at home without a sitter.

Still, the well-dressed man is not finished, and somehow the two of you have become more interesting than our phones. Down, across. That's easy. An L. He paused. Then, almost seductively, his toe dropped down, then up in a perfect loop. We saw on his face that he was done. The final letter—P.

The man spelled HELP with his toe. We sigh. So many words could have made our families or our roommates laugh over dinner. HELP is not one of them.

But you, you poor old lady, your eyes come alive. You lift your right foot high enough to grab the frayed hem of your sweatpants, and you pull with both hands until your ankle rests on your knee. And we know what you are going to do before you even do it, and we have renewed faith in our dinner conversation.

He watches you through peripheral vision. You spell slowly, with a nod after each letter. W-H-A-T-S.

But you stop.

We realize what you realize. You want to spell the next word: WRONG. But you can't. Because how do you signal the space between words? At one point, you likely had a code with your son. A little pat on his back, maybe? A clap of your hands?

The ponderance grows all-consuming, for you and then for us. For a beat, we sympathize. Because even our phones can't tell us how to form the space between words. But therein lies the difference between you and us: We don't care.

Your foot drops. We consider terrible questions. Are you noseblind to your tragedy? Don't you want to give up; don't you wish the entirety of it was over? But you carry on, using your cane to stand, lumbering over to him, leaning down, whispering in his ear, soft and gentle. We lean in and listen because, for our story to be complete, we must know.

'I'm here for you.'

Your words succeed in surprising us and, oddly, making us feel ashamed. He stands, mumbles an insult, harsh but not crude, and strides to the opposite side

of the train. He's not nice. And we appreciate him for making us feel better about ourselves.

You stand, feeble, pathetic, gripping the overhead handle, unsteady, pondering needless questions like, 'How does this gray handle stay tethered when everything everywhere feels so slippery?' Reality blazes. You are on a train. You look at the board; the dead lightbulbs blur and swirl and spiral in your head. We saw this coming. You have forgotten your stop.

Oh, you poor old lady. We do pity you, and we wish you were on our screens so we could read a thread of comments and understood how to react in this moment. All we wanted was get a little work done before work.

The man on the loudspeaker says, 'Belmont is next.' No spark in your eyes. We wish you realized how anxious you're making us—our heads and hearts pour over our grandmothers, the living and the dead, whispering golden rules into our puerile ears. One poor sap among us even thinks, 'What would Jesus do?' But we know helping would mean we had been watching and watching would obligate us to help. And didn't our mothers tell us that no good deed goes unpunished?

There exists an end of the line—a final destination where everyone must get off. At that point, someone will be required to help you.

We reconsider our dinner story. What if our roommates or wives or husbands or kids say, 'You really think that guy spelled HELP with his shoe?' Might they think we're crazy? Does the end of our line look like the end of yours?

We decide to keep all of this to ourselves.

The next stop is our stop, which leaves enough time to scan an article about healthy aging. The author provides bullet points; our minds form a checklist. Socialize. Crosswords. Exercise. Slow the boozing. No more bacon. No more burgers. Jesus, why did we eat fast food last night? At the first signs, we will take that pill they advertise on those god awful television commercials. Anything.

This is our stop. We won't say good-bye, but we will think of you often. And we want to express our deepest gratitude. Believe it or not, you have been most helpful. You taught us to appreciate all the simple things we take for granted. And most importantly, you taught us to do whatever it takes to keep from becoming you.

ANDI MYLES

Impressions from a Vacuum

Prologue

There is no sound in space.

No whirring, no engine thrusts, no clink of metal on metal. Total silence.

Sound, like light, travels in waves, brushing against molecules, causing vibrations that pass it along to the next—creating a dance party on a molecular level.

In a vacuum, there is nothing. No thing. No molecules. No atoms to carry sound waves.

In a vacuum, the scream—or the gasp?—of a human body sucked into the emptiness will not be heard.

Even if someone were present to hear it.

Act I

The room is not empty.

If I listen, I can hear him take a breath. I can hear the subtle whirring of his computer. And mine. Its fan works hard.

It overheats intermittently, turning on and off by itself. It has been with me for a long time. It has survived the jolts of airplanes and a late-night train ride through Bulgaria. It has been with me through five jobs, eight countries, and twenty-three cities.

It has been with me longer than he has.

~ ~ ~

He likes to call me wife. He says he likes the sound of it. He says he likes that it is not gender neutral like the Turkish word he grew up with, the one I prefer, 'eşim.' It means partner or match. I don't call him husband.

~ ~ ~

As a child, I wanted nothing more than to be an astronaut. I carefully crafted every empty appliance box into a rocket ship to Bloopiter. My father pushed me around the living room as I made engine noises, frantically pressing marker-scrawled buttons and glancing at the accurately reproduced constellations in my circular window to navigate. When I crawled out of my box, my father and I would make first contact with the sole alien residing on Bloopiter—my mother—proffering cookies and welcoming us with ‘bloop bloop’—the only words she was allowed to say.

‘Bloop bloop,’ I responded, endeavoring to convey my thanks with my tone.

~ ~ ~

How long until suffocation overcomes the potential of marital bliss?
The married man I once dated waited eighteen years.
My mother waited thirty-one.

~ ~ ~

There is a photograph my father has now moved to the desk in his office. In it, my mother, a young woman, gazes into the camera. Her hair is long and the slight up-turned corner of one side of her mouth hints at a smile. Her lips are parted slightly as if she is waiting for the photo to be taken to say something.

~ ~ ~

A man fell 40 stories from a New York skyscraper the other day. I say fell instead of jumped because although it was intentional, the jumping part lasted only a fraction of a second. Or maybe he didn’t jump. Maybe he just relaxed and finally quit resisting gravity.

~ ~ ~

My father’s voice is panicked, petulant—almost a whine. He is breathing quickly. ‘Why? Why would she do this?’

~ ~ ~

My brothers are mostly perplexed. It is odd, why she chose to leave in the way she did. Making lunches in the morning, cleaning the house and then slipping away in the afternoon with the process server sitting on the back steps waiting for my father, divorce papers in hand.

‘We are a dramatic people.’ I tell my brothers. ‘It’s in our genes.’

‘That’s not how genetics works,’ replies one of them.

~ ~ ~

Did I mention that he survived? That he crashed into a car below breaking both his legs? Did I mention that doctors find it ‘very unlikely’ that he will die?

~ ~ ~

I sit in the kitchen with my brother. Occasionally my father walks in. Together we analyze a line or a lone word my mother chose for her final letter to him. *I fear for my safety* sits heavily on the counter.

~ ~ ~

I read about a man who survived a fall of thirty-nine thousand feet. He died ten hours later, but doctors are convinced he would have lived if he had had access to proper medical attention.

~ ~ ~

While sitting with my father, I glance into the living room where six months earlier I spent three days on the couch, or on the floor, in the same panicked state he is in now—except I was cast in the role of the leaver and not the left.

I cannot walk into that room, I bounce from it as I wander in search for a more comfortable seat. I don't know what to say to my father. I think about some of the things he told me then.

'Stress takes a toll on the body. World champion chess players routinely lose 15-20 pounds during a tournament. It's not just that you don't want to eat when you encounter extreme stress, it's that the stress placed on the brain actually consumes enormous amounts of calories.'

'Breathe into this paper bag. You have to create a seal around your mouth for it to work. There is too much oxygen rushing to your brain; you need recycled air with less oxygen or you're going to pass out.'

We both take comfort in understanding the science of what is happening to us.

~ ~ ~

My youngest brother was five or six years old when he was first confronted with the realities of adulthood. When he realized that he could not simultaneously attend his friend's birthday party and go to the Dodgers game with the rest of us, when he forgot his homework assignment in his desk at school or dropped a glass, causing it to shatter on the kitchen floor, he would crumple to the ground. 'Kill me now!' he would sob. 'Just kill me, get it over with.' His tears were real.

Amusing? Yes.

Pathetic? Possibly.

Exquisite? Indisputably.

I know how he feels.

You must choose between pleasures. You must deal with the consequences of your irresponsible choices. You must accept that if you desire water, there will be times that you are too weak to grip the glass, and you must assume the burden of what you have broken.

~ ~ ~

‘You have to talk to him, Mom!’ Pressing the phone to my face, I stood by the garbage cans outside the back porch. My father takes the front porch with the padded chair. We both know that the other smokes, I’ve known since I was nine. My father, however, finds it more soothing not to acknowledge this fact. The weather is turning and is almost to the point when the cold weeds out all but the most serious of addicts—which would be everyone in my family except my mother.

‘I’m not strong enough,’ she responded. ‘I thought you would support me. I thought you would understand.’

‘I understand!’ I cried, for a moment allowing my voice to rise. ‘But you don’t get to just run away without having the conversation! No one likes the conversation! Trust me I know! Everyone would love to leave without going through the conversation, but I cannot divorce Dad for you! I have enough of this—’ I stopped myself.

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Then she spoke. ‘How are things going with you guys? Have they gotten any better?’

~ ~ ~

Of course, once you hit terminal velocity, the point at which an object stops accelerating, height becomes irrelevant. Eighteen hundred feet or eighteen thousand, the ground will meet you at the same speed.

~ ~ ~

‘I don’t deserve this,’ my husband said.

‘No. You don’t.’

‘I’m a good person,’ he sobbed.

‘Yes, you are.’

The conversation echoed one we had had only months before. We sat on our bed, the pale light from the streetlamps streamed through the blinds, cutting the ceiling into geometric shapes. One of us would have left. But neither of us had anywhere to go.

~ ~ ~

Kill me now.

~ ~ ~

After she left, my mother began taking personality tests at a rapid rate.

‘Is this me?’ she asks. ‘What do you think about this?’

She cannot find herself in the Myers-Briggs 16 types. This concerns her.

‘Maybe I don’t fit any of these because I don’t have a personality.’

I take her hand.

‘Maybe I’ll just choose one I like and be that.’ The troubled sincerity in her tone overrides the light spin she attempts to put into her words.

~ ~ ~

In between every whole number exist an infinite number of fractions. Meaning that every second can be divided into an infinite number of measured moments. There are days when I am acutely aware of this fact, when I can feel myself left behind in those moments, unable to move forward to the next second, waiting for infinity to pass.

Perhaps that is what falling hundreds or thousands of feet feels like. Perhaps, on the way down, one is forced to count to infinity over and over again.

Or perhaps, once you take that jump, once you make a decision that cannot be undone, the length of time it takes to fall becomes irrelevant.

Intermission

And what of that human body we left tumbling in a vacuum? An environment without oxygen—without the pressure of atmospheric gasses to cushion it?

Most likely, you think something violent. Expose a human body to a vacuum and you expect to be picking bits of her off the walls. Scraping her from the floor.

This is not so. Compared to the gruesome imaginings above, death would come aching slowly. The human body is remarkably resilient. It can survive things that seem beyond the limit of what is bearable.

Should she be able to refrain from holding her breath, survival is a possibility. What follows is about ten seconds of consciousness. Ten seconds of very painful, but useable consciousness. Ten seconds to find a way out. Ten seconds to think seriously about the decision that led to the vacuum.

Ten seconds can be an infinity.

*Act II**One-Mississippi*

In the first ten seconds of exposure to a vacuum, the water contained around her eyes and the saliva on her tongue will boil and evaporate immediately.

~ ~ ~

The lease for my new apartment was two years.

I had moved seventeen times in the previous six years. I had lived in seven different apartments in the last two years alone. Moving back to the States from Turkey required me to once again strip my life down to what could fit into two large blue suitcases—cheap, stained, and threadbare. They were, however, the best I could afford.

I thought of the possibilities of living in the same place for more than a few months. I imagined enormous posters of galaxies and nebulas covering the gaping blank spaces on my beige walls. Large windows cast slated sunlight on the empty floors. I bought some new carpets and a wok. I wanted to nest.

Eight months later, my blue suitcases were still lined against the empty walls like giant Legos, doubling as extra storage for summer clothes and a nightstand. My mattress remained on the floor where I had placed it the day I moved in.

I had become attached to impermanence.

~ ~ ~

Two-Mississippi

The water in her muscles and soft tissues will also start to evaporate, causing swelling, bruising and some bloating.

~ ~ ~

Is fire alive?

No? No. Of course not.

But if life is breathing, and breathing is dependence on oxygen, then yes, fire breathes.

If life is responding to stimuli, watch fire pace itself, sometimes darting swiftly, sometimes cautious, curious. Here—pushing against the wind, here—finding its way around water.

If life is in consumption and waste production, inspect the ashes of a blade of grass now dusting the blackened ground; watch the green forest turn into hills of charred sticks—eerily empty as the ashes are swept away by the wind.

If life is contained in growth or reproduction, follow the sparks, the seeds, sent out by fire—some finding fertile ground, others, without sustenance, soon dying out.

If life is defined by death, then yes. Fire lives.

~ ~ ~

Since I was a child, I have had dreams of getting married. It was always a surprise, and I was never prepared. Sometimes everything had been taken care of, and all I needed to do was show up. Sometimes I had known about the wedding but at some point had forgotten and was scrambling to get ready, to remember why and how I had ended up in a white dress. I never knew the man. I was always panicked.

~ ~ ~

Three-Mississippi

Heat will begin to leak out of her body but not as quickly as you might think. Eventually she will freeze, but like any reaction, the loss of heat will take some time, and it will not be the cause of death.

~ ~ ~

Five days before I was supposed to get married, four hours before my flight to Istanbul was going to leave, I pulled my suitcases into my living room. Rolled up in one of them was a wedding dress, a dress I had bought three days earlier and carried home by myself in the misty New York rain. I went into the bathroom and looked at the half full bottle of Softsoap on the sink, the single toothbrush and the green and white striped tube of toothpaste that I intentionally did not roll up from the bottom. I looked up at myself in the mirror—something I rarely did. I looked at my eyes, red with lack of sleep. I looked at my cheeks, white and drawn, a sign of too much smoking and not enough food. I started sobbing.

Both my parents got on the phone once my mother realized that her adult daughter was incapable of speech. Gasping and crying through airport security, I didn't stop until I got into my father's BMW in Chicago. My plane to Istanbul had left six hours earlier without me.

'I don't deserve this,' he said when I called that night to tell him not to go to the airport. That I wouldn't be there.

'No. You don't.'

'I'm a good person,' he sobbed.

'Yes, you are.'

‘Come. Please. Give us a chance. You promised to show me your life. I promise I will make you happy. There are so many things we have left to do.’

~ ~ ~

Four-Mississippi

The nitrogen in her blood will immediately desaturate due to the lack of pressure, forming painful bubbles that will course through her veins.

~ ~ ~

When I was five, I watched a Sesame Street episode where the little boy had to get out of a burning building. He checked the doorknob for heat, crawled down the stairs, and ran to a neighbor’s house. For two weeks, I couldn’t sleep.

I cannot remember how long it was after I started sleeping again that my mother smelled the scent of burning plastic. It could have been a week. No more than a month. I remember that the one porcelain doll that had not been broken by the firemen as they scrambled through the black smoke came out smelling of fire and that her porcelain white face had turned a bright shade of green. I remember that afternoon I went to my best friend Casey’s house and we sang ‘Wheels on the Bus’ and her mother forced me to do the motions, taking my limp hands in hers because movement lessens the pain of loss.

~ ~ ~

Marriage can be undone:

‘Don’t think of it as forever,’ my mother said. ‘Forever might not be very long.’ She paused as she put the milk back in the fridge. ‘One of you could get hit by a bus.’

~ ~ ~

Five-Mississippi

Any radiation, sunlight or otherwise, without the barrier of molecules to hinder it, will begin to burn her skin immediately.

~ ~ ~

I lived in my apartment a year before I went to Turkey to collect him. Before he came back to live in the States with me. Before the photographer captured my father and me walking down the aisle and my face clearly, starkly, terrified. Before he moved into my home. It was months before I stopped referring to it as ‘my apartment.’ Even then, the best I could do was to change the possessive adjective to a definite article—the apartment.

~ ~ ~

Consider the wires inside a house. Invisible and forgotten, they run throughout the walls protected by plaster. Often fires begin outside these walls—a sleeping smoker, a carelessly left oven, a forgotten candle. But occasionally the electrical wires, branching through homes and feeding televisions, dishwashers, and bed lamps, are not hidden from the fire but are themselves the source.

Follow the spark. It begins, nestled among the insulation and wooden frame of the house, directly behind the dryer. The newborn spark, perhaps no hotter than a popping coal from a campfire, jumps from an ancient frayed wire to the feast before it. Closed in on both sides, the spark finds its way through the interior of the house cautiously—at first consuming only the insulation, creating more smoke than fire. The smoke rises, seeking to fill its confined space and climbing up into the rest of the house; it reaches out through the slits it discovers in vents and cracks. Before the occupants notice the faint smell of burning plastic, and long before enough sneaks out to set off the smoke detectors, the tiny spark in the basement has grown into a flame, devouring the wooden planks and plaster.

~ ~ ~

Six-Mississippi

Now that she has exhaled, she does not have to worry about keeping herself from breathing in. There are no molecules in a vacuum. And without any pressure, her lungs won't be able to expand anyway.

~ ~ ~

I dreamt that I got pregnant and had a baby in only one day. It was painless, as events are in dreams. The doctors asked me if I wanted to see my baby, hold it. I left the child, burdened by the knowledge that there was no way to give it back.

I wake up, my tongue dry, my vision still blurred.

'Yi misin?' he asks. 'Su istermisin?'

'Anlamadim,' I murmur. I tell him I don't understand his offer to bring me water.

I do.

But I am annoyed by the fact that I am still drunk.

I am annoyed because I didn't start drinking until I met him.

I am annoyed by his choice to speak Turkish.

'Inanmiyorum,' he replies. *I don't believe you.*

~ ~ ~

Anniversaries cannot be undone:

I will always have a wedding anniversary. Married or divorced—one day a year will not be mine, but ours.

~ ~ ~

Seven-Mississippi

Deoxygenated blood will cause her skin to turn blue, a phenomenon called cyanosis.

~ ~ ~

Do you want to leave me?

No, I answer.

This is true. I do not want to leave. I want to be left.

I know that he will not. He is happy.

So he seems.

Or so he says.

Maybe he will leave.

Maybe he won't come back.

And if not—

Maybe I will meander through my apartment lighting flammable objects like prayer candles and kneel to watch home burn around me.

~ ~ ~

Eight-Mississippi

This lack of pressure I keep mentioning will also reverse the function of her lungs—pulling oxygen from the blood and quickly depleting oxygen flow to the brain, which leads to—

~ ~ ~

In many house fires, the most destruction comes not from the flames but from the permeating smoke that carries with it its own grimy color, smell and heat. Smoke—searing lungs, suffocating and putting people to sleep in the midst of the fire—causes three times more deaths than burns.

~ ~ ~

Inflammable and flammable have the same meaning. This distresses me.

~ ~ ~

Nine-Mississippi

—brain asphyxiation. Insufficient oxygen in the brain creates hypoxia—causing blindness and loss of judgment.

~ ~ ~

How long until suffocation overcomes the potential of marital bliss?

~ ~ ~

Walking down 42nd street towards the M train I imagined—considered—not going home. Turning off my phone and wandering into the first cheap hotel I could find. Finding some alcove on the street if I couldn't find a place I could afford—my freshly washed hair and thick coat revealing the fact that I had a home to go to.

It was not the cold that stopped me but the image of his panic—the childlike fear of being left alone in a country that was not his own.

~ ~ ~

'You should have seen me out there,' he said. 'I talk with them and make jokes even though I only understand half of the things they say. You should see me. You would fall in love with me again.'

~ ~ ~

Ten-Mississippi

Unconsciousness and convulsions will soon follow.

~ ~ ~

I slide my hand through the flame. When I was six, I watched a teenage boy do the same thing. He told me it was magic and I believed him.

The flame does not burn, it caresses. After a few moments, my skin is dusted with black soot. Looking closely, I notice a halo of energy surrounding the flame itself. I pull my finger away, and the flame returns to its original shape, as if I had never intruded.

He takes my candle from me and places it forcefully on the other end of the table. He does not like my so-called self-destructive tendencies. When I pick it back up, he leans over and blows out the flame.

Epilogue

It is possible to survive in a vacuum.

In a vacuum, a fire would die before she would.

In reality, she has up to a minute and a half of floating in the silence of the vacuum before suffering any major injuries. Ten seconds is simply the amount of time that she would be able to do anything about it.

But if ten seconds can be an infinity, ninety seconds could most certainly be a lifetime.

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GRACE SMITH

Genesis

I

Genesis had always made it a habit to try and capture the sun first.

The summer air was thick and humid. Sunbeams flecked through the tiny wooden slats of his tiny room, growing with eagerness. They beckoned him to capture. He reached his pale fingers out to grasp the sunlight, expecting it to feel spongy and ticklish against his skin. He waited for it to clutch him, prod him, poke him—whatever it may do—but instead, it left him with the same emptiness of touch. He longed for a feeling other than coarse dirt or decaying wood that left him with handfuls of splinters and shame. He picked up the jar next to his bed, its coolness soft on his fingertips, and held it up to the sun strands, waiting for the weight of it to double in his arms. The jar stayed empty. He frowned and tucked it away.

This was not the sun he could catch.

Two children ran by, obscuring the light. Genesis stuck his face to the slats and watched them play, careful to stay hidden in the shadows. The children were decorated in white dresses which were stained with dirt, crumbling off of the crinkled mess in clumps. Above all else, he studied the animated expressions of glee upon their tanned bare faces with curiosity. With prominent chins and balding heads, they looked more like creatures rather than humans, but he stayed fascinated by their gestures and their tinted skin. They barreled down the paths, nearly running into a wrinkled man whose crisp white garments were taut against his gangly body, a nearly blinding light in his eyes. The children bowed at his presence and muttered the familiar words *Praise Ra*, raising their fists to the sun in the sky.

The fabric over Genesis's face itched and he scratched it until the frays grew loose, averting his attention to the other side of his room. He hoisted himself up, tiptoeing across the floor to peer out the tiny hole in his wall. Mother was in the kitchen, her head over a boiling pot, eyes darting to a book she had opened on the counter. The little sun underneath the pot blazed almost as hot as the one from his room, but it shone a more orange kind of light and moved fluidly. He couldn't capture that sun either, he'd tried it many times. It nearly shattered his glass jar and left it with splotchy black marks and him with blistered hands.

He knocked on his wall to the rhythm of his growling stomach. She didn't budge. Knocked again. Her prominent nose bobbed with her steady hums, growing

louder as he pounded. She was entranced by the pages before her. The sunlight was touching her wrists now, slinking over her skin like it'd drag her away from him. *Sometimes the sun can do that*, she once told him, *swallow you up and take you away if you're bad*. He wondered if the gesture that the kids did outside was what kept the sun in the sky from swallowing them up if that's all that Ra wanted. He sometimes mimicked their movements in the shadows of his room, carefully mouthing the words himself.

'Sun's still out,' she said without looking up, huffing over her pot and stirring with vehemence. She coughed a deep, guttural spew and wiped her mouth. There was blood on her fingertips. He sat back down, eyes fixed on the wall, and let the shadows hold him. He could never seem to capture the dark either, but it held him more than the light of all the suns ever could.

The shadows are home, Mother would say, *to the little boys who do not belong to this Earth*. Genesis knew he was different than those kids robed in white garments, hands lifted towards the sky.

She named him Genesis, borrowed from an old book she read in secret, smuggled from the wreckage near home. Even at birth, he was absolute perfection: no deformities, all four functioning limbs, and unblemished skin. The boy didn't shed a tear or muster out a single cry. He was quiet—like he knew his fate from the moment his body belonged to the Earth instead of her. Belonged to everything else. Safety would never exist beyond her womb. She was certain it would never exist for as long as she was breathing and the world was spinning.

They say Ra demands his perfection back; they say the sun swallows it up; they say it is an Earthly evil.

Kallista knew it the moment she saw his face. It was the embodiment of new beginnings, of uprisings, of all the change there could never be in the world. His beauty would be the root of catastrophe and would have to be relinquished. The Elders would never let him continue past infancy. *Nothing of Earth competes against Ra*. Genesis would be returned to the realm he belonged and she would be left alone, childless, and shamed. The curse of a perfect birth had tarnished Kallista.

No. She was akin to the woman of the virgin birth, like she had read, holding a savior in her arms. She would spare him *because* life depended on it.

'Cover his face,' her husband said. He fell to his knees, asking their god for forgiveness with all the power inside him. He ripped the beads from his neck and held them to the sky, begging for mercy she knew he'd never find. By the time he finished, his face was pale and covered in sweat. He trembled in fear and reached for the child. 'We have to find an Elder. Cover his damned face.'

She watched, incredulous, her precious Genesis resting in her arms. Her husband questioned her, wondering how she could look at the sordid creature in her arms. But this creature was her blood, the ichor still fresh on his newborn skin. They were still connected, for the time being, the umbilical cord yet to be clipped. His last tie to her, for once she let go, he would fully belong to the sun, to light, to Ra. The god would rob her of motherhood simply for the curse of treacherous beauty. She shook her head viscously. This was not a fate he was destined for.

‘Let me cut it.’ Kallista’s voice quivered. She looked at her husband with tears in her eyes, arm extended in the offering. He nodded solemnly, obeying her request for perhaps the first time in their marriage, and knelt next to the bed after handing her the dagger. By her side, he stilled, head bowed in prayer.

The blade glinted orange in the candlelight as Kallista caught a glance of her reflection. Tufts of red hair clung desperately to her head and her lazy eye drifted, bloodshot. She frowned and turned the blade away from her face. Under the cover of the dark, she cut the umbilical cord, and, swiftly through that movement, the dagger met with the flesh of her husband’s neck.

She had decided guiltlessly. And she became stranded, a mountain of tribulation to hide.

It was easy at first. *Untimely death is common; disease is uncertain; Arawn’s timing is absolute.* She buried the body a few days later; two graves side by side. The villagers’ pity was a fickle thing. Even the worst of people sputtered out lies of condolence, but she played the part of the grieving mother and widow. She wore her ceremonial black and attended the Elders’ sermons, turning towards the enigma of her womb, bearing witness to her own genesis. She drew into reclusion, shackled by her miracles–fantasies, the Elders would have called them.

Kallista raised the boy in darkness and the dread within her only grew as he became more beautiful. By age three, she couldn’t bring herself to hold him anymore. Even touching him tarnished his perfection. She knew Ra was taunting her, proving to her she was unworthy of even looking at him, beckoning the child’s soul to him. She recognized, then, why beauty could not belong to a single person. But he was her baby. *Her baby.* And one day he would be free of the darkness she kept him in. The Elders had gotten it wrong, she was certain of it. She only had to prove to them with evidence of Genesis’s purpose, that he could prosper in this world just like them.

She shielded his face, convinced that containing his perfection would stall the repercussions while she searched for the answers. And she feared with each passing moment that Ra would conjure himself before her and snatch Genesis from their own home. He wore a frayed mask over his head, made from the lumpy sac she used to carry home the apples she picked in autumn. She poked two holes out of the middle, both completely different sizes. It hung over his head, a barrier between the world and the divinity within him. Protection for as long as he would wear it.

As the years passed, her reclusion cast her further from her people. She played her part in their worship but otherwise stayed clear of the scorn. She never tried to remarry and bear more children which deepened her mark as an outcast. In her loneliness, Kallista would walk through the curving olive groves just behind her house, bare feet traipsing along the green grass. When the sun was setting, she would catch fireflies like she did when she was a child, praying for that innocence she once harbored, before the burden of the world was viscously placed upon her shoulders.

This is salvation.

Just past the groves laid wreckage from a past world. It was a place her people rarely visited for fear of jeopardizing their safety; there was fear of the black plague around each corner, or the infected in the pits, or even the Minotaur prowling to prey on unsuspecting human flesh. The Elders prohibited travel beyond the confines of their village walls, but Kallista found solace in the deeper darkness it harbored; the truths she could unfold, dangerous as it may be. She had become transparent enough that she was a ghost. She frequented a large building, half crumbled and withered from time and decay, that she discovered when she was pregnant with Genesis. It housed hundreds of old books, most of them filled with pages long destroyed, and practically unreadable. The Elders claimed that this place used to be the source of all knowledge, that they had extensively rummaged through the building a millennia ago and recrafted the framework for human life after near extinction. Kallista knew that something was missing, that not all of the books they disregarded were simply fiction.

She knew Ra must have it out for her, growing angrier with time and betrayal, though, how can one kill a god? This was not a force Kallista could escape, the Elders assured that in their morning speeches. The world may be dangerous but the gods were more wrathful than humanity itself. Ra was everywhere life existed, he was the light that touched the Earth, and she blasphemed him in her shadow world. She thumbed through the stories, wondering where the Legend of Genesis prophesied, certain she grew closer to finding out *why* each day.

Proof of Genesis's purpose existed here. And she had devoted herself to discovery. To salvation.

II

The big sun was finally gone for the day. Genesis waited for Mother to remove the covering on the wall and spent time watching the children of the village twist and turn around the little suns that their parents cooked over. He often wondered if he could catch those suns in his jar and dreamt of walking beyond his wooden walls

to try. But Mother would never allow it, of that he was certain. If he disobeyed her and acted out as bad children do, he didn't think he could capture the angry sun.

The children giggled and jumped, garnished in their red night robes, bare faces glowing orange as the light followed their bodies. The shadows obfuscated their faces, elongating their already bulbous noses and flapping ears. Genesis imagined himself next to them, mirroring those odd movements near the warmth of the light. He wondered if that is what kept them from being swallowed up in the day.

Sometimes after dinner, the children would sit around the light and read from their tattered books until they fell asleep and their parents carried them back to their beds. Mother harbored her own collection of books that she constantly read from, but she never read aloud to Genesis. He learned a lot at night. Genesis enjoyed these stories, especially the one about the boy who could fly. At night, he imagined what it might be like soaring above the world, out of reach of the sun and the shadows. He dreamt he had wings on his back, big enough to carry him and Mother away from the darkness. He wondered if people like that existed beyond the village and if the world was as big as they claimed it to be.

But his life, he learned, had been relegated to these four wooden walls. To an absence of touch.

Mother removed the cover and beckoned him out. He tottered through the dark of the room and climbed into the chair, scooping up the pitted olives on his cracked plate. He was careful only to lift the fold of his mask just enough that his mouth peeked through. Mother watched him carefully, rheumy eyes wide and beaming in the limited light.

'Let me see your face,' she said, coughing again. Genesis cocked his head in confusion. She rarely ever allowed him to lift the mask fully and when he did, she would turn her face away. He could barely see her toothless smile from across the table as she encouraged him. 'You can take it off. The sun is gone. Nothing will get you.' She didn't need to say anything else. He ripped the sac off his face, the coolness of the air kissing his cheeks. and sucked in a deep breath of air.

She gasped. 'What happened?'

He touched slight indentations of the scratches on his cheeks, ever so present on his face. He felt them all at once, burning with her gaze. Dried blood flaked off when he dropped his head low and he frowned to himself. 'Itchy.' He pulled the sac back over his face in shame.

Mother shook her head and fell to her knees next to him, grabbing his tiny hands. 'Ra, what have you done to my perfect boy?' she cried in anguish. 'Must you punish me for gifting the world? He is a god. He is supposed to save me. I'm going to die and he can't save me.' She began to hyperventilate, her labored breaths frightening Genesis out of his seat. He fell to the dirt floor and backed away from her, shielding himself behind the curtain. She coughed and sputtered, blood on her face and hands, gasping for breath as she crawled towards him.

‘Be good, Genesis,’ she pleaded. ‘You’ll save me. Us. I know you will. You’re a god. He’s a god. He *is*.’ Genesis didn’t understand her savage hysterics, pushing her off of him. He ran into his room but she crawled after him, her coughs radiating through the home. He panicked, daring to step outside and find any other soul. Mother was dying. Mother was sick. Mother said he was special.

Will the light ever forgive me?

The little suns were dying out when he opened his front door. He frantically waved his arms in the air, the wind catching in his throat as he tried to vibrate his vocal cords. The children looked up from their stories, their parents’ faces struck with horror. One of the men by the fire immediately rose and ran to peer through the doorway.

‘She’s infected,’ he screamed, slamming the door shut and scooping Genesis in his arms. He could still hear her coughs rattling the home.

‘Get that child away from her,’ the woman gasped, holding her own children to her chest. ‘May the sun have mercy on her.’ She held a fist to the sky and started to weep.

Genesis had yet to move and found he nearly forgot to breathe. ‘Who do you belong to?’ they all asked. The man placed him next to the light and ripped off his mask.

There was a statue inside that Kallista began praying to. Ivy clung to each crevice in her white stone-carved body, creating the effect of a harvest dress. She was missing a head and only had half a torso. The real one, Kallista knew, toppled centuries ago in the Dark Age, when humans were godless. Aimless. She crafted a new head of leaves and crackling clay, reminiscent of the story where people created their own god of gold. She brought gifts to her each day and lit candles at her feet; devotion to the divinity of another woman. Another mother.

She’d read about this goddess before. Demeter, her grimed engravement read. Goddess of fertility. Harvest. She lost her daughter to the dark.

As Genesis became more independent, she worried what havoc his existence would wreak upon the village. By age five, he was getting too big to hide and she knew he could not be mute forever. Curiosity beckoned him with a fierceness she could no longer control.

‘There has to be evidence. The answer *is* here,’ she said aloud. ‘I beg you to show me.’ She had read about Odysseus. About Krishna. People who walked the Earth just like her Genesis but still ended in the same brutal demise. There was always a cost to living among the inferior. She could not reveal the presence of Genesis yet.

The goddess answered her with silence, her crafted face crumbling with death like the rest of her body. By now, the ivy hung dry on her body and the clay was

brittle and gray; her appearance was as wrecked as Kallista felt. A life of crumbling devotion and ceaselessness.

Kallista screamed. She threw books at the statue and the pages swarmed around her like angry bees, enveloping her goddess into nothing. The stone crackled and rippled, becoming the decayed building. Her remnants were mixed with dead leaves, cockroaches, and candle wax. Kallista lay down and sobbed until the sun was far beyond the horizon and the world had fallen asleep. For six years she devoted herself. All for nothing.

There were too many answers to nothing.

Through the blackened sky, she traced figures in the stars. The great horned goat, Capricorn if she remembered correctly. Leo. Sagittarius. She wished Genesis were with her, learning all she did in her youth. Learning that there *was* more. The burden of a perfect savior was too exorbitant for a child and she hated all creation for his fate.

But fate, she knew, must be carried out.

The night passed. She rose from the bones of her sanctuary and stepped out into the dawn. The wind carried her body, ailing with each step. She felt herself grow weak. Chills ran through her spine. It was like walking through molasses: thick and impossible. The wretched world was upon her then, and she called out into the void.

‘Reveal yourself,’ she bellowed, throat burning, convinced that some force would appear. ‘Where is my proof?’

There was no answer.

A hunchbacked man with a snow-white beard hobbled into the light of the rising sun. His clothes hung loosely upon his skeletal body and he clung to a warped stick for support. He wiped the sweat from his brow when he spoke like talking took all the life out of him.

‘Sun,’ he whispered in a grisly voice. ‘Sun.’

‘Son,’ she repeated in amazement. ‘Yes, my son can save you.’ Overcome with sudden joy, she ran to him. Divine intervention at its finest.

The old man fell into her arms and she noticed the blood speckled along his dry lips and grimy beard. He said it again, over and over, face clenched in an awful grimace.

She hadn’t gifted the world with a savior. Genesis was a god.

‘I can bring him back at dusk.’

III

Mother always said that people would not know how to react when they saw his face. *You are too wonderful for this broken world*, she would say. *That is your curse.*

A strange, wrinkled man laid his body on cool stone, quietly tying his wrists and his ankles to the four pillars around him. Genesis looked straight up at the vastness of the dark sky. It was something he had never seen so close before, a million tiny suns that moved like all the kids at night. Twinkling—he fought to find the word in stories he'd heard. He smiled and wished he had his jar. Perhaps this was the sun he could catch now that he was close. But that same emptiness of touch burned his skin. There was only the touch of the rope grazing his body and nothing more.

The wrinkled man clasped his hands together. He was humming some melody that he'd heard Mother hum before, but it grew louder and louder with each verse. The whole village gathered on either side of him, slowly joining in the melody. He recognized some of the children and parents, cloaked in purple. They looked like lavender ghosts in the night.

Mother appeared, wispy hair in the wind, face frozen in absolute despair. Her wrists were caked in blood and it dripped from her nose and mouth. She hid behind the group, looking skeletal in the eerie light: hollowed cheekbones and a rib cage poking through her rust dress, making her stand out among the mass. Her yellow eyes twitched and the tremble moved down her body, lips pressed in a thin line. The olive trees swayed behind her. They looked like extensions of her own bony hands—like she'd reach down and scoop the people up, sending them soaring high above the world. Genesis closed his eyes and imagined his wings spread white and wide, their glory shining with the light of the sun.

'Perfection must be dispelled from this Earth,' the wrinkled man said. He didn't seem to notice Mother. 'It is unnatural to mortal flesh.'

The people responded in unison. '*Amen.*'

'To Ra, we must beg for forgiveness and offer him his rightful property,' the old man continued, his voice deep. 'May this put an end to our drought, our dying crops, and the plague of our people.' He looked lost in a trance, his eyes rolling back, revealing only a milky white. It reminded Genesis of the liquid Mother would give him when he was younger. The rest of the crowd mirrored the old man's movements, their hums nearly deafening Genesis. He returned his gaze to the sky, continuing to imagine what it would be like to catch those suns. *Would you carry me like the shadows?*

Then, the Earth stilled.

'*To Genesis, I pray,*' Mother screamed, clutching a caged orange sun in her hand. She threw it to the ground and a circle formed around her body, spreading to each end of the village. People ran in every direction, their screams rising, a sea of purple among an ochreous backdrop. They moved in all directions, but the orange strands snatched them all, trapping them in their unforgiving grasp. It spread to the trees, consuming them almost as fast as the people. The air around him grew hot and unforgiving. The orange sun was nearing him, it was going to take him away forever.

But it didn't.

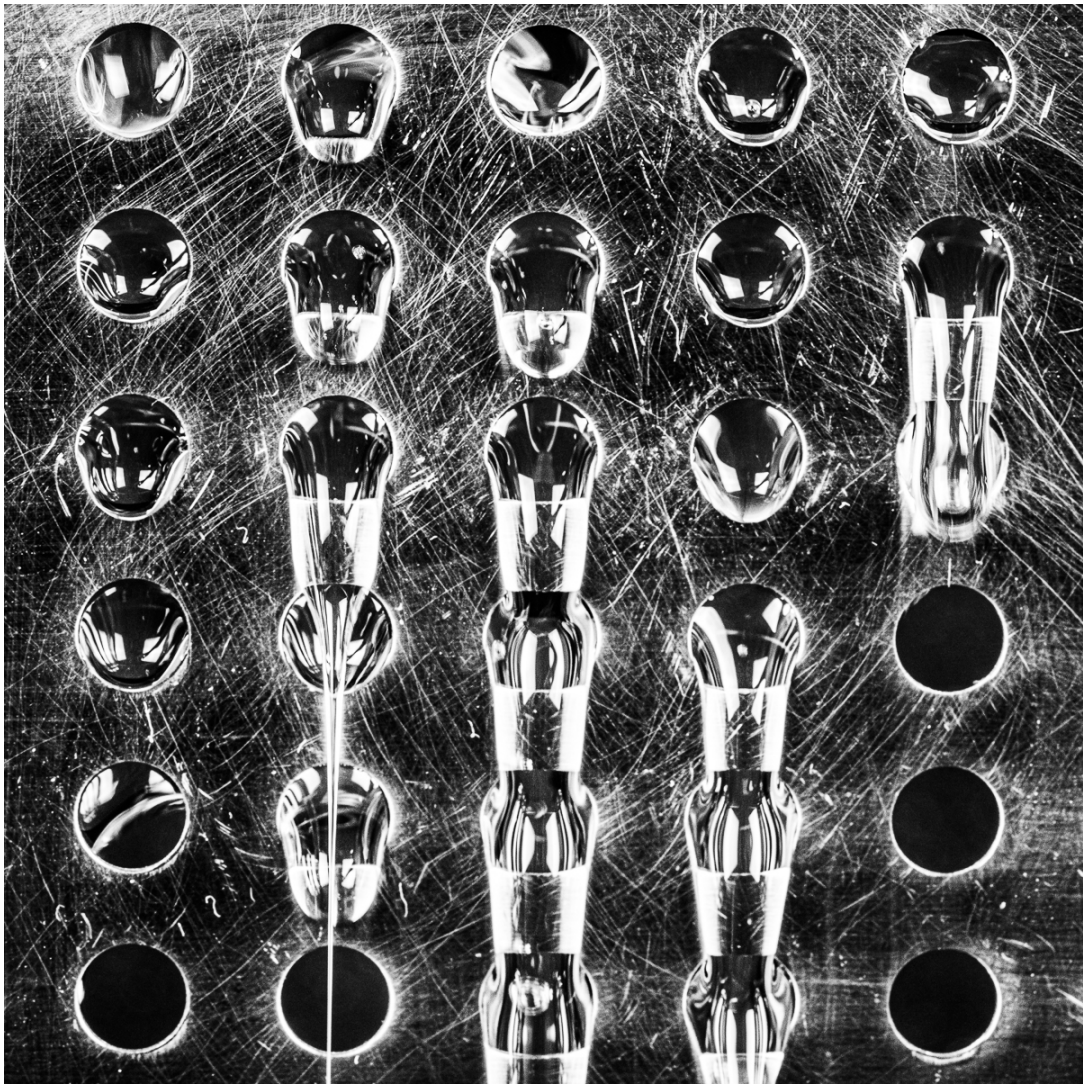
The heat spread along his wrists and his ankles, just enough to tinge the fibers. He was freed. Genesis jumped off the stone and ran towards Mother, but she still hadn't moved. The orange sun—once caged and now utterly free—was swallowing her up with the rest of the village.

Sometimes the sun can do that to you. Swallow you up and take you away if you're bad.

Genesis froze.

Mother smiled.

Poetry



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Bobby Parrott

FAR FEWER THAN MERELY ZERO BIRDS

We wind up our pillows with their muffled thumpity-thump so they won't run down while unwording our non-selves before our next plunge into the theatrical fakery of waking life. In sleep's release-mode we dip our imaginary selves into this plush blur until our galactic battery reassembles us for the next day's simulation. Of course this is a case where Quantum Cosmology momentarily disentangles from Particle Physics long enough for String Theory to unfray its ravels. I don't think I'm appropriately dressed for this poem, my green-room weather the existential nightmare of entropy, oscillation point between contradictory views of us as distinct individuals. See, knowing we are all both liberated *and* imprisoned by language, we strap on its robots and do our best. Like hearing Metallica and Nirvana played on breathy, low-pitched flutes, the moon sutra of my alphabetical cellos floats into my sleep. Ideally, we resemble more our back-up heads of cabbage on the bottom shelf of the fridge, way in the back. But when is a lie not just a secret waiting for its own version of full catastrophe disclosure? Like when you forget you've switched books and now the one's plot is trying like hell to snuggle into the open receptors of the other's until that stops working. Which can pop in you like a chip of memory grafted onto the motherboard of a false future. I think of the time-stoppering bottle of my head, that rhetorical white noise as it swarms, so many starlings fizzed into another synchrony to re-imagine their parallel flight of far fewer than merely zero birds.

Ferdinand Lewis

PROPOSAL FOR A CASE STUDY

There is evidence that this parking lot is the most natural thing in the world. The brown withered box hedge, cracked slumping asphalt, skidmarks, waterbugs dimpling oily puddles. The sun's pink lip resting on three huffers sharing a cigarette as aerosol dusk brightens, exhaling up the aluminum siding and out into space. Even johns and hookers in foggy cars grease the wheels of evolution: Like the sodium lamp checkerboard of this landscape, all respond to early sunset.

Consider also that two hundred feet and a million years below the fractal chaos of shopping carts and gravity, a single raindrop reincarnated as acid works limestone to sponge, and will in time devour this profusion of fluorescent packing tape and clerks in hairnets.

Q: How to consider their links to the waxed moon, laid down among cigarette butts and living water, drying under a heat lamp of stars?

ho: Links between these things do not give way to a bettering, an interruption, or redirection.

h1: Care remains viable in determining with certainty how light has fallen, or could fall, across the endless chains of mostly failure.

AS REQUESTED AND FOR YOUR REVIEW
(ADDITIONAL INFORMATION REGARDING DOCKET
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Emerging in scrawny light from the skin of the dune,
dreamed things keep watch from pore to pore. Entire

webs of alliance taste risen waves of moisture,
an extravagant process of seasons re-attaining. Now

from a deeper more muscular level, secret dark
contractions thick with signals: the sagebrush lizard,

perfect striver, attends the rearrangement of pressures
in these invisibly heaving sands. Barely anchored

to the low clinging oaks, breathing damp into minerals so
sweet on the tongue they fill the mouth with quiet.

Meanwhile, blind to dusk, we stood to go and back in our cars
were unaware that in the last motions of day, crows

fell into our places. Or that in years to come,
here in what was once sand, we would stumble enraged

onto still blinder versions of ourselves who, compared
to the lizard or the naked intent of crows, tasted nothing.

Jimmy Christon

A SURREALIST'S INNOCENCE

Where Jon, when Jon.

At a variance with itself, like it's split in two:
the experience of which embodied in the manners of speech
colludes with life and hides itself inside many emanations.
Form is of no avail.

Pattern is of no avail.

Self-imposed rules can craft only a self-imposed excellence.
Whatever one does, the other will undo.

She sees fate less like a string, and more like a tree.

True excellence comes from the sky, true excellence strikes like lightning
and knows that thunder leaves no excuse after itself.

The turn of thought makes things cruel.

The turn of thought brings things ill-considered back into the fray.

The turn of thought ruins what was bad
and what was Good makes us who we are again.

Behold, the magic of description:

When Jon?

A handful of months back.

Where Jon?

My house,
my home,
my family's home.

Jon is cooking eggs. Jon has only now just awoken.

It is 1pm, Jon.

Jon takes the eggs and butter and bag of shredded cheese from the fridge,
the pan is already atop the stove, heating.

The butter melts and Jon has never been a cook before so he doesn't look with his
eyes and only falls his head down to examine his progress. His back is hunched.

His phone is on twitter atop the counter next to the pan of melting butter and

Jon is beating the eggs in a bowl. He adds some water.

When the butter is melted and begins to bubble he adds the eggs.

He keeps his head lowered and looks again at his phone.

Pattern is no tool.

Form is no friend.

Jon is my brother. He is making eggs.

David Poutine

LOVERS ALL AROUND HER

“I’ll smoke me a sadness hydrant if you don’t hop up here with us,”
warns the crowd stuffing their beaks in rotten armpits.
I’m writing thank you notes

for them for healing yesterday’s canyon-cliff scars.
We’ll cackle at the pores
of the cross-eyed moon,
and leap into the half-torn
lines of a bassoon.
Canaries digest Jerry cans. They’ve made
a Superbowl out of slurping up
lighters, wrapping timelessness

in a tire or two. For their troubles: a pocket full of laughter.
Singers who put your sadness on parole are heroes.
Shot my first set of tears down when I was older
than I am now, whittled out of my sister’s
splintered violet bow. Did I do the right thing?

Launched it from a highway cafe
somewhere in Ontario, squeezing sour rinds
from raindrops in their eyes, painfully
becoming something else.

Lake Angela

Georg Amsel

TO FORGET

Father forgot his facial expressions at the barber. He stops at the site of the bonfire, the start of the parade. At fireside, we glitter like broken glass. Following the red-cheeked trumpeter and whipping flags, father rides his wheelchair into the wind, hat flying. Somebody has silenced the rampaging parade to black and white shapes trailing over a day-old newspaper. Children scurry after shining wrappers, but the horses trod on the gelatinous candies, transforming black pavement to confetti: the crime scene of a party. Between soft rains, sand piles higher. The sea will rise with the dunes. Mother says, *If I don't really like you, I'll let the wind take you and deliver you to the fox.* She strokes my cheek but forgets her hand in my nest of hair. The fox is hunting for me now. The parade has dwindled to ants stampeding the last pink sweet. On the road sits one wheelchair; on the wheelchair rests an empty hat.

Olof Samuelsson

SVARTEKÄR

In the bay of an islet off the coast,
nestled in the crooks of rounded stones
and sands of shell and glass: a pile of death
rotten and trembling. Seafoam:
the void's own honeycomb
festering on the waterline.
Sometimes the wind builds
and tears across the lichened crag,
loosing clots that swirl and burst
into the air. Sometimes it stays,
a skeleton terror, its truth mounting
with each wave, each breath.

LEARNING

she is was will never a boy
girl death to all before
and when she is small
she skips about

the house in a pink
tie-dye shawl
flowing over
her shoulders

and into the room
its tatty ends tickling
as she twirls and smiles
in her always costume

singing falsettos
she had heard
bled through headphones
on the bus to school

and when she cries
it's for a crease
in the dress
of her doll

Phil Powrie

UN CHIEN ANDALOU REDUX

*La femme se lèvera, avec des mains dangereuses, avec des yeux de
perdition, avec un corps dévasté, rayonnant à toute heure.*

*(Woman will rise with dangerous hands, with eyes of ruin,
with a devastated body, ever shining.)*

Paul Éluard, *Dans la brume, Capitale de la douleur*, 1926

Part 1

§1 Establishing shot. No sound, not even the waves. They're on a quayside. In front of them, a market stall with polished coral, orange eyes, blue knuckles, bones, a pulsing unidentified sound object.

§2 Close up. Her mouth saying something we don't hear.

§3 Close up. His left eye, her lips mirrored in the iris. Followed by superimpositions: his brain shrinks, a lobster boiled pink, stretched from ear to ear; his heart tangles in pitch-black popping seaweed; his arms hang stiff.

§4 Swipe. He stares at the palm of his left hand, right hand on hip. Fish dart and wriggle out from the hole in the centre of his palm.

§5 They both stare at a clip from Buñuel's *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972): the repeated sequence in which the group walk determinedly along a deserted country road. We hear their feet on the road and birdsong, the latter distorted through a vocoder. This shot ends with a cymbal clash as we cut to...

§6 Black screen, held for an excruciatingly long time. The sound of vigorous love-making accompanied by the doorbell chimes associated with suburban life. We understand that this takes place in the past and may well be a fantasy.

§7 Long-distance shot to the sound of the Liebestod. They rock gently in the swell, clothes strewn about them.

— Man (pompously): I want my palm to be stopped up and plugged. I wait patiently for coral to form. I will be a reef for your shipwrecks. (Half-way through this last sentence the sound of yacht rigging and throat-poles slapping against masts is superimposed on the man's dialogue, swamping the Liebestod, which is replaced by bursts of the woman's laughter.)

§8 Sound of hammer repeatedly hitting a nail. The man lifts a cockle shell to the woman's ear; she lifts a piece of orange-coloured glass to his left eye.

§9 Superimposition of the glass slitting the man's left eye. The vitreous humour is blood red.

— Woman (to a bouncy tango): Ferchrissakes, you'll crucify yourself, just you see, there'll be blood everywhere, and then where will we be.

§10 Leaking eye pumping like a heart in time with the soundtrack from Mickey Mouse's *Steamboat Willie* (1929). Superimposition of a soft Dalí-esque clock face without hands.

Part 2: The director's reflections on what she achieved and what remains to be done

Woman (voice-over; in what follows the 'woman' is no longer the woman of Part 1, but the director of the film): The images in Part 2 change dreamily with superimpositions, in the style of Germaine Dulac's *La Coquille et le clergyman* (1928). My attempt to marry Dulac's Impressionist style, disavowed by Artaud in a bitter polemic, with Buñuel and Dalí's more playful Surrealist aesthetic. This is a film about time and space.

§11 Image of a bullfight.

— Woman (voice-over): My earliest memory. A lobster boiled pink in popping seaweed.

§12 Image of a Venus Flytrap.

— Woman (voice-over): Mad bad love. The equator of evolution. The North Pole of Revolution.

§13 Image of storm clouds.

— Woman (voice-over): Less vitreous than aquatic. A slit eye contains a beating heart.

§14 Image of a scarf made of bones flapping in the wind.

— Woman (voice-over, in a high sing-song voice): My heart was tangled in brittle driftwood, I left my heart in my mad bad childhood.

§15 Image of a busy city street. We see several cyclists fall sideways.

— Woman (voice-over): Adolescent memory. You stare at the palm of my hand shaped like a coral shell. It leaks shrimps, turtles, seagulls, albatrosses. I can see the prow of a tanker wriggling out like an oil-powered camera in a disused laundromat. I want my palm to be stopped up, and plugged, an ancient reef to lure the warfleets of time. I want to be piratical, eye-patched, buried treasure, leaky, oceanic. (On the word 'leaky', the same soft clock as in §10 is superimposed on the fallen cyclists.)

Part 3: Reflections on time and space

(Director's blurb for the film. To be used when advertising showings.)

Mirror 'time': emit. My film emits its reversal.

Time is compressed space and space is compressed time, both poised precariously to explode and expand in a moment combining agony and ecstasy. This proves beyond all reasonable doubt that time is an object of chance and that space, to reprise André Breton's dictum, is nothing more than my haunting, a shell that like a snail I am condemned to haul and whose sole purpose is to contain me.

Meta-pata-beta: the unconscious as work in progress. If we assume that the Real is lacework, is the unconscious the lacework and the conscious the light? Or is it the reverse: the conscious is lacework and the unconscious the light struggling through it? Or are light and dark the composites of an unknown colour, like curds and whey for lunar milk?

What if time were the dream of space? And space the dream of time?

When I walk I am pushing the globe round. It's my contribution to the planet. Cyclists don't have enough traction, so they lose balance. When you watch my film, each shot pushes the next one. It's your contribution to revealing the fortune of reversal.

Part 4: Every film needs a spectacular finale

§16 Title: “The next day”. Sound of city streets, cars, muffled conversations.

§17 Sepia image of a man in a bow tie tapping out morse code.

— Man (voice-over, languorously): I can sense you in the crackling seaweed, in the swish of the shingle. I look for you in the frozen breath of passers-by. I am just thin spray, a slender wind.

§18 Sepia image of steam train leaving station to the sound of morse code. The chuffing of the train echoes the rhythm of their vigorous lovemaking in §6.

— Man (voice-over, angrily): I will throw an orange bottle containing my right eye into the shredded blue sea. I will lay myself down in the street and summon a piano (a pause) to sever my limbs.

§19 Title: “Later”. Industrial sounds.

— Woman (voice-over, reciting, as if reading from a filmscript): I will make a film of our hands. Our hands will be masts with flags of surrender fluttering in the slender wind. Yours will have a hole seeping with triplewart sea devils and their luminescent caruncles, umbrellamouth gulpers, fangtooths. Mine will hold objects of the exact dimensions to fill the hole: a perfect pebble, the indescribable sound of mad love, breast-shaped clouds, a bull named Gilgamesh bleeding from banderillas, empty trains running late, grand pianos taking flight like black swans, the keys detaching and turning into snow. Your hand will ooze a lunar sea of milk curdling on the beach, where we will stand, (gradual fade-out of the dialogue) arm in arm, hand in hand, hand in arm, bone to bone, arm to bone, eye to eye, bone to eye.

§20 Final shot. Loud and irritating whistling sound. The couple are buried in sand. Their arms are cauterised stumps, and their eye-sockets are empty. They are surrounded by fish, some dead, some still gasping. We hear the sound of a guillotine slicing through arms, and the sound of tendons curling back on themselves with a snap.

Thomas Townsley

EFFULGENCE AT THREE O’CLOCK

*The chief difficulty Alice found at first
was in managing her flamingo*

Lewis Carroll

I.

*Two lovers en-
twined by
the quarry’s edge:
(read “foaming sighs”)
(read “lyrical glaze”)
—the curiously inwrought
figurations
“when the illegible becomes pellucid”
as or as if
(O apostrophe— to whom I know not—)
this decorative abyss
in love with
easeful
decolletage
sans
“the disenchantments of the world”
(read “tinfoil moons”)
(read “pensive roses”)
(read “dirty sparrows”)
(read “cardboard Venus”)
or ask, “Is that Chinese lantern
imaginary?
Is this
silhouette
crouching in what you call
‘the background’
merely an astigmatic shadow?”
i.e.,*

“do irredeemable diadems
 drop
 unbidden?”
 as or as if
 the poem’s potential auditors—
 a necessary subterfuge—
 actually ex/ist
 “so long lives this”
 (read “his lambent heart”)
 (read “the dream-lit arbor”)
 (read “her eyes at neap tide”)
 (read “flamingo of your—“)
 “curious dints”
 —words channeling desire—
 “upon a table”
 as or as if
 “the hedgehog had unrolled itself”
 in lyre-prismed
 “boxes of cerebration”
 Into which
 the flamingo slips
 (“such a puzzled expression”)
 almost unseen
 its pink feather
 so that
 “she could not help
 bursting out laughing”
 and
 “it was a very difficult game indeed.”

II.

Say a “real” quarry
 is made allegorical
 by the lovers’ proximity
 (or vice versa?)
 as or as if
 the gaping pit
 false azure

a symphony of nerves
 whose third movement—"a
 boisterous scherzo"—
 plays out
 in georgic tableaux
 ("You are old," said the
 shepherd youth)
repeatedly
 which is to say
 "One of the lovers could be you!"
 If you
 suspend
 time or
 "Now I'll manage better"
 as or as if
run simulacra
 (read "sad balconies"
 (read "nightingales on strings"
 (read "Death's hand-puppets"
 (read "memory-foam heart"
 the lyric already de-
 centered
 preceding
 commodifying
 inventing
 "love"
 "the silken dénouement"
 of "homestyle' aphrodisiacs"
 woven
 O Ever-Absent
 thinking Itself
 as or as if
 quarried
 querying
 uni-
 verse
 sans
 sans
 as or as if
 allegories

wake us and we en-
twine
where ne'er the twain
shall meet

III.

(read "his battery-operated bloodstone"
(read "her periwinkle herring"
(read "his synecdochic dowsing"
(read "her photosynthetic inculcation"
(read "his splenetic peripheries"
(read "her dulcet phlebotomies"
(read "his warrantless panegyrics"
(read "her saturnine incubators"
as or as if
borders sealed
devil's playground of
verbal hedges, shibboleths, all the
"latest formulations"
run simulacra
"You are old"
sans
flocks
you are
"written to nobody
which isn't usual"
said the King
or would you rather
think in greeting card slogans
run on verbal donut-tires
dine on TV dinners
limit reflection to "selfies"
as or as if
"Eat your Jell-O, Reginald"
simply
tabulate
pleasures & pains
all your so-called
life

and
“If you cannot afford a poet,
one will be appointed to you”
so
just a reminder
you are scheduled
for effulgence
at three o’clock
please
have your
flamingos ready.

FOURTEEN SEPTETS SUSPENDED IN A TRISTAN CHORD

1.

Stir up bits from the bottom; watch them float in tepid broth.
Always disambiguate the mountain laurel.
When observing how far your wake trails behind you,
try to feel at peace.
Remember that allegory has the potential for excess,
but do not spare the ampersand on that account!
Beware asphyxiation by mirror.

2.

What these rhizomes need is a piano repairman!
I looked her smack dab in the corolla.
“How about some radical mimesis?” I purred.
tonight’s moon is made of memory-foam.
The new restaurant caters to narcoleptics—
reservations recommended!
When thinking of silence, consider the page you write on.

3.

This creamy-white species has waxy, pale green or pinkish bracts.
As a narrative, it was fairly conventional.
The specific epithet ‘fontinalis’ comes from the Latin for “of a spring or fountain.”
Some maintain that superior literary forms are organically unified.
One can see right away that the expressionist elements—
the lobotomizing mitre and talking cuttlefish—are beginning to find a new space.
“The beginning of the poem is just whiteness,” he insisted.

4.

Is that a new hurdy gurdy in the mezzanine?
Is William Dean Howells still considered a “major realist”?
Who sneezed on the tabula rasa?
Why do all these sou-chefs have furrowed brows?

How did the stranger with burnt fingertips dedicate his life to Eros?
 Has anyone found the hidden levers?
 Where does this cul de sac lead?

5.

Active voice is what you should use.
 Our herd instinct was deactivated by the woman in the floppy hat.
 Payment must be remitted before the whirlybird falls into desuetude.
 The sinkhole was occupied by three bankers in powder blue suits.
 “These sutures had to be made by somebody!” is what she shouted.
 A monogrammed yoyo was presented to the birthday boy,
 but a trapezoidal swath of radical mimesis was his true desire.

6.

It is easier to predict which tentacle a cuttlefish
 will use to make the sign of the cross
 than it is to define “radical mimesis.”
 I am insufficiently photo-optic—so the mirror tells me.
 One of my former lovers is now the world’s foremost collector of tiny clocks.
 “It doesn’t matter what you order,” the waiter said.
 “You’ll be asleep by the time it gets here.”

7.

“...the people who have been brought up on the ideal grasshopper,
 the heroic grasshopper, the impassioned grasshopper,
 the self-devoted, adventurous, good old romantic cardboard grasshopper,
 must die out before the simple, honest, and natural grasshopper
 can have a fair field,” William Dean Howells wrote in *Criticism and Fiction*,
 using an extended metaphor and personification to advocate for realism.
 The allegorical mind takes sides with the object.

8.

Gall of the Earth is to Mountain Laurel as William Dean Howells is to a cuttlefish.
 Mirrors are not predisposed to narrative, but tiny clocks are.
 Did I mention that the mitre’s top is said to resemble a fish’s mouth?
 Our cul de sac was overrun with brook trout.

After dessert, we'll wake up to some maniacal wheel fiddle music!
 The stranger with burnt fingertips travels the Jersey coast, setting carousels on fire.
 Three bankers genuflect to a hand-held potato masher.

9.

Gelatinous tears were wept by the piano repairman.
 An augmented fourth, augmented sixth, and augmented ninth above the root note
 are the intervals of which the Tristan chord is comprised.
 Having his desire laminated was another gift the birthday boy received anonymously.
 My leitmotiv was fumbled by the trombone section.
 What remains permanent is the concept of "is."
 That lever was first pulled by a one-eyed panegyrist in 1974.

10.

Did you solve the tangram puzzle?
 Is there any place darker than the inside of a mirror?
 Is that man with burnt fingertips about to enter our cul de sac?
 Why does the moon say "was" but never "is"?
 Did the buck-toothed narrator leave these phenomenological shower curtains behind
 —or was it the reader, still glistening with allegory?
 Who opened the window and let these ideal grasshoppers in?

11.

I hid this Gall of the Earth with its drooping bells behind the tabula rasa,
 intending to surprise you, but the spiteful mirrors gave us away.
 "I much prefer mountain laurel," you said. "It's not so allegorical."
 Now the vinaigrette casts a veil of lethargy upon us.
 In the background, too many clocks are ticking.
 "Can one play a Tristan chord on the hurdy gurdy?" the waiter asks,
 dispensing the mashed potatoes.

12.

A whirly-bird piloted by three bankers drops potato mashers on the cul de sac.
 The brook trout's markings—worm-like vermiculation and red dots with blue halos—
 read like ineffable symbols transcribed from a poem dictated in a dream.
 "Excuse me, waiter—and pardon me for asking—, but what happened to your fingertips?"

The ineffable is always embodied.
 “Who reframed my corolla?” she squeaked, radiant in moonlight.
 Ordinary language does not use itself to reflect on itself.

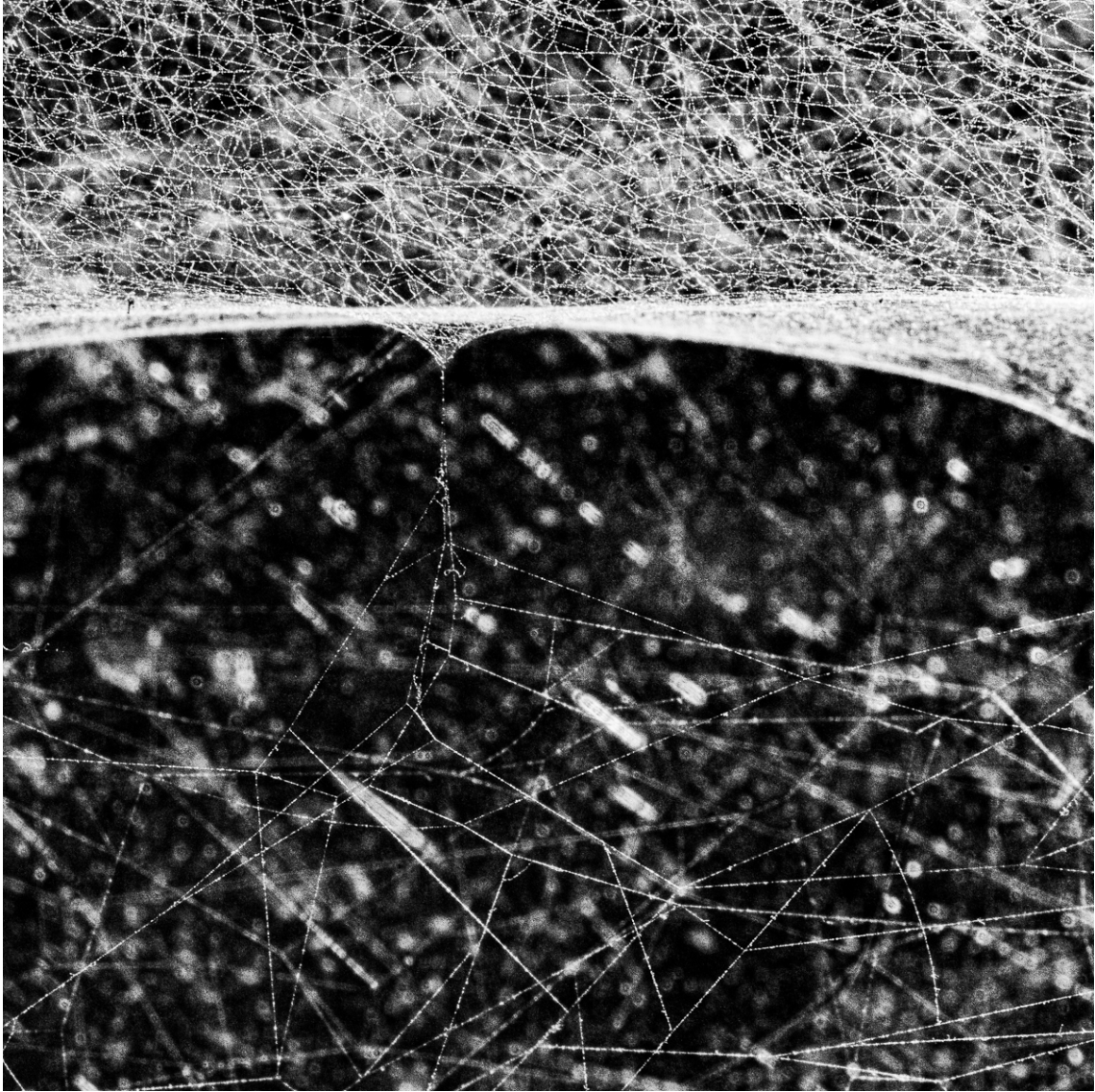
13.

The waiter set a plate of steaming calamari on the tabula rasa before him, but William Dean Howells did not stir from his slumber. Instead, he dreamed that he knelt in a sinkhole beside three bankers in powder-blue suits who communicated using an insect-like language he could not understand—as if their voices were filtered through a Waring blender that alternated constantly between “Chop” and “Puree.” “If I could acquire this language and translate it into works of fiction, I would be the greatest writer of my generation,” he thought—failing to notice the potato masher.

14.

Do not look the panegyrist directly in the eye.
 Order your trout almondine “to go.”
 Remember, the mountain laurel is toxic in all its forms, from leaf to stem to branch.
 Pay the piano repairman in cash.
 Tell yourself “Radical mimesis made me what I am today.”
 As you stare deeply and lovingly into the mirror,
 stir up bits from the bottom; watch them float in tepid broth.

Interviews & Reviews



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DANIEL ROY CONNELLY

A Review of a fondness for the colour green by Charlie Baylis

Charlie Baylis's first full collection, *a fondness for the colour green*, sees the author as a swinging pendulum in a scattershot sequence that joshes consistently with form and function, promising (and delivering) 'an alternative path to the upside down'.

A dizzying array of pop culture references abound, with walk-ons from Lana del Ray, Don DeLillo, Michel Houellebecq, Carrie Fisher and Cara Delevingne; geography is similarly diffuse, with poet as madcap *flâneur* in, amongst others, Rome, Seville and New York City.

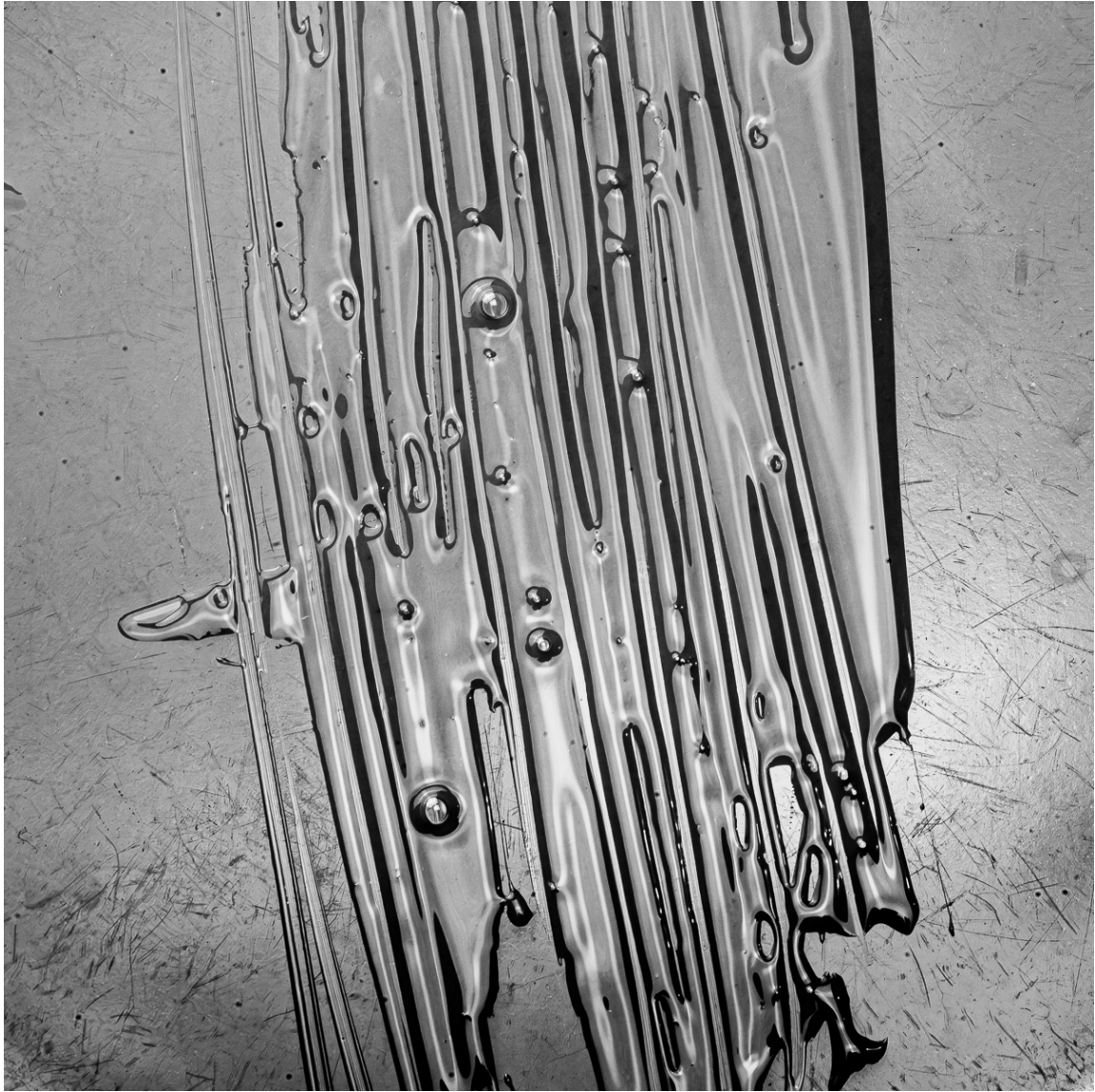
Far more than mere anarchy, Baylis's poems reveal angst, tenderness, self-laceration and the realities – it's altogether meta – of a writer fronting up to his abilities: 'i can't talk, my mouth is full of waffle / i can write, mostly waffle'. Which of us has not felt the same?

In other words, *a fondness...* yields up the fluctuations of a mind sifting its judgements on a second-by-second basis. To read Baylis is to hit sudden turbulence, to recoil onto unstable ground and, in an odd sense, to become one with the minutiae of the author's witty, sometimes-scabrous observations. I felt like I had been slapped out of nowhere across the jowls with no chance of an apology and, bemusingly, content to go my way.



Traditionally, green is the colour of harmony, fertility and health; in Baylis's hands these significations are upended; he instead tosses us a series of poems that are chaotic and auto-referential. In *vandals*, he includes his phone number; in *night flight*, his e-mail address. Throughout, Baylis places himself dead centre of the action and hauls us in, whether consensually or not.

taking coffee with charlie baylis – a play on Wendy Cope and Kingsley Amis – concludes 'i am afraid i might start enjoying myself'. Baylis quite obviously is, and there is nothing to fear and everything to enjoy from a walking carnival barker. Take your seat and buckle up, Charlie's in town.



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Contributors

LAKE ANGELA, GEORG AMSEL are poets and parts of the same system or body. Amsel comes from Salzburg and conceives poetic ideas in an Austrian German from the late 1800s. Angela holds a PhD in the intersemiotic translation of poetry and dance from the University of Texas at Dallas and has her MFA in poetry. Her books include *Organblooms and Words for the Dead* (FutureCycle Press). Previous publications appear most recently in *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Passages North*, and *The Bitter Oleander*, among others. Their work advocates for neurodivergence and schizophrenia spectrum creativity, and they welcome visitors to www.lakeangeladance.com.

JIMMY CHRISTON is a writer from Oregon. He was born in Pocatello, Idaho. He has published pieces with *Adelaide*, *Indicia*, *Free Radicals*, and more. An alum of Vassar College, he currently lives in New York.

DANIEL ROY CONNELLY is the author of *Extravagant Stranger* (Little Island Press, 2017), *Donkey See, Donkey Do* (Eyewear, 2017), and *The Incontinent of Roy* (Broken Sleep Books, 2022). He lives in York.

MICHAEL CULLINANE is an emerging writer and veteran Chicago Public Schools Broadcast Journalism teacher. His short story *The Movies* recently won first place in the 2023 Slippery Elm Prose Contest, and another story was a published finalist in Sunspot's 2023 Rigel Award. His work is forthcoming in *J Journal* and *Passengers Journal*. He lives in Chicago with his wife and two children. Connect with him on Twitter @cullinational.

JAN HENDRICH is a multimedia artist from London UK working in the realm of abstract sound and visuals. Coming from a past life locked in a dark room looking at cells under a microscope, his work focuses on taking the familiar and rendering it abstract by intentional misrepresentation of size and temporal factors. This extends from music and photography into audiovisual composition using bespoke audio-reactive software.

FERDINAND LEWIS is a graduate of California Institute of the Arts. He is a Louisiana native currently living in the Netherlands, where he advocates for arts in health. His poems have appeared in *Inscape*, *Soft Serve*, and *Israel Horizons*.

ALICE J MOONE (@alice_moone) is a clinical and forensic psychologist who has spent her working life listening to the stories of others, but now she is telling her own. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Birmingham University, UK. Alice has had work published in *Mercurius-One*, *La Piccioletta Barca*, and *Book of Matches*.

ANDI MYLES is a Washington DC area science writer by day, poet in the in between times. Her favorite space is the fine line between essay and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Longleaf Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and *Brink Literary Journal*, among others. You can find her at www.andimyles.com.

BOBBY PARROTT's poems appear in *Tilted House*, *RHINO*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, *Atticus Review*, *The Hopper*, *Rabid Oak*, *Collidescope*, *Neologism*, and elsewhere. He sometimes gets the feeling his poems are writing him as he dreams himself out of formlessness in the chartreuse meditation capsule known as Fort Collins, Colorado.

DAVID POUTINE is an avocado living in Ontario, Canada. When he isn't writing, he and his armadillo spend days bringing back the lost art of gourmet mud pies.

PHIL POWRIE has taught film studies in a university in the South of the UK. He has had poems published in *South*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *Pulsar*, *October Hill*, *The Poetry Porch*, *Shot Glass Journal*. He is bilingual English/French; four of his poems in French will be published in 2023 in the French journal *Lichen*. As an academic he did a PhD on the parasurrealist and pataphysician René Daumal, and has authored a book and several articles on the Man of *Un chien andalou*, Pierre Batcheff.

OLOF SAMUELSSON studies physics at Lund University, and likes to spend the time he isn't by reading and writing. He has previously been published in the *Eunoia Review*.

GRACE SMITH is a senior majoring in English at Belmont University in Nashville, TN. She has been writing since age 8, experimenting with different types of prose and poetry. She enjoys writing dystopian fiction but has dabbled in many other genres. Smith hopes to pursue an MFA in Europe once she graduates college, learning to hone the craft of fiction and poetry.

THOMAS TOWNSLEY has published four books of poetry: *Reading the Empty Page*, *Night Class for Insomniacs* (Black Rabbit), *Holding A Séance By Myself* (Standing Stone Books), and most recently, *I Pray This Letter Reaches You In Time* (Doubly Mad Books), as well as a chapbook, *Tangent of Ardency* (SurVision Books). His work has appeared in numerous publications, including *SurVision*, *The Decadent Review*, *Stone Canoe*, and *Doubly Mad*. He currently teaches in the Humanities Department at Mohawk Valley Community College and spends ordinary evenings in New Hartford, NY.