

RUST & MOTH

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A House all Sweet

“We decided: We will have to kill her,”
the plucky little girl Gretel told her father
while staring at the confused stepmother.

Hansel smirked as boys do and described
the witch in the woods who helped them
when they had become lost. “But, Daddy,
she wanted to cook us!” The father hugged
his crying children, and his wife clenched
her fists as if holding onto a lie, not caring
if her palms should bleed.

Hansel and Gretel
stopped crying only when they began vomiting
up the house that they had eaten, candy bricks,
planks of cake, shattered sugar glass of windows.
Yes, their teeth would rot and fall out in weeks,
child smiles sculpted into a crone’s: all gum,
tight lips. A house all sweet won’t taste of home.

And powdered sugar became their favorite food.
A dust so easy to eat, confection easy to confuse
with flour, with white arsenic, with a fire’s ash.

A Series of Arguments

It is hard to explain to my boss that I cannot
take a day off, come back the next
a heroine overtaking a snake or raptor,
that after three years on the same antidepressants
they started to make me sick and that off them, I am
sicker. I cannot argue with the doctor at the urgent care
clinic who says, *this should not happen*, gives me something
for my stomach, then asks for a half grand.
I haven't stopped explaining
to my parents, who think survival is a matter of eating
the right animals, that yes, a job is a piece
of luck but it is not the sky, it has nothing to do
with the sky nor its creatures at night. Believe me,
I have not forsaken the world, only I have seen
more of it. There are teeth yes, but my gaze
still catches on the eyes and the coat. Once I saw a woman
perch herself on a street in San Francisco and
through her drunkenness give me directions over and
over and over again for a safe place to wait out the rain. It is strange
to think of anger and find its mark, think
there could be blame in any of this, that
we are not each animals, clawing for our piece
of earth until someone says, you can go home now—
the fight, yes, it has been won.

Laundry

—*For C and D*

In sun-soaked Iowa, we eat peach rings
two at a time, crowd their gummy bodies
into our mouths. I want to pocket the bits.

Down in the laundry room, we melt
Tide Pods between the pads of our fingers,
their blue-green skin. These fluorescent lights
bleach the air limp. I cough up dryer lint—
I want to cry. How easy it is to admit that
we are happy and stand by it.

In the room with purple walls, we watch a movie
with the door ajar. A man and his bulldog sway
to the tug and tussle of the washing machine.

It is June. I tire of goodbyes. Say tomorrow
we meet on the twelfth floor twelve minutes past
midnight. Say we reincarnate into the lacewings
holding fast to this glass cage.

Porch lights

Twilight, and the silhouettes of trees,
streetlights, and the scent of magnolia.

Porch lights motioned on, and the many
taillights of cars like ships at night at sea.

This is the setting to which my daughter is
falling asleep. For a dark place, this poem

goes on and on about light. Twilight,
streetlights, porch lights, car taillights.

All of it and the hum of the car is putting
my daughter to sleep. I questioned

the repetition, my use of the word light.
But the same song plays on and on.

The melody on repeat. And every tree must
be repeating itself blurring past her window.

Of course, repetition is soothing. Every day we
wait again for the one we love to come home.

Grandma Goes to the Junkman

Flowered wing chair, dangling ruffles,
ouchy springs.

Bedroom suite, Desert Flower powder dust
in every drawer. Drawers missing.

Hearing aid batteries, depleted, sharing velvet
box with loose costume pearls.

Fish tank, slight cracks, faint smells
of sauerbraten and pound cake.

Pages and torn pages of crosswords, filled,
half-filled, and empty.

Wind Season in Los Angeles

Early October afternoon, an eerie
stillness settles over the city, a creepy edginess that

prickles your ears and feels like waiting
in the principal's office. Even kids know

there will be wind after sunset—Santa Anas that howl
all night under an orange moon, devil

winds raging down the canyons to the coast
toppling trees, snapping power

lines, snarling traffic. Meteorologists explain
reduced relative humidity, positive ions, gust velocity,

but never mention the exhilaration swirling
in the air, the mesmerizing waves

rippling through the long grass, the desire
to follow that wild frenzy up and over the hills.

August

The way the sticky air bathes me
in my own sweat, how my thighs glue
themselves to every seat, red and raw
when I rip them up like weeds.

The stubborn sun refuses to die,
forces me to be seen in my most
disgusting nakedness.

An orchestra of mosquitoes buzzes above
our heads, the song of the season
whipping past our ears.

“You’re all bitten up!” you cry,
tracing the hot welts along my leg,
a range of angry mountains erupting
on my tanned skin. Your fingers
come away wet and red, your eyes
drop to the knee-high grass.
The evidence is there beneath my fingernails;
I don’t know why you’re surprised.

I have always been bait for bloodsuckers,
an easy target, an endless source
for someone’s sick satisfaction. Even children
know that scratching makes the bites feel worse.
I want to make it worse.
I want to make it stop.
I want to make it hurt.

Tiny vampires sing their sleepy song,
hum satisfied sighs, their bellies full
with their share of me, and you
cannot look me in the eye. I reach down
to touch the blood, slippery on my skin,
wipe it up and smear it in the dirt.
There is a hole. I keep digging.

Seniors Find Love

I send you the video of goats eating
a wheelbarrow load of tomatoes, weird
eyes half-closed in ecstasy
jaws popping the red skins, pulp running
into their beards. You say it reminds you
of your last date, the one who smelled
old, how it would be hard to love
the speckled folds of his neck, the sad
sack of his scrotum as you imagined it
softly tapping your thigh
when you fucked. Dinner out
in a nice place and he ordered
something with tomatoes, told you
about his loneliness between bites and wayward feet
beneath the table, any wife
long gone who could keep
his manners in check.

O friend, call the man back. Never mind
his red-stained shirt, the tremor in his hand
inching toward yours. The mountains have been falling down
for years, ancient waves are beating
the same shore senseless
morning and night, and all the stars
we see are dead. You and I are marching
into the void, and who knows what form
we'll take in the resurrection – solid, liquid, gas, goat – nothing
is promised. Your date may hardly
remember what desire looks like
without the right glasses. He may call you
by his dead wife's name and step on your
toes when you dance. But doesn't
everything hurt?

the orchid

butts her head to my cherry-tipped nose,
tongues inflamed violet, petals a roaring

mane, veins popping like Father's tree-
bark hands. back when she was transplanted

last April, the moon broke its curfew to
watch her scream: maggot-fingers clutching

her plastic cocoon, infants wrenched from
cradles, howling curses at the marbled sky.

pity how she sways by the edge every
night, how she swallows water like wine.

i grab a fistful of her face, tongue on
tongues, petals dripping from my teeth.

tears like dew on scrubbed wounds;
i smile with violet-stained lips.

Have you flown up during sleep have you broken

time have you seen the angels biblically
accurate not winged but plush and stuffed
with eyes not blue but blue-black have you
leavened in the screeching silence seen
the sky from within its flannel felt its scissored
scraps around you have you witnessed the sky
pouring from the horrible mouths
of the angels in silent midafternoon unable
to move did you know you must shock
the body before it warms completely to the color
of carbon I must tell you they know
you are good you taste so sweet to angel
tongues they want you / they want you every night

Peeled Apples

The last time I saw Michael,
we were driving through garlic

fields when he turned down Ben Folds
& asked me to try molly with him sometime.

You can feel everything, he said,
Like every pore is a channel—

but my pores are wide
as subway tunnels & often I would rather board

them up. Is there a drug that can stop me
from weeping at the curtain drop

of every small town play?
It's embarrassing, to be in love

with everything you see,
to open yourself like a blouse

to the world over & over.
Two weeks later, Michael

got caught, *fifty counts over eight years—*
his middle-school students, so many

Jane Does. I had no words for my grief
& suddenly I couldn't stop

making apple pie—
That fall, I probably baked twenty,

peeling whole crates of honeycrisp, pink lady
& Granny Smith, lining up ranks

of unarmed naked fruit on my counter,
strips of shiny skin dropping to my floor.

Our Daughter Does Not Leave Us in Our Hours of Need

In the months after our daughter's death
we heard her wandering the house, more present
than she had been since before the high school
estrangement and our becoming toxic waste—
not ghost exactly, but echo in noisy hollow,
less shout, more whisper than when she last lived
with us under our roof. She was, we swore,
the sound of the fridge sighing its closing
or dropping ice cubes in the dark. She was
the rustling of small feet in attic crawl space,
the scratch scratch of something furred making a nest,
the sudden thud of a door blowing closed,
the exasperated gasp of a stack
of books and papers giving in to gravity,
a fall, a collapse, a resignation.
We each heard her separately, muffled tears
at the far end of the house or clothing
from hangers slipping, settling, subsiding
in the closed closet of her old room,
the sound of a sleeping person's breath.

Somewhat Insomnia

Love is nothing more than breakability
of human skin. The way breath
is whiskey and exodus. This evening
a sky of sapphire, beneath me the wry
squelch of a disappointed monsoon.
If you were to ask me why I'm seeking
a definition of love, I'd come up blank.
Lay the blame on seasons. Tell you
I've barely slept these past three nights,
consumed by the disappearance of blue
whales, the annihilation of my favourite
cities, the way grapes these days
resemble squishy ghosts, how every
modern song is the train wreck
of an autotuned ending. A couple
across the street is arguing over milk.
The billboard with the one lazy eye
winks in neon resignation. Nightbirds
swoop by on screeching bikes. Lying
awake, I think of a few long-ago
summers. I take a swig from last night's
wine and mumble along to Cohen.
Orion's up there somewhere and in
a few million years, even stardust
will be fickle, voluntary. Something like
sleep. Or—now that I think of it—love.

When asked to map the downfall of our relationship

my fingers hover over the East Coast.
Names of places blur together, images blur together,
I know what happened, I know what happened,
my voice can lift above the blur, I can sing, I can sing,
I can sing about you

and me at the lighthouse—the trip
to an artist's colony somewhere on the East Coast.
The plums I let rot rolled down the street.
The expensive sandwich shop turned you away.
Then the place that was my surprise, the place was my surprise,

surprise, surprise! Here's more of your anger
when I don't live up to the other woman
in your head, surprise

surprise, the lighthouse looms
as we walk down to the water
a woman tells us

she collects lighthouse experiences, tallies them
on an extensive field guide

I want to tell her I don't know where I am
when I am in the boat of your anger

the lighthouse itself small, suffocating,
I won't go there, up there to the top,
he says

my body is too big,
says over last night's dinner *no one*
wants tits all stretch-marked out,
edits travel photos to hide the size
of my stomach, has become so embarrassed
by my body I can't,
I can't

go up there

the humiliation

the attempt

his anger growing
sun burning reflecting
off white walls

this was supposed to be my special
my safe this was supposed to be
this was supposed to be

I want to tell her I don't know where I am

surprise he said

to the lighthouse

he said

surprise

Ghazal for My Father's Insomnia

Insomnia is an inheritance. My grandmother's family ghosts
fill my curtains, whisper dreams of burning. I know most fathers

don't ask children to proofread speeches about death or carve languages
into flame. In art school, mine scalded his hands until they feathered

with blisters. Decades later, he coats the walls
in fluorescent skulls and flooded monuments. Ghosts father

more ghosts until the family tree buckles under the weight. We eat
parallel midnight breakfasts: my peanut butter toast, my father's

cereal, four hours away. His own father's name was twice-anglicized,
reforged in the ocean, first, then wartime. Grandfather,

I wish you'd known me. Grandmother, you tried. Your whole family
was locked in horror; escapees hemorrhaged through coastlines, fathered

children you wanted to love. You spoke five languages but only
used Yiddish for secrets, only spoke of your lost פאטער

in flickering nouns: glare, heat, fury. Your son inherited
your tears and added his own, salting the earth. With no father,

who were you? With no mother, who is he? His death a haunt that lives
in the curtains. The first time you were diagnosed, Father,

you wrote a book; the second, you added a chapter. Now, I slide on
your left shoe and wonder: after surgery, did you lose faith or

just your sense of smell? Was it a kind of prayer, when you sang
Isaiah? Father, when you cup the tea I've made in your hands, do you know

how many years we have left?

Black paintings

Rothko Chapel, Houston

To clear my ears of a ringing, insectile,
I swallowed once: it continued, cantillated,
and light filtered into the room, white,
fluorescing, through some glass up high
one could not see, spilled over an octagonal baffle
that matched the walls' arrangement:
whitening everything, even the dark stone floor,
the heavy benches. The only sound
people entering, voices hushed subito,
and the percussion of their exits, and that
little hive in my ears: I sat, wondered how long
I might sit, how long the woman on the black
zabuton before me would kneel motionless:
how long before, in that same pose,
I'd lose patience. A bench scraped, someone rose:

and the dark panels did not change but became
somehow more still, more visible, purpled
into an ink blue, a black edged in oxblood.
I had wanted to come: how long till I
could leave? I felt the breath move within
my ribs, stood, circumambulated
once more the perimeter, the panels,
their thin washes. Was there more?
The door swished, an entrance or exit.
No people I knew. I wanted an emptiness,
but even more empty. The woman
on the zabuton would sit an eternal zazen.
The drone in my ears a personal music,
its tone having imperceptibly deepened:
no sign but the scrape of wood on stone,
paint in its obscure strokes, motes rising
in the light from that iterant door.

Kestrel Duplex

Bryon is weeding black lilies and speedwells
that flaunt their blue blossoms. A towhee calls.

In the blue blooms the bird says cheewink chee.
Rain soaks my clothes but I'm not any cleaner.

I'm soaked and more settled, but nothing is clearer.
In dawn light I settle, see like a painter—

see cadmium yellow cherished by painters.
The kestrel I've watched these first days of fall

watches me watching. He startles. It's fall,
time to mix in quinacridone red.

It paints out nicely—quinacridone red.
To paint the kestrel I breathe in chemicals.

When I paint loveliness, odor of chemicals.
Bryon kneels where the black lilies bloom.

Studies in Paralysis

Two times two is four
& I wish I could calculate my future,

just as easy, extract the unknown,
prove it with words & numbers,

not just intuition & tarot—
use other means to understand my body—

holistic, artistic, deterministic, statistic—
words trapped in the discreet quanta.

I have wars to fight
& the right odds to find

the answers like holding
breath underwater.

For Hopkins, who saw the bent world

In the dry grass, a dragonfly and housefly locked
together, the dragonfly works its mandibles
while the housefly writhes. It is autumn, but barely.
The cottonwoods are turning but not the larch.

Soon these hills will frost and finish both
flies' lives. My daughter has a fever but not
Covid. She is asleep beside my wife.
Her sisters, inside, have built

a town of toys, and are playing loudly.
Something changes. The dragonfly
releases the housefly, which walks off
one-winged to die. Another dragonfly
 alights nearby, its abdomen pulsing
 red-fleshed, fecund but out of time.

*The world is charged with the grandeur
of God.* And what grandeur
is that? The pond blooms with algae
and the broken slab of a timber camp.

On the banks, otters whelp and herons
fledge, and fading autumn light
gilds the shaking leaves of the cottonwood.
Now another daughter races out

announces the demise of their town
in some imagined apocalypse, nearly squashes
the one-winged fly. *Trod and trod*. We wait
for winter and for dusk, and for God's
wrath to pass across us.

faster, baby, faster

in Greenwich, Connecticut, the sun is burning from Canadian wildfires,
skies hazy like cremation. Netflix says mother nature is fast nearing her

limit. by noon, mothers sift through cobalt on their knees, babies
still fastened to the mine as the earth clamps its jaws shut or just

crumples. the boy i loved is fast asleep. *the cobalt in his phone is
rusting*, i write, eyes chafing against the screen, searching for him

just as he wants. he has been watching girls like me, screaming *fill
me like a wound & faster, baby, faster*, a joke until it isn't. the poems

come faster by the day, wrested from my skin like pores. let them
be searing & heartless, so long as they send me to Harvard & him

to hell. *god, let my words save someone*. i'll FaceTime my grandma
with the news, hold her sun-cracked skin & a stranger's blood. our

clock runs so fast, nobody can be saved. at least i'll become fossil
fuel before our home is wept dry. by night, ChatGPT

is more generous than any boy i've met, but remains steadfast to its
tired gospel. *as AI, I cannot form attachments*. doesn't it know it's

time? time to buy your daughter a bigger cake, faster internet, stronger
chemical peels. to stand for love, to eat your words, to start your fast.

every poem about exploitation is exploitative, every pore scratched to
a wound. islands look like bridges, shampoo like conditioner, & by

& by breakfast, every town is dirty with mourning victims & laughter
from newly-formed committees. mother, you spin so fast that dust

settles everywhere, & all i can clean is my room. 10,416 people died
of hunger in the time i wrote this, & all i am saying is *get better, &*

publish me, & just make me stop & scrub faster, baby, get clean.

"Losing 25,000 to Hunger Every Day." United Nations. Accessed June 18, 2023.

Before I Loved You

Home sounded como chicharras humming
chatter entre hombre y los aves
creaks from the cedar deck the dried-up creek
y sus piedras flip and flop of tortillas
calentitos like those splashes of wind
who taught and teach the chimes to sing and dance
tumbleweeds who are kept from collecting
and prayers brought back by the pájaros.

Todo cambia con el viento. Amber
stripped from the oak tree outside our window
paints the afternoon sky. The cicadas
hushed by the wind. Blades of grass silently
swaying. In the glorious light we dance
bailando con la naturaleza.

My doctor told me that losing weight would be challenging.

“You know, because of that ‘being-a-brown-person’ thing,” she said.

She said it would have been my ancestors who stored calories that survived
the famines.

The ancestors who could stomach the meager scraps given to them;

The ones that would swallow the moldy bread crusts,
Chew the fatty rotting meats,
Or break their teeth on dried beans.

Those who would stay hungry and moving for days on end,
Having given their food and water to their children,
Willing their legs to move forward,
And their backs not to break under the heat of the sun.

The ones who survived.

I don't know if the math checks out on that.

I do know Grandma was always worried about my weight.

She once told me how much her father's mother sold for.

I am 285 pounds sterling,
and I need to slim down.

Mountain rendezvous

Nighttime, and we are writhing
with the worms.
Weekend escape:

solitude in the face of denial,
syntactic precision
underscoring firefly

promises. Wild forage leaking
their saps. I want to
breathe you in:

anonymity in the hands of desire,
inundated in blue
denim all wet

and tattered, fabric unraveling
as we claw the
earth to its core.

Minor-key tunes that emit
from lantern
flickers. Blink,

and the tent flies away. Trust:
stranger contortions
have happened.

But tonight, I'll be your cowboy
and wear your
closet camouflage,

hide in the freight train haze,
dance with
the coyote yip—

all these mountain things
shudder under
campfire light.

Swanning

The guard at the door of the leather
goods store scans the lines of people.

Bags cost more than the woman pushing
the cleaning cart earns in six months.

The salesclerk shows me an orange wallet.
It's an investment, a must have, something

you'll keep forever. I don't want to want it,
but the leather is butter soft, and my phone fits.

I should get rid of my phone. I check it every 10 seconds.
In my old life, I'd plan the day, then wake everyone.

Now, barely out of bed, I'm reading email, news,
ordering groceries. I never have to leave the house.

I walk to the lake to watch summer's last swans.
An early frost is forecast, but the swans, bright,

like sprigs on spring trees, stay. They know when to go.
A woman and child skip stones on the water.

He asks where swans go when the lake freezes. She says,
The mother, father, and baby swans fly south, where it's warm.

She zips his jacket and adjusts his cap.
I pull my phone from my wallet to fact check her story.

Pulse

Oregon Garden, Silverton, OR

Sunblind, still how could I miss
the scrap-metal dragon, sculpted
scales poking up through pea-green
marsh. Past Pacific maples in
the bosque, bursts of zinnias
span the spectrum of visible light.
Then the monkey puzzle tree,
the empty children's garden, toad
lilies nourished by raw quiet.
And roses, sure, though their colors
bleed slowly. Farther down,
forest edge spells fire danger,
lays out evacuation routes in case
our flames raze the good green earth
we took for granted. In this tinderbox,
sweat somersaults from bent brow
onto echinacea; bee balm and aloe
soothe burns yet fail to save us.
Meanwhile, calendula still coat
the meadows; a snail secretes
a legacy on leaves of thyme
for all of us, tangled in a solar net,
lone exit sign flashing *red red red*.

Lepidoptera

Quiet bloodletting—counting monarchs
over boysenberry buds.

In time you forget your body—
a cadmium sphere
wedged between dust-caked panes.

The sinews of your shoulders
come undone.
Every passing hour pickpockets dreams,
smudging hues from the lacunae
of your harlequin wings.

One day you will awaken,
 flight bones pulsing—
 scale cells warm and aglow.

Tradesman

From the river that received his ashes like alms,
my father stands at his workbench, tinkers

in the service of the lesser angels now,
heaven acceding his need for a 40-watt bulb

cornered away from the radiant surge of Shekinah glory.
Departed souls about him will get used to the dimness,

study him putzing about with obsolete tools he kept
in case of a Great Depression rebound—

nails writhed from hurricanes, rusted augers, chuck keys,
a Studebaker taillight he swore could illumine a snowy

Christmas window. Sometimes under his bulb
he'd flick away moths worthy of the empty corners

of the local Sears that passed away the year he did,
his opposite fist holding coffee so burnt and bitter

it'd keep the devil awake, and drill bits the world
gave up on, scored with dust in that diminutive corner

of eternity, still holding their own, wild to claim a chunk
of metal or oak, startled to be in his hands.

Umwelt

A conifer next to a broadleaf tree, in a corner
of the garden, lonely like a dog and a cat

separated from kin to be household pets.
The landlady said she'd have to have it cut

down. She meant the pine, standing where
the two cedar hedges meet. The neighbors had

written to her saying they were concerned
about their safety. They're right, she said,

nodding. See how the branches are hanging
over their passage? And what if it's toppled

by a storm? But what about the birds and
the squirrels? my children protested.

What will happen to them? Where will
they go? Why doesn't anyone think about

them? They were traumatized two summers
ago, seeing the landlady's gardeners pollard

the walnut tree with an electric saw. Ask them
to stop, my son cried, I cannot stand it

anymore. He hadn't seen the butchery
it had already endured. The trunk, sawed

off just above where it had started to
branch out in four sure directions, reduced

now to a wavering yelp of twigs. Perhaps
you can trim it a little? I meekly suggested.

Cutting it down won't be right; won't be good
for the *Umwelt*. She'd nodded; and later,

one of the neighbors who'd complained, told me
they didn't want the tree to be cut down either.

Trimming the branches would do. She mentioned
the squirrels and the birds, and I the *Umwelt*.

But someone was sent to measure the trunk.
One of these days, I'm afraid, they'll cut

the wretched tree down. And it won't be,
come to think of it, too remarkable an event

either; the felling of a single tree against
the incalculable continents of forests we've felled

for thousands of years. And for all that carnage,
take heart, there are more lifeforms in

fistfuls of forest soil than people on the planet.
Only, its needles won't sift the morning

sunlight onto the yard, and fifty-odd square meters
of the planet will miss its slow, gentle life.

And while the summer afternoons ablate
the garden's memory of it, the soil, now rife

with leftover moisture, will mourn its roots'
aborted camaraderie. As for the moon,

it will circle the earth a few times, rising daily
to look, weeping, for that evergreen crown,

and then, at some point, it'll give up and find
its perch on the walnut tree's deciduous bough.

And the birds and the squirrels, if still alive,
will surely have found their new homes by now.

Cultivated

In May, treasures buried in the park dead-ending
Fifth Avenue appear on three-foot stems: shiny
pods that break open with the thrusting

of a thousand buds becoming one purple pom-pom.
A long line of them, proceeding amid duller sedge and
hostas like swans paddling a leafy pond. Or fireworks

over the river. Grand as a fleet of tall ships sailing
into the harbor, these Persian onion flowers
nodding in the breeze at passersby. The closest

I will ever get to the Zagros Mountains eclipsed
by a woman head to toe in red reaching over the ironwork
at the path's edge to snap their necks one at a time.

vessels

at the edge of the water i don't know what to fill or discard / i have many
jars and reservoirs / i have tried to pour out all of my grief but it keeps
filling from inside of a cylindrical wound / as i open up my anger the bottle
sprays and my arms blister and welt / i gather laughter and patience in glass
flasks that seem too small / too fragile / they turn my palms opalescent as
i grip them / i put my face directly into the water and love stains my teeth
the color of god / the color of the end of a fuse / half charred flesh / half
magnesium / my tears will rip the body apart or they will just moisten my
axolotl limbs / sadness is not a fluid but a piano or the ghost of a piano / i
have spilled most of my memories near the storm drains / twigs / bandaids
/ overdeveloped film / the fish here buzz like eyeless helicopters / they see
everything and swallow nothing

Basting

is the art of stitching
loosely; not too much religion to sinch a soul up. She tacked
a Butterick template unto pieces of patterned
cloth, cut along dotted lines
on glossy brown tissue. I watched her pull
straight pins from a stuffed canvas tomato, stick them
into her mouth, picking them out one at a time
to tack and hold two pieces of cut cloth
together where they would, eventually, be sewn. And she
would baste humming, pins in her mouth, forming the words
to a song whenever she took them all out. *Oh*
how I love Jesus, she tuned, needle rivering though yellow
floral cotton and polka-dot navy blue rayon. I knew
I would have to wear the product whether I liked it or not; some
people should be pre-forgiven for the things you will have
to do to make sure they know you love them. A dress
& new culottes. A pair of knock off Keds and bangs. Maybe
I was cool. [You had to have the bangs.] A mother
who sang about Jesus. The month,
I learned she would die, I wrote a letter to her that read:
“Thank you for giving me Jesus.” Some people
are just forgiven for what you know you have to do to be sure
they know how much you love them.
What I meant to say was this: “Thank you
for the dresses and culottes that saved me from succeeding to be
less than the daughter you always knew how to love.”

Kissing Disease

He taught himself to play sonatas
two fingers at a time, exhibiting
the same restrained rage other men
reserve for making ransom demands.
Passed out by morning, pinned supine
to the piano bench. At the house-sitting
house all the girls have gone home.

Summerlong we're employed by an
absent family to feed and walk their
runty spaniel. Rescued late in life,
she remains skittish as a stray around
strangers, yet in his presence she senses
a shared fear, and reassured, sleeps

sweetly at his feet. Upstairs, I rise
at noon in a darkened room, weary,
unwell, wondering if those tumescent
nodes in my throat are symptoms
of hangover, some form of corporal
punishment. At nineteen, I'm ill-prepared
to recognize the onset of actual illness.

Kissing disease, is what the nurse says.
Mine a special case of atypical lymphocytes
compounded by a three-day beer binge,
juvenile liver turning spoiled grey
like markdown meat on its sell-by date.

I suffered another condition that could've
had the same name, a compulsion, putting
my lips on every available face and breast
and pelvis, sealing each fold of flesh
with my tongue like an envelope of money.

Before driving myself to the pediatrician,
I drank a last swallow of something and
woke my good friend. He stares out the window,
woozy swoon of glass settled in a leaded pane,
seemingly liquid, incapable of flowing free.
Thirty years later his marriage will dissolve
in a familiar refrain. *This isn't the life I imagined...*

The dog whimpers, lost in a dream. Legs twitch,
claws scrape floorboards. I want to believe
she is chasing a squirrel. Not trying to outrun her
childhood, memories of the hands of careless men.

Birth Day

Outside
gray as a nail.

Tomorrow will be
like a popped balloon,
string

dragging in mud.
I keep possibilities
folded

like a photo in my
pocket. Your
vermilion

body leans
close, even though
I know

it has long drifted
to dust. Inside
the coffin

no one to brush
stray hair, to prop
your head

on a pillow.
Out here only
the sky

with its
stake-down
manner,

its
long blown—
out candles.

Sonnet and a Half for a Beginning

I didn't mean to burn the toast or cry
in public; I didn't mean to spend the party
sulking on a stranger's icy balcony
or wasting all my ex-friends' new friends' time

on lies they won't remember by the morning.
We wandered to the driveway at eleven
and I got mean, then I cursed out every twig
that snapped between the frozen coughs of wind

and every groan of every owl, but you
stayed back when I bent to tie my shoe
and the moon glowed like a fist and my fist
turned all the colours of a mirror, and I swore

that even in the hollow of my rib
I knew I always wanted all the noise;
I'm too afraid to sit still and pray

that the day I die will be as uneventful
as the first day of my life: quiet snow
that blisters down in a wide and sweeping arch,

solid in the mind but strange for April
in Toronto, breath gone white and slow
and cold, someone waving from the porch.

About the Authors

Ronnie Sirmans is an Atlanta digital journalist whose poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Plainsongs*, *Atlanta Review*, and elsewhere.

Jingyu Li immigrated from China at age three and received her bachelors from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her work appears in *Rust & Moth*, *Palette Poetry*, *Okay Donkey*, and was longlisted for the *Frontier Poetry* Hurt & Healing Prize. She loves dogs of all sizes and her favorite food is hotpot.

Smile Ximai Jiang is a poet from Shenzhen, China and resides in Massachusetts. Smile serves as an editor for *Polyphony Lit* and *The Lumiere Review*. She is a 2023 poetry mentee of *The Adroit Journal's* Summer Mentorship Program under Mario Chard. Her work appears in *Peach Mag*, *Palette Poetry*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *Surging Tide*. Smile loves sumo oranges and her cat.

Richelle Buccilli's work has recently appeared on *The Slowdown* and in the journals *Thrush*, *Rattle*, and *SWWIM*, among others. A nominee for the Best New Poets anthology, she lives in Pittsburgh with her husband and two children.

Margie Duncan lives in New Jersey. When not writing, she putters in the garden, hikes in the woods with her husband Brian, and hangs around the house with their two tuxedo cats. Her first published poem appeared recently in *Thimble* and another will soon be published in *OneArt*.

Victoria Melekian lives in Carlsbad, California. Her stories and poems have been published in print and online anthologies. She's twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Michelle Ott is an MFA student at American University set to receive her degree in Creative Writing in August 2023. Her work has previously appeared in *Black Fox Literary Journal*, and was featured in the 2022 D.C. Pride Poem-a-Day project. She lives in Washington, D.C.

Arlene DeMaris is a freelance writer living in Avon, Connecticut. She is working toward her MFA in the Bennington College Writing Seminars. Her first published poetry will appear in the *Naugatuck River Review* this September. She received a Nutmeg Poetry Award from the Connecticut Poetry Society earlier this year.

Amy Lin is a Chinese-American writer from New Jersey. When she is not writing, you can find her enjoying word puzzles, painting, and eating home-cooked meals.

Alexandra Romero holds an MFA in poetry from Hunter College. Born in Miami and raised in Southern California, she now lives and writes in New York City.

Carly Wheelehan Gelsinger is a poet and single mother in the Bay Area. Her work has appeared in *San Pedro River Review*, *Relief Journal*, *Narratively*, and elsewhere. She is expected to complete her MFA from Ashland University in 2024.

Cecil Morris retired after 37 years of teaching high school English, and now he tries writing what he tried teaching students to read and (maybe) enjoy. He has had poems published in *Cobalt Review*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Hole in the Head Review*, *The Talking River Review*, and other literary magazines.

Siddharth Dasgupta writes from lost hometowns. His fifth book, *All These Streets We've Known By Heart*, emerged in October 2022. Siddharth's literature has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Cordite*, *Epiphany*, *Kyoto Journal*, and elsewhere. He serves as Editor, Visual Narratives with *The Bombay Literary Magazine*.

Callie S. Blackstone writes both poetry and prose. Her debut chapbook *sing eternal* is available through Bottlecap Press.

Isaiah Newman (they/he) is a Jewish writer and social worker living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They write both fiction and poetry, and their work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *The Lumiere Review*, *Waxwing*, and *Pidgeonholes*.

Lisa Bickmore has published three collections: the second, *flicker* (2016), won the 2014 Antivenom Prize from Elixir Press. Her poem “Eidolon”, which appears in *Ephemerist* (2017, Red Mountain Press), won the 2015 Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize. She founded and edits *Lightscatter Press* and in 2022 was named Poet Laureate of Utah.

Barbara Daniels’ *Talk to the Lioness* was published by Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press. Her poetry has appeared in *Qwerty*, *Image Journal*, *Rogue Agent*, and elsewhere. She has received four fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

Ariana D. Den Bleyker is a Pittsburgh native residing in New York’s Hudson Valley, where she is a wife and mother of two. When she’s not writing, she’s spending time with her family and every once in a while sleeps. She is the author of three collections, a myriad of chapbooks, and hopes you’ll fall in love with her words.

Jonathan Frey is associate professor of English at North Idaho College, teaching creative writing and composition. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Millions*, and elsewhere. He lives in Spokane, Washington, with his wife and daughters, and has just completed work on his first novel.

Ziyi Yan is a young writer from Connecticut and an alum of the Iowa Young Writers' Studio and the *Adroit Journal* Summer Mentorship. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Poetry Northwest*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and others. She is also the editor in chief of the *Dawn Review*.

Julián David Bañuelos is a Mexican-American poet and translator from Lubbock, Texas. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Jason R. Montgomery is a Chicano/Indigenous Californian activist, writer, painter, and playwright from El Centro, California. In 2016, he co-founded the arts activism collective Attack Bear Press, and in 2020 he founded 50 Arrow Gallery. Along with Alexandra Woolner, Jason is 2021–2023 Easthampton Poets Laureate.

George Chang is an Asian-American writer with an interest in short stories and confessional poetry as a means for personal catharsis. In his free time, he enjoys taking long walks and discovering new music.

Linda Laderman is a Michigan poet and the recipient of the 2023 Harbor Review Jewish Women's Poetry Prize. Her poetry has been published in various journals, including *SWWIM*, *Poetica Magazine*, *3rd Wednesday*, and *OneArt*. Additional work is forthcoming in *Thimble Literary Magazine*.

Andrew Alexander Mobbs (he/him/his) is the author of one chapbook, *Strangers and Pilgrims* (Six Gallery Press, 2013). A Pushcart Prize nominee, his poems have appeared in *Crab Creek Review*, *Arkansas Review*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Ghost Ocean Magazine*, and elsewhere. He is also the co-managing editor of *Nude Bruce Review*.

Oormila Vijaykrishnan Prahlad (she/her) is an Indian-Australian artist, poet, and improv pianist. She lives and works on traditional Gamaragal land in Sydney.

JC Alfier's (they/them) most recent book *The Shadow Field* was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include *The Emerson Review*, *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Vassar Review*. They are also an artist doing collage and double-exposure work.

Eugene Datta's recent work has appeared in *The Dalhousie Review*, *Rise Up Review*, *Red Noise Collective*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, and elsewhere. He edits research articles and lives in Aachen, Germany.

Iris Rosenberg writes poetry and fiction in New York City. She has written widely for businesses, news organizations and universities; taught business communications; and served as a poetry reviewer for *Library Journal*. Her work is forthcoming or appears in *right hand pointing*, *Club Plum*, and *Ekphrastic Review*.

Scott Ferry is an RN in the Seattle area. His most recent books of poetry are collaborations: *Midnight Glossolalia* with Lillian Nečakov and Lauren Scharhag and *Fill Me With Birds* with Daniel McGinn, both from Meat For Tea Press.

Kimberly Ann Priest is the author of *Slaughter the One Bird*, chapbooks *The Optimist Shelters in Place*, *Parrot Flower*, and *Still Life*, and finalist in the American Book Fest Awards. She is an associate poetry editor for the *Nimrod International Journal of Prose and Poetry* and assistant professor at Michigan State University.

John Powers lives in the Hudson Valley of New York. His poems and essays have appeared in *SLAB*, *Salon*, *Wired*, *The Comstock Review*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.

Judy Kaber is the author of three chapbooks, most recently *A Pandemic Alphabet*. Her poems have appeared in journals such as *Poet Lore*, *deceMBER*, *Hunger Mountain*, and *Spillway*. Judy won the 2021 and 2023 Maine Poetry Contest and was a finalist for a 2022 Maine Literary Award. She is a past poet laureate of Belfast, Maine.

Jillian Clasky is a writer from Toronto. She is studying English and creative writing at the University of Ottawa, where she serves as managing editor of *Common House Magazine*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *PRISM International*, *flo.*, and *Vagabond City*.

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