

# RUST & MOTH

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## **Camping at Buck Creek**

Perhaps the forest was dreaming,  
and for one night,  
we were allowed to dream with her:  
three deer crossing a stream  
branches becoming antlers  
mist becoming ghostly bodies.  
The deer watched us  
with their moonlight eyes  
as we watched them.  
All of us dreamers,  
wide, wide awake.



## **Only in a dream**

When the sky is blue, I think of God  
in a secret language which I speak only in my heart,

and the wound isn't made out of light,  
but from love. I am brave but not yet forgiven.

When God gave us language, he made us immortal.  
I lie to people that I am a poet, the truth is

I am writing the same poem over and over  
again—your name on every page.

I try to hold onto the shape of us,  
the world keeps prying it away.

I should have known that God isn't in the books  
they translate, in the buildings made out

of false promises, he is in us.  
And there is a dream I don't tell anyone about where

I have a love that doesn't feel like it burns  
when I hold it in my arms.

## Self-Portrait as Free-Body Diagram

Appa, tucking God under his tongue, in the space  
between prey & prayer. Brown bodies & black  
holes & bullets traveling at the speed of light,  
our bodies consuming gunmetal like stardust.  
In the pooja room, I am hunched over God like a  
physics problem,

*like if the bullet's velocity is light speed,*  
*then what is the momentum of your body & I*  
answered my body is a perfectly-inelastic  
collision. Metal cradled, no exit wounds.  
& I know that light travels faster than  
sound so I say a bullet is God-touched, all  
this light was once born & Appa was once

a son. His flesh, the inside of a pomegranate  
against white palms, the seeds scraped clean  
& swallowed. Here, in the chanted verses  
I swallow myself, every bullet lodged  
in my throat like a syllable from my name,  
a language, grapheme & gunshot. I mouth  
commas, the trigger of a rifle, unhooked &  
pulled. I accelerate to a bullet-bodied God,  
arms open & filled with light.

## **Mehndi girls**

*for Chennai, India*

The evening before the wedding I pluck  
blooming moons like pale jasmine. Amma  
cradles each one in her palms, splashes the  
white on all our brown bodies. I watch as  
Ammamma's henna cone kisses our sun-  
soaked arms, spirals tracing a prayer for a  
daughter, a tendril germinating from the paste.  
Tomorrow, the sun will rise, the groom  
will place vermilion on her scalp. His touch  
like a fingertip to money. A girl becomes a  
woman when brown skin becomes rupees,  
when daughter translates to dowry. Tonight,  
the bride wears onyx eyes, searching for the  
groom's name in henna. Somewhere there is  
a mehndi girl, searching & searching &  
searching. Her husband's fist clenches,  
his girl-stained knuckles, white as a  
full moon.

## Fourteen

—*for Lucie*

My daughter is almost fourteen. She begged me to buy a four poster bed so she could hang pink vines, net drapes. I said no, but she promised to wash dishes for a week. I call her down for dinner and think of your father, who called you down for dinner. Kept calling. I keep her bedroom door ajar. She slams it. I am afraid when she plays Rihanna loud. Soon, she will be older than you. Maybe then I will stop listening carefully for the pad of her feet through the ceiling. She wants to be a special effects makeup artist when she grows up. In her world, dead girls are just pretend.

## **Beyond Repair**

Steaming in the root cellar. Freezing in the root cellar. Always the rages and thirsts. My mother's ghost shivers between walls and resentments pool at the foot of the stairs where a cast iron boiler hisses and growls. I turn a valve, rust fogs the glass gauge. I don't turn a valve, a blue flame sputters and doesn't. Enough levers and dials to power a rocket ship, but the ignitor can't. The feed pump won't. The thermostat tugs at frazzled wires. *Black, red, black, red.* The boiler hiccups and snores like my father. December ices my eyes.

## Cabbage White Butterfly

*Pieris rapae*

*"It was observed that immediately after the insects had been killed through the application of high frequency their bodies were hot to touch."*

*—Thomas J. Headlee & Robert C. Burdette, Some Facts Relative to the Effect of High Frequency Radio Waves on Insect Activity (1929)*

What of that star-foiled moth suspended in the heart,  
capped in its tubule of glass and beating, ceaseless,  
at the pit of you? The homely salt-footed corpse  
of Archimedes, cankered on a distant beach?  
Pulsars sing the Syracusan fleet transfigured,  
all-tethering round, to an underhanded light:  
waves that panic the white insect. Let us be cruel  
as each is wont, hooking eyefuls of God. Let us  
be awed, hot-bodied in the immaculate shear  
of it—transfixed as if on the beam of a spear.

## **The Mast**

A flock of sparrows  
pecking in the newly laid sod  
along the road  
whir up together up into a maple tree  
when I round the corner.  
I am as startled as they, preoccupied  
with a world awash, pitching right and left.  
Invisible among the branches  
they wait for me to pass,  
and when I am very small and far away  
I hear them begin to cheep and chatter  
then see them swoop back down  
to the grass that is browning  
in the September sun.

If there is a mast to hold onto  
I can grasp it here  
seeing these tiny feathered bodies  
of unbright colors  
picking up the seeds, resuming

## A White Neighbor Says I Owe Her

*a civil conversation.* Not even my landlord, a neighbor who lives in the triple-decker. She says she can smell me

every time I open my door. I'm *hard to approach*. She prefers to discuss things with my partner who is *reasonable, polite*, White. She's *never had a problem with anyone*. My trauma asks, what's wrong with me? *Raised differently*, she guesses aloud.

Faulknerian, my impression fills a room in her. *We*, she says, *are oil and water*. I wonder which one she intends me to be?

She clutches her chest and coughs.  
My essential oils *leak into the wood* in her hallway.

I wear dabs of lavender on my wrists to smell myself calm on two buses, two trains, back and forth, every day.

She called the police on neighbors for parking.  
Have you ever seen a Black woman ask to be left alone?

Sometimes, it's not an ask, it's a dare. Sometimes, it fights for air.  
Not my first time. Not the worst. How many ways in a day?

Coming home, trying to get into the door, put my shit down.



I was fifteen when a cop ordered me onto the curb  
in front of my house in Kansas City. The neighbors closed their blinds  
like I'd never lived next door. Even if I told her this,  
she'd probably ask, *What does this have to do with me?*  
My mama laughed at the absurdity of white folks  
when they hurt her too much. That's what happens next.  
When she says she wants to *keep the peace*, it's a joke that cuts me open,  
so I laugh. Throw my purse at her feet. Tampons and lipstick  
scatter in a hallway she keeps saying is hers.  
My untidy spills into her apartment. My serrated voice invites her  
to see her reflection in my teeth. I know I abandon safety  
when I unknot this part of me taught to obey.  
They find reasons to shoot us either way.

## Still, love

In the first of my past lives I died of indigestion. I'd picked red berries from a strange bush. It was a different time, before antibiotics.

In my second life I was chased by a quarrelsome army with swords. They danced on my open chest, danced and drank. Took a lock of my hair as trophy.

The third life was so long that I forgot to die and went about my daily cooking and cleaning till I heard the whispers about me. *There's a ghost who stalks the hallways all night.* Suddenly exhausted, I lay down.

In another life they laid me off. I died many times before I expired for good like a jug of old milk, soured beyond use.

Once, in my most privileged life, there were grandchildren around me at the end, squeezing my hand, singing my favourite songs. I couldn't remember their names but made sure to wait till they had gone to sleep.

Next life came the drought. This was the simplest death of all.

Lived my seventh life feral, as a cat, always daring (once failing) to cross the road during peak traffic. That's when I knew (hoped) I'd have two more.

My eighth life was brief as a bubble. Breathed open air for just a couple of hours. Then they bombed the hospital.

If I've learnt anything it's this: in my last life I want to die of love. Love's hunger and celebratory fire. Its haunting shame. If you're lucky, its abundance. How something in it will not be quenched, will take leaps of faith again and again. Love's total indifference to justice.

Still, love. In this life I want to die in your arms, love

## **Chronoscope 186: The wind pulses the trees**

The wind pulse trees  
like a wing thrash and cry  
raven frenzy.

Those clouds are not  
for storms but heat.

The grass brown as guilt  
needs more than just drizzle  
needs more than just a downpour.

threat

in the country: a slowing freight train  
flint sparks the easement overgrowth:

blunt insane as love the fire burns  
around iron, around barbed wire  
around telephone poles

looking for another harbor  
of oxygen tucked inside the wood.

## amuse-bouche

a dazzle of azure  
thrums a hazy yellow plaza.  
glazed azaleas cut  
busy-patterned topaz  
into paths. a black  
snake, phosphorescent,  
zig-zags through a razor maze.  
crazed with jazz.

*how many times did I ask you  
not to call me crazy?*

    help me stargaze.  
help me watch miyazaki  
movies. lazily, in a backyard,  
be a lion. invite me  
to be a gazelle. give me yuzu.  
call me yuzu. call me gazelle.  
gather the bluest reason  
into a garden of mazus.  
gather mazus,  
until your body is amazed.

## **You Know You Need To Return To Antarctica When**

You know the wind's a wimp.  
You're waiting impatiently  
for its frozen slap in the face,  
and all you get is a lukewarm caress.  
The weather's reserved,  
predictable, pleasantly polite.

You curse at it.  
*Cut loose already;*  
*tell me what you're really feeling.*  
You want to tremble,  
so hard your shivers have shudders,  
not just from the cold.

You feel all blues are boring,  
even the sky, so seeking sapphires,  
hoping to get azure right,  
you realize none could ever be deep enough,  
so no substitute color  
would ever be big enough.

You wish the worms would leap right out of the dirt  
and fall back in puffs of dust.  
You want to glide over waters teeming with life.  
Sailing's close to flying.  
At least birds still wander overhead,  
over horizons, out of sight.

You can't find the right pole to guide you,  
looking for true south, not fooled by the False Cross,  
all you get is a marching zodiac.  
Seasons? There should be only two—day and night.  
Sunsets are a blink, and you long for them  
to last and last and last.

You start wondering if  
the world doesn't know what white is.  
You haven't been snow blind for far too long,  
so you haven't been forced to navigate  
by your mind's eye,  
and it's gone to sleep.

You know you're missing pieces of yourself.  
Your dreams are listless, unfinished.  
The clouds have been lifted too high,  
and they won't come back down to the ground.  
It may be a cold, cold heaven,  
but in it, everything floats.

## **watching war films in history class**

play this film in history class:  
in every black & white  
frame, a mother & her daughter are two

girls reinvented from war. trampled so far  
down shadows can smear scars  
to birthmarks. render faces

faceless. seal tongues so tight  
they harden to bone. listen—  
there are no words here, no captions,

just a language barred  
in bare teeth, yellowed,  
because this is how a generation

of war was born: refugees forging  
first names from crooked shore-  
lines, weaving last names with blood.

//

pause this film in history class.  
war passes with passports  
clutched between a mother's



white-knuckled fists. the security guard  
asks & her daughter clamps  
her quivering jaw. *say home,*

*ma. anything.* across oceans,  
they are robbed of everything  
but their tongues. there, a mother mistakes

her wedding ring for shrapnel.  
she plants her palms on soil  
& learns that they don't rust from blood.

//

replay this film in history class.  
understand how this recreation of war  
is another facade of a victim's

parched tongue. we forget how the tongue  
never ages, how it remembers  
all stories clenched

between teeth. in this last scene,  
a mother curls her shriveled body  
beside her daughter.

her mouth is stained red, white-  
gummed teeth pressed against  
her daughter's cheek.

& i see this: seconds  
between two frames,  
a daughter is renamed

refugee, motherless, mouth molding tight-  
lipped prayers. *say home, ma. anything.*  
*tell me, can i call this my home*

*land? can i rewrite*  
*this anthem without a tongue*  
*or mother or mother tongue?*

## **Elegy**

You will not appear in obituaries:  
cells and the universe colliding,  
contracting into an embryo, a whole  
half with me since before I was born.  
But they said this body could not keep you safe,  
so I carved your name into my bones,  
swallowed a pill that made a grave of my womb.  
    Motherhood is earned in shades of red.  
    There are days I wish I could have loved you less.

## **Waking to Morning**

Quilt swallowing the sleeping cheek  
beside you. Across the driveway, the blank  
stare of the dead neighbor's window.

Grackle settled on the lilac branch  
outside the kitchen door. Tiny yolk of sun  
frozen in his cast-iron eye.

Pilot light dark, blue ghost flame  
holding its breath. Clock blurting out seconds  
like castanets. Yesterday reruns.

Same icy sky, stars flickering out.  
Hem of night dragged beneath ravaged trees.  
Nothing escapes the appetite of forever.

## **Half-death of the daughter**

It's already begun. I sense air  
on bone, pollen sticking to pancreas.

Wisps of her hang in the air like breath  
from a candle. There is smoke

and there are mirrors; one  
has nothing to do with the other.

I want to ask her how she relearned  
to move, how she'll move on in a day

or a week when her mother lifts away,  
back to her own parents. One loose thread

between my teeth and memory unravels.  
What pools at my feet is unwoven

and unweavable, but I can wear it. Is this  
how my mother sees her prognosis, as

textiles untethered and tightening  
at her throat? Is she warm?

## Digging the Carrots

They were ready in October, after  
all other harvests,  
hard orange fingers shaped  
in prayer, waiting for us  
to *amen* with a heavy shovel.  
They appeared endless  
from the dark wet sleeve.  
You knocked them against  
the bed plank, buttons  
of loam tumbling loose.  
I scrubbed each gritty knuckle  
in a bucket with hose water  
until my own fingers were pink.  
Then we shared one, a secret  
that grew in the dark, splintered  
again and again in my mouth.

## **Elk River Sky**

do you remember?  
leaning back in Elk River sky,  
stars dripping through riverside  
sycamores at noon, mud  
washing off my feet, your  
hand just beneath my  
five-year-old back, as if you  
held a leaf aloft for the wind,  
i tried to ignore river-god's  
blood running into corners  
of my mouth, knowing we  
were near enough to shore,  
with the main current years  
away on my right, that you  
& the river both knew me,  
knew i had to learn to arch  
my back & relax all at once,  
that to struggle meant death,  
that to float meant at least  
i could always see the sky.

## Home for Thanksgiving

I open the door and everything hazes,  
lamplight fading to big and bigger ghosts.  
My room's unchanged, posters still hung,  
notebooks flipped to half-blank pages. I worry  
about similarity, fragments made universals,  
a boy in a bar with nothing but a suitcase.  
He's there for a moment but the air is warm.  
He knows that's enough, living someone's life.  
When the drugs don't work, pick out a bar. Wait  
until waiting beats leaving. Leave when the waiting's  
not enough. Whole life of cliches. Tasting strangers  
in the parking lot. Yearning for the city. Scouring the bedroom  
for the visage of another life. Everything in threes.  
*Beginning. Middle. End.* Reindeer bobbing  
in the windows. Sun setting on suburbia.  
The doors getting small, small, and smaller.  
The boy with nothing to claim but a notebook.  
The walls and posters collapsing into essence.  
Everything caving in. He's running out of pages.  
And running and running and running.



## On Not Seeing the Hopper Exhibit at the Whitney

*But I heard it's so crowded!*

The woman leaving the theater is elegant,  
pinched nose. The word *dowager* enters my mind.

The lobby presses us together.

We've forgotten how to do this.

*I heard it doesn't even have Nighthawks!*

My heart goes out to her, truly. It's twenty-five years  
I've walked these streets. When all else fails, we walk.  
Our limbs litter the place: awnings, bus shelters,

balconies strewn with mothers, night-shifters &  
the ones returning from that date, that show, that other room  
they set ablaze & so can't go home, not yet.

Who arrives, who walks here but those in need  
of softer landings, contemplations of loneliness before a canvas.  
Outside: a grating, a garbage can, and wine.

We came to the city for solitude.

We were misinformed.

## Duplex (Home)

Home has always escaped me. Walls chipping,  
white as bones. A winding river, a bare apartment.

A river winding bares cracks in my skull.  
I hope they reveal a mural beneath my naked walls.

I wish to become a mural, not a wall, naked,  
my body seen only by doctors when it fails me.

I cannot doctor what has failed me. I'm a picture  
of straying away from God, his distant beauty.

Straying away from God, my only beauty,  
my hands are in the dirt, digging for a family.

My hands in the ground—my dirt family,  
is there any peace before I return to you?

Before I return to you, let my hands be full of empty,  
the river full of wine. Don't let home always escape me.

## **Love Poem**

Love you. Trace patterns on your back  
like subway systems.  
Hold you careful, reverent,  
trying not to leave marks behind.  
Love you. Share bowls of cereal, share clementines, share casualties.  
Heart a breathless jump-rope chant  
skipping off searing August asphalt.  
Love you. Gather treasures:  
Shiny pennies, snail shells, sea glass.  
Know you. Know you'll see them like I do. Know that's enough.  
Love you. Dog-ear pages of me. Curl back my cover,  
leave notes in the margins.  
Toss birdseed with you. Hang laundry.  
Sip too-hot coffee in pretentious cafes. Take sugar, take cream.  
Walk through my door, leave your keys on my dresser.  
Love you. Love you in a way that scares me.  
Love you seatbelts and helmets and life jackets.  
Give you the tangled snarl of thread  
stitching my bones together.  
Announce unguarded memories that feel unspeakable.  
Face the great encroaching dark  
with a lantern.

## **A Letter to My Son After Learning of His Rare Genetic Disorder**

When you arrived,  
even the flowers wore masks,  
as though cross-pollination  
would shatter soil.

I laid on my side, afraid.  
The midwife punctured a membrane.  
There were cheers.  
Brine spilled on the bed, you emerged  
indigo and raw.

For a long while,  
I awoke to the Japanese maple  
at my window.  
It beamed maroon,  
leaves shimmied aglow  
in the late May sun.

But on the tenth day  
a whack-thud  
rang through my corridors.  
One branch had snapped  
under a waning moon.  
I wept.

You gazed with focus  
as the arborist  
tended and diagnosed.

A honey bee  
found an opening  
and took up residence  
behind my breastbone.

Now, it harvests nectar  
from goldenrods  
and blazing stars,

and fills my chest  
with crystalized  
wax cells.

Before the leaves turn,  
we melt the comb  
and drink.

## When I Got into American Ballet Theatre, I Called Ms. Cravey

I think she was surprised to hear from me.  
For eleven years, while my mother waited, shifted,  
stared into the middle distance,  
Ms. Cravey observed my wobbly legs stretch until  
my knees—hyperextended, swollen—began  
to strengthen, pulling me up and over impossible  
arches. She twisted each, from groin to bunion,  
into arabesque like a screwdriver—open, open,  
open. *But, keep your hip bones square.* I tried  
to balance, turn, on starving bones, while hiding  
the ones protruding at my collar, *It looks unfeminine.*

Over the phone, her voice was a haunted echo—  
a cool, liquid whisper to my measured rapture,  
but I was parched. So I drank.

## Side Effect

This hobbling pain in my legs, my feet  
when I rise in the morning, stand from a chair, emerge from a car.  
Just over a year, now, since I started taking these pills.  
I flex and stretch, rotate my ankles, wiggle my toes.

When I rise in the morning, stand from a chair, emerge from a car,  
I know I'm lucky: my pain fades as I move.  
I flex and stretch, rotate my ankles, wiggle my toes.  
Better this than recurrence, metastasis.

I'm lucky the pain fades as I move.  
One small, mustard-yellow tablet per day  
is better than recurrence, metastasis.  
Dear body, again you remind me: I will lose you.

One small, mustard-yellow tablet per day  
for just over a year, now. Four years to go.  
Oh, my body, you remind me to notice you.  
Legs. Feet. Muscles. Bones.

## On Ceasing

Lost moths, we sisters gather home.

A pile of heirloom jewelry  
and a book on famous graves  
for anyone who wants them.

Post-its dot the gramophone, piano,  
the lacquered liquor cabinet,

like confetti/ticker tape.

We stage the rooms; a reverse crime scene.  
Plaster-over and replace the screens,  
stock photos on the mantle.

The buyers filter in  
as water through a clam, laying hands  
on dirt-packed time. Our footsteps, trinkets,

skimmed away like flotsam off a river.

All gone except the mallet  
forgotten in a drawer;  
wood handle, fish house stamp,



passed around for summer feasts.

The bludgeoned shells  
turned red from the boil,

lay broken at our feet.

## I often find myself lost in the basin

as if a void or whorling cosmos has opened in my bathroom. It's the water. How in rushing and rushing across my hands—how *rushing* isn't the right word but the sound of *rush* as in *gush* as in *sloosh*. How sound reverberates in both eardrums and my legs feel drips and fire. I am gone. I can't say where. My body remains. This loss lasts only seconds because there are the children. Always the children. Touching my legs and hair and arms.

My husband won't eat ice cream from the pint after it's been opened, scooped, placed back in the freezer. Only untouched. Only smooth and unblemished. *Come on. We all think this is a metaphor.*

I patch myself together like an exquisite corpse. Blinking eyes on my breasts and labia and knees. I am badly drawn. I am always blinking—sleepy. I can't compose my husband. I try. I want. I fold and fold and fold. The page always white when I unfold and flatten the white against our table.

Some days I cannot peel myself from the bed. I am two dimensional—paper with sticky backing—sunflower wallpaper scraped to curls, creeping around the room in a breeze. I can't smile over risotto or green beans: *You can't know unless you've watched your life move on from the bed and wanted so hard to both walk to the table and to die at the same time.*

Medical waiting rooms remind me of breathing or eating. How we all do this moving together as marionettes. Like smelling armpits or ear wax or maybe dead skin squeezed from a tight black pore. Like remembering the weight of a past lover on your body. Like breaking apart or sewing together. I think of all the bears and cats and llamas I've re-seamed with thread. For a child, this being sewn is alchemy. Like the beast come to life and roaring. Think of all your own intangible pieces that have gapped. Waiting together is like almost touching the tender slit between two of your toes. The touch that is not yet touch. Medical waiting rooms always have an old man clearing his throat. This is standard. And his wife of forty-seven years hears the phlegm rattle his trachea. Again.

I tell my son he is swimming in a light I can't touch:  
*You never forget how your baby looked in your arms, in your body. I carry your swaying, your twitches and jerks always, inside my body.*

Another of my cousins has been diagnosed with MS. Now four out of twenty-five on my mother's side. My uncle said at the first of his siblings' funerals, *Eleven of us and not one divorce*. He made marriage seem like a job.

All I can think about is *dismemberment*. Here is a bit of skin, I've been saving this for you. Take both my aortas, plaque removed. Would you like my eyes? Left or right? We will never be strangers if you've swallowed a sliver of my fingernail. I have eaten pieces of all my children: a bit of cuticle, a lick of salt from their eyes.

I'm worried I've become the central figure of our story. I didn't plan it. But here we are anyway. I should mention those nights—giddy on ecstasy—a lover brushed my curls straight. How the comb trilled static against my back. Or how one of my lovers killed a friend with a car. Or the one who burnt down a house in revenge. Thought it was empty. Or the one who held me by the throat in a wet alley. In the grocery store when my son was a baby, he vomited as he played in the seat of the metal cart. I caught the vomit in my hands like a bowl. I think that may be what love looks like. We are not held but bound to each other. Eventually, there was nothing left to do but toss the vomit to the floor. No one came to save me.

## **November Requiescat**

This endless November,  
its heartbreak skies,  
keening rain,  
mist like insomnia,  
mist like hangover throbs,  
mist like migraine aura,  
resolved at midday  
by diffuse sun  
and back-office talk.  
Perpetual fall,  
foam pillow to feeling's face—  
Light as bulwark, floor joist, scissor jack:  
Gasp toward distant breezes  
+ your maker's  
endless light.

## Summer of Ash

Our father burned the piano—the only  
measure of your childhood that remained,

As we had in a sweltering Baltimore rowhouse  
with its basement gathering a crown of filth,

Our rugs leavened with sawdust falling  
from beams he rasped in the night.

You remained with a brother, eighteen years  
younger, when our mother and sisters fled

His brawl of manic neurons. In flaring hours,  
my mind's eye trained on shadows, but you saw

Clearly as he stood at the stove's gas flame  
with a pot of ashes and spent cigarettes,

Insensible leavings like scraps of meat,  
strands of tinsel seething in the broth.

His face was raw and swathed in steam  
as he stirred the glinting ashes.

My remaining sister: What grace let you stay,  
calm him—and shield your brother's eyes?

## **Blight**

The fruit from the family tree has a pit  
shaped like a heart and tough skin.

The fruit from the family tree is plentiful  
but inedible. It falls to the earth and feeds  
no one. The fruit from the family tree  
goes straight from blossom to rot. I live  
in an abandoned orchard. No one prunes  
the trees but time, which has no sense  
of symmetry or balance and cuts all  
the healthy branches first. No one  
wanders through the rows of trunks,  
placing their hands on the rough bark  
and speaking softly into the trees' hearts.  
The thing about family is how it isolates  
you by existing and then not existing.  
The thing about living in an orchard  
is no one knows you are starving.

## Eight Years and Three Months

—Average length of a marriage in USA

If the trees are alive  
and I am alive,  
then what is dead between

us is but a passage. Having  
taken part in it—this is in-between,  
this conjoining of tired

eyes and wounds without  
prejudice—the future is always  
already. God persists by apology,

forgive me my absurdity,  
for beneath the blurred stars,  
the always drowsy horizon,

she told me there is no point  
anymore to this charade, against  
your will, against my will,

there's nowhere left to go but bitter,  
hands of fire, hands of dirt, this psalm,  
this brilliant appetite.



## **Custody**

They divided the week in half—  
half at hers, the other his,

where dad made a dollhouse I could carry  
to each place to have a constant home,

built in his shed where he'd bridge  
the planks to span the sawhorse space,

tucking a dull pencil behind an ear,  
and whispering his weary wisdom

to always measure twice  
and only cut once.

## **It's Here**

My Aurora app dings  
telling me within the hour  
the northern lights may appear  
over my house.

But snow is falling.

How often do green and purple waves  
shimmer above me  
and I don't know it?

I imagine someone, maybe me,  
pistol in hand, deciding to do it  
in the back yard, not inside  
the house, less mess on the grass,  
shutting the side door faintly,  
walking out and looking up  
one last time—then seeing the sky  
tremble with pink and lavender,  
watching the waves  
open a presence  
he had thought long dead,  
but it's here now—  
it's here.

## **A Return to Childhood**

When I am five, I become a whale. I have to close my eyes. I have to be in the water, your hand in mine. Beneath the wave, we both shed our human skin. Our bodies become large. In the water, we are eternal. As whales, the matter of us matters more. Shakes the earth. Slips through the ocean. When we die, we'll make whole ecosystems, forge new homes for other living creatures. If this isn't the way to die, then what is? But no, enough of that. Our deaths are so far off. For now, just listen. Feel the salt of the ocean on baleen skin. The caverns within us, the song building in our throats.

## About the Authors

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**Jennifer Skogen's** work has appeared in *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Green Ink Poetry*, *Bowery Gothic*, *tiny wren lit*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, and *FERAL*. She holds an MFA in poetry from the University of San Francisco. Jennifer lives near Seattle, Washington and goes hiking in beautiful places whenever it isn't raining.

**Aiman Tahir Khan** was born in Lahore, Pakistan. From a young age, she has been fond of reading poetry and she has cultivated a vibrant community of fellow poetry enthusiasts on Twitter. At any given moment, she can be found crying over Kafka's *Letters to Milena*.

**Rishi Janakiraman** is an Indian-American high-school student who writes from North Carolina. His work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, and he appears or is forthcoming in *Eunoia*, *Blue Marble*, and *Rising Phoenix Review*. A Top 15 Foyle Young Poet of the Year, he also reads for *Polyphony Lit* and enjoys red skittles.

**Carson Wolfe** is a Mancunian poet and winner of New Writing North's Debut Poetry Prize (2023). Their work has appeared in *Rattle*, *The North*, *New Welsh Review*, *Evergreen Review*, and *The Penn Review*. They live in Manchester UK with their wife and three daughters.

**Jackie Craven** has recent work in *AGNI*, *AQR*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Pleiades*, *Ploughshares*, and others. She's the author of *WHISH*, winner of the 2024 Press 53 Award for Poetry, *Secret Formulas & Techniques of the Masters* (Brick Road 2018), and of chapbooks from Headmistress Press and Omindawn.

**Nathan Manley** is a poet, translator, and contracts attorney from Windsor, Colorado. He is the author of two chapbooks, *Numina Loci* (Mighty Rogue Press, 2018) and *Ecology of the Afterlife* (Split Rock Press, 2021). Recent poems and Latin translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Spillway*, and *Image*.

**Karen McAferty Morris'** poetry has been recognized for its “appeal to the senses, the intellect, and the imagination.” It has appeared in *Persimmon Tree*, *Sisyphus*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Canary*. Her collections *Elemental* (2018), *Confluence* (2020), and *Significance* (2022) are national prize winners. She lives in the Florida panhandle.

**Krysten Hill** is the author of *How Her Spirit Got Out* (Aforementioned Productions, 2016). Her work has been featured in The Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-Day Series, *Poetry Magazine*, *Winter Tangerine Review*, and elsewhere. She is recipient of the 2020 Mass Cultural Council Poetry Fellowship and 2023 Vermont Studio Center Residency.

Straddling Chicago and Delhi, **Tanima** writes poetry, makes theatre, and calls on you to betray your conscription into systems that proliferate brutality and unfreedom under the sign of civilization—from Palestine to Kashmir, and beyond. Our messy, beautiful, and unexpected liberations lie on the other side of empire. Tanima's recent and forthcoming writing can be found in *The Spotlong Review*, *Rogue Agent Journal*, *poetry.onl*, and *Wildness*.

**John Walser's** poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Spillway*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Plume*, *Posit*, and *december magazine*. A four-time semifinalist for the Pablo Neruda Prize and a Pushcart nominee, John is a professor of English at Marian University and lives in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, with his wife, Julie.

**Lizzy Ke Polishan's** work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Gulf Coast Journal*, *The Notre Dame Review*, and *Prism International*, among others. The author of *A Little Book of Blooms*, she is a Pushcart-Prize nominee and a reader for *Psaltery & Lyre*. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband.

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**Ron Stottlemeyer** has resumed writing poetry after a long career as a professor/scholar of Medieval English Literature, Linguistics, and Classical Literature. Awarded Three NEH study grants to Oxford and Cambridge and three to Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies, he has presented papers at conferences in the United States and Great Britain.

**Jennifer Fischer Davis** is co-founder and co-EIC for *Many Nice Donkeys* lit mag. She holds an MA in English and will begin her MFA in poetry at Spalding University in 2024. Publishing credits include a collage essay in *McSweeney's* and poetry in *Rust & Moth*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Peacock Journal*.

**Emma Harrington** has published poetry in *december mag*, *Fulcrum Journal*, and *Emrys Journal*. In 2016 she was a National Student Poet semi-finalist. She hails from the Midwest but is spending a year in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

**Chris Talbott** has been writing poetry for many years. After a career as a business writer, he worked at the nonprofit Barre Center for Buddhist Studies for a decade. He now writes poetry full time.

**Kylan Tatum** is a student at Harvard University. Their work appears or is forthcoming from *Diode Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Online*, *The Center for Fiction*, and elsewhere. They are the winner of the Center for Fiction's National Social and Criminal Justice Contest and a Poetry Reader for the *Adroit Journal*.

**Laura Tanenbaum** is a writer, teacher, and parent who is a professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York. Her poetry, short fiction, essays, and book reviews have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, *The New Republic*, *Dissent*, *Entropy*, *Open Letters Monthly*, and many other publications.

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**Hannah L.D.** is a poet hailing from the rainy gray of Seattle, Washington.

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**Stefanie Leigh** is a poet and ballet dancer based in Toronto. She holds a BA from Columbia University and was a dancer with American Ballet Theatre. Her work has been published in *The Dance Current* and *Syncopation Literary Journal*. She is working on her first poetry collection, *Swan Arms*.

**Jennifer L Freed** is the author of *When Light Shifts* (2022), a finalist for the Sheila Margaret Motton Book award. Other awards include the Frank O'Hara Prize and the Samuel Washington Allen Prize. Her poetry has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Review*, *Rust & Moth*, and other publications. She lives in Massachusetts.

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**Allison Blevins** is the queer disabled author of three collections and five chapbooks. Winner of Persea Books' Lexi Rudnitsky Editor's Choice Award and Raleigh Review's Laux/Millar Poetry Prize, she lives in Minnesota with her spouse and three children and works as the Director of Small Harbor Publishing.

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**Gary McDowell** is the author/editor of eight books and, most recently, of *Aflame* (White Pine Press, 2020), winner of the 2019 White Pine Press Poetry Prize. His poems and essays have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *The Nation*, *Gulf Coast*, *Ploughshares*, and others. He lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where he directs the Belmont University MFA.

**Aaron Sandberg** has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Offing*, *Asimov's*, *Phoebe*, *Lost Balloon*, *Flash Frog*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, *Qu*, *Alien Magazine*, *Whale Road Review*, and elsewhere. Nominated for The Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Microfiction, and the Dwarf Stars Award, you can see him—and his writing—on Instagram.

**William Palmer's** poetry has recently appeared in *I-70 Review*, *JAMA*, *ONE ART*, *On the Seawall*, and *Writers Resist*. He lives in Traverse City, Michigan.

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