

# VECTOR



ISSUE III

"In writing, beauty prefers an edge."

Anne Carson

editor – Shannon Hozinec

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vectorpress@gmail.com  
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**↻ASSANDRA  
DE  
A↑BA**

## The Ravens

The ravens owe a lot to Poe. Before him, they were a directionless species, unsure what to make of their dark urges and generally foreboding nature. But now they feel free – free to hold séances, to build their nests only in graveyards, to menace young, lovesick students in the night. The ravens can relish their position in the world, take great pleasure in the doom they signify. They carve arcane symbols into trees; they mutter about portents of doom; they fly over small towns at dusk with lit candles clutched in their talons, delighting gothic teenagers and terrifying the general populace. The ravens take great care to cultivate their image, to never be observed in non-dramatic environments or eating out of the trash like common birds. Most nights, the ravens can be found on the roofs of mausoleums: perched on the edges of Ouija boards, moving the planchette with their beaks, spelling out the same nine letters every time.

## The Elephants

The elephants' circus is not going according to plan. The humans are not nearly as sturdy as they need to be; for all the years when humans ran the circus, not one elephant was ever crushed under their spangled weight, but now the elephants find they must replace their mounts daily, sometimes in the middle of a performance. The humans are also finding it more difficult to raise a tentpole or pull a wagon than the elephants expected, given the ease with which they, the elephants, had always performed those tasks. Still, their show must go on. Their ringmaster, a scarred old bull, personally oversees the procurement of what they have agreed to refer to as 'talent' – the (sadly weak) backbone of the circus, the men and women and children (mostly children, who find the elephants' proposition to run away and join them the most appealing) on whom the elephants parade in each day, glittering, to the deafening trumpet of the crowd.

## Snake Prom

All the towns in Shuker Valley have a snake problem, but ours are the only ones who've evolved the concept of high school. We have popular, medium popular, and unpopular snakes, snakes who wear trenchcoats and smoke cigarettes behind the gym, snakes who sneak out their windows at night to go for rides in older snakes' cars. And, once a year, we have Snake Prom. Snake Prom happens in a clearing in the woods between the Pine View trailer park and the minimart that still sells loosies. Every snake in town attends, even the deeply unpopular snakes, the ones who didn't start shedding their skin until the other snakes were already getting drunk and losing their virginites in basements. You (and I'm assuming you're a person, with arms and legs and the ability to chew your food) don't go into the woods on Snake Prom, and if you live in Pine View you make sure your doors are locked and your windows shut tight. A guy I know walked into his bedroom on Snake Prom and saw two snakes going at it on his pillow, one of them still wearing a bunch of nylon and tulle. He moved, I think. The snakes haven't evolved the concept of graduation, so

they keep going to Snake Prom year after year, dancing to the snake DJ, electing a Snake Prom king and queen. Some people get real horrified by this stuff, talk about shutting the whole thing down, but I kinda like it. In a few years they'll evolve things like snake college and snake office jobs and snake mortgages, but for now it seems like we ought to let them have their fun.

## The Eagles and the Turkeys

The bald eagles are obsequious little fuckers, always shining the president's shoes with their flight feathers or removing his hat as a team, four or five of them coordinating every wingbeat like a bunch of goddamn synchronized swimmers. Sometimes they even scurry ahead of him on their absurd yellow talons, sweeping the ground so the shoes of the commander in chief never touch the detritus of the common people.

The turkeys watch this display of patriotism from a distance and scoff. The turkeys hang around the White House all year, even though the only day they're needed is Thanksgiving, when the president makes a big deal about not eating one of them. The president has never once informed the public that he does not eat bald eagles, although the turkeys suspect that if they were asked, an eagle would swoop heroically into the oven and stick a fork in its own belly.

The turkeys find this lack of a self-preservation instinct alarming in a species chosen to represent the character of the American people. Given their relative sizes, attitudes towards authority, and propensities for groveling, the turkeys believe that they would do a much better job.

## The Snapping Turtles

The snapping turtles know what they are doing. They have a plan – have plans, actually, an architect's blueprint showing where each part should go. They are careful builders, if a little over-eager, a little anxious to get the whole thing finished. Their king has been waiting a long time for a suitable throne, and the snapping turtles cannot wait to see his black eyes sparkle when they present him with the product of their labor. They have learned, however, that they cannot be too hasty. If too much throne material is harvested in a single week, the supply will vanish, dry up, the surface of the snapping turtles' pond smooth and glassy and lifeless. The turtles limit themselves, now, to the acquisition of only a single toe a week, waiting until the ideal specimen comes along, the one that will fit perfectly into the king's majestic, if rotting, seat.

## The Chameleons

All chameleons are drag queens and some of them are spies, but the best of them are both. They are terrible gossips and worse liars; a chameleon may claim he never compared your shoes to shriveled mealworms, but his color will betray him every time. Only the most self-disciplined lizards can avoid self-incrimination in moments of international intrigue, instead turning the proper 'code color,' the one that communicates an all-clear for the message to be passed or the trigger pulled. The most accomplished of the chameleon drag queen spies was named The Green Lioness, although she favored an array of reds, pinks, and purples that shimmered in sunlight and seemed to glow under the moon. The Green Lioness was caught only once, on the outskirts of Shanghai, when the sight of an old flame across the piano turned her a vivid shade of orange. The chameleon who walked out of that Chinese prison was a changed queen—one who had managed to whittle her heart down to its essential elements with a jailhouse shiv, cut away any weakness, any chance of being caught off guard by love again.

## The Ostriches

Certain physical limitations have kept the ostriches from greatness, but their enthusiasm is legendary. While their wings are functionally useless for the playing of instruments, their beaks can pluck strings and play cymbals as well as any opposable thumb. Although the ostriches have never seen a garage, that is most emphatically their genre. Their songs are loud, off-key and -beat, blasting into the air like a tinny, misshapen rocket built by even younger ostriches. The ostriches' neighbors, at this point, have either moved or gone deaf, leaving them to thrash and shred unmolested in the desert dusk. The ostriches have never recorded an album or played a show for anyone other than unfortunate passers-by, but they know in their conical hearts that they are the greatest band in the world, of all time, their feathered stardom only a cymbal crash away.

KENDRA  
ANNE  
BARTELL

Yes, tell.

I.

I know the slight off-blackness of your form:  
midnight at the top foot of the staircase.  
The dog whines. She's allowed to be vocal.  
I wait, shamed, for your diminished return.

I think blankets won't cut it to cover  
what the blush of shame reminds me. I want  
to whine. When I say whine, I mean to call  
you by your name, to have you come when I

call; my voice, my system of gravity.  
I know Pluto's want: to be an object  
of an ordered & actual system.

The pull & give of validation, yes—  
the curved fold of space, part of a warm  
& engendered pairing, engulfed in sense.

## II.

The body as gendered art: combusting  
takes time. Thoughts, tinder. Fingers, flint sparking.  
Hours spent holding yourself up before  
the mirror, burning holes across each pore.

Limbs, torso, muscle, fat: each its own wronging.  
Inches, cups, flimsy, flopping. Belonging  
belongs to a certain other of beautiful  
woman. She carries selves, what she's able.

The body splits in heat, easy. Enflamed.  
Crack yourself open, and gaze inward. See.  
Layer your organs over and under.

You will not be able to stand more shame,  
but you know how to force the weeping.  
You are overfull.

### III.

We were supposed to be  
something else. Fully rough and rubbed over  
with each other's something wholly other.  
Edges of sheets tangled in fingers  
reaching for something I  
can't quite grasp.

My shape refilled. New-filled.  
Supple, budding, blossomed.  
Feminine in all the right—  
What you mean is: flesh to grab.  
Hands full but of firmness.  
Mouth red and plump with  
tongue waiting and silent  
to say yes.

IV.

All skin fumes.  
All selves womb.

No you without turn of lock.  
No you without shatter of mirror.

You remember—all it takes  
is a little less of the self and—  
and—you wanted to say something but shame,  
you wanted to anoint yourself.

*Yes, tell.*  
*Yes! You, covered:*  
*You are not a texture*  
*to be explored.*

I see you.  
I see you also.

V.

Each  
time,  
the  
self  
that  
went  
bump  
in  
the  
night  
didn't

remain  
hidden.

## VI.

Hide enough inside you so you can go back and touch it— I feel it happening and I hurt.  
 I have known this innocence no longer. I covered, they became.  
 A box and a boy are only a tale apart. I have shoved mine deep within. Do not spill the wish to  
     be magical too early, I say.  
 I won't be caught dead admitting I'm about to burst into flames.

Surrender for me is hard—  
 what is that heat—  
*you stand on your own two feet—tell me what you know—what do you know about*  
*fire—grasp—ash—selves—salvation—*  
 this sense delicious—  
*you have known this for far too long—*

ecstasy of lyres stills me.  
 A quite unknown self sits waiting inside,  
 but what can I do?

I pick and pick all night,  
 turning into nonsense, something else entirely—

VII.

Entire  
a delicacy  
Piece of machinery  
to handle—on fire

in soft focus—a shimmer  
of errors framed  
excellently and knowing Oh what  
I want and see

there you see  
Oh only what  
Yes I see

I keep myself  
held within  
I

SARA  
F↕TZPATR↕CK  
COM↕TO

## Kind Danger

Everything that hid an outside of that,  
white of a new mother's nursing gown -  
abundance and containment  
to cushion new skull moldings  
as a curtain softens  
a harsh portal to morning,

even whiteness that occludes the sun  
cuts itself out in gesso  
as the shadow of a flame

and what little gets through  
is a kind danger.

But what to do with vision anyway  
when the aperture is not opening  
or closing  
but cut out the horizon  
in crow shapes or the menacing pram?

Too, the sun is known  
by colors on the clouds.

Do the wheels bow out  
on ancient axles  
as the distance chases itself?

A tree is a cairn  
but how tall is the joke.  
Away! the season of weeds  
for what survives  
has already flown  
downy as milk,  
the burning of fog.

V↑CTOR↑A  
McARTOR

Maybe on your way home:

- Milk.
- The reddest watermelon you can find like in the photograph in my mother's dresser, seedless, if you prefer.
- A pot of honey, local to Oklahoma, same pollens of the bee who lingers at the back door (or whatever the pharmacist recommends).
- Garlic stuffed olives,
- or the branch given to the UN by Yasser Arafat saying  
*Today I come bearing the olive branch and the freedom-fighter's gun, do not let the olive branch fall from my hand.*
- The freedom fighter's gun (or whatever is on sale).
- Ripe plums or avocados for giving away, it's nice to be owed a favor sometimes.
- Swirls of nostalgia with the ache of anticipation, cherry dipped frozen yogurt and
- ~~Tomato~~— I'll take from my Father's garden. Mown grass smells so substantial I want to taste its chlorophyll, which reminds me,

- Kale, which reminds me,
- An autumn afternoon with a little time to misspend, I'll pay you back.
- Ask the butcher what's freshest.  
Get the creamy-white fat, mostly marbled. Remind the mother, no one owns the wild beast she rears.
- All meat is muscle, en masse,  
all dining room tables, one voice  
as a whole, wholesale, on sale.

KR↑ST↓IN  
LUEKE

## Revenge: the Trilogy

Part I.

Living well is the best revenge.

The second best revenge is slowly  
over the course of many years  
destroying your foe's faith in their own ideas.

The third best revenge is loosening the salt shaker and  
spoilng the risotto.

The fourth best revenge is poison.

I've done a few revenges-  
emotionally embezzled a few thousand dollars  
withheld good information  
lousy loving-

sometimes all at once.

My favorite revenge was the one where I felt nothing.  
It is my favorite revenge because it was unexpected.

Never underestimate the element of surprise when  
planning or not planning your vengeance.

Part II.

Revenge isn't a dish it's  
a scout badge.

This one is for animal science.  
This one, thoughtful citizenship.  
And this one is for skilled deceit.

Revenge isn't a scout badge it's an estate pendant.

Passed down from one generation to the next and the  
next and the next until no one recalls where it came  
from or why but it's cursed maybe no appraiser will  
touch it a curious trinket that isn't found it found you  
it brings upon your home the fury of the seven hells  
and it's going to tear this family apart.

### Part III.

Here's the thing about vengeance:  
It is not sustenance or satisfaction.

Your revenge will not hold your hair back.  
Your revenge might take you to the hospital but your  
revenge will almost certainly  
leave you at the curb, bleeding, mysterious, without  
proper identification.

Your revenge doesn't know what to call where you're  
broken,  
or soften itself into somewhere you sleep,  
and bet the farm, the family farm,  
your revenge won't weep at your funeral.

So you bury it with all the secrets you shared only  
with your revenge in a ditch you dug with your own  
two hands, honest hands, clean hands, a close up on  
your hands reveals a lifeline you never noticed was so  
long, so hopeful, My god have you ever looked at your  
hands? They're pilgrims, preachers, guardians of truth,  
your beautiful long fingered administrators of grace and  
forgiveness, divinity, the peace you never knew you  
deserved, you hold yourself in your own two hands,  
they are filthy with mud from that ditch you dug  
remember but you have never felt so absolved, so  
loved, so held in your life.

Epilogue, Rogue Franchise, Rebooted for the Blood  
Lusting Holiday Market

Everyone dies in the end.

SARAH  
ANN  
W↕INN

## Baldwin Apples

In October, their vinegar  
drew bees or decay's sweetening  
drew bees. We brought bushel baskets  
and sorted. Some for the compost,  
the gently bruised for pies. The best,  
those half-gone with pocked, perfect skin  
still a little green, for canning  
and apple butter. The Baldwins  
lured me to the kitchen counter.  
The turn-and-scraping colander  
mill when the cooked apples were poured in —  
the splashed juice hot and delicious.  
Space made by adding cooked apples  
carefully. She tipped the ancient  
dutch oven, and my idea  
of plenty poured down. *Did you and she* —  
I asked. *Hush*, she answered. I didn't dare  
move or some would go to waste.  
*Save some for later*, she said. Now  
we restock the canned goods cupboard.  
No beauty goes to waste here. Fill  
the shelf. Put up for lean winter  
the sweet of slowly gathering  
afternoon, that long fragrant bake,  
the whole house cooked up, and browned with  
cinnamon. In winter, the sound  
of that seal breaking snaps me back  
to sorting apples in the sun.  
Their scent rolled from Atalanta's  
fingers, the breath of Eve before she bit.

G⇕NGER  
K⇕

## Gaslight

1.

She wanted more  
How could she get more  
Looking through eyes that saw nothing but dark blue blood  
Running a tongue over secret small teeth  
Grey and crowded  
Things unremembered can be made unreal  
A soft black eye perfectly round  
Flavory fucking that fills the room  
With a sodden smell

2.

But you'd fly into rages anyway  
So even when I speak softly  
How about I make myself a ghost  
How about I really do what you say I'm doing  
And protest with silent jowls  
So if we'd lived on the moon  
Where shadows don't cross your face  
As quickly as you believe  
What would you have done  
Would you have cut the gut  
From the inadequate ribcage  
What would you do to my resting bitch face  
Bobbing unbelievable accuser  
Bearing up to me with your rotten  
Little morsels of bonkers

3.

The tight powder of shame caking her face  
    Stirring the bedsheets into a paste  
She knew what was good, knew she was good  
Carefully, carefully, all that body  
Nothing making sense  
    Settling tiny paper airplanes into trees  
        Empty veins lining their surfaces  
    Paper blank and brilliantly white  
        Flying off with wind  
    To always be there  
To always be wiping, to not care  
    Leaking molten and building the landscape  
again and again  
    Every day branches brightening

4.

What if I just stopped  
What if decomposition sweetened me up a little

You pried through my entire childhood  
But a child isn't allowed to feel sorry for herself

If she first doesn't have sorry-ness for you

If I were muscular enough, cunning enough,  
To write entire books, to sing entire albums, to cut entire films,

About how you are wrong, the story of it  
Consumable again and again

Lined with gold razor-wire flowers to punish  
Those taking what isn't theirs

5.

When I was young you'd take me to the movies.  
You'd be furious afterwards if there were sex scenes.  
I've been sorry to you my whole life  
that you couldn't prevent bad things from happening to me.

6.

With a cough she had never been so afraid.  
A cough through a hole  
In the back wall of the closet.

7.

He had been there long  
And now casually cleared his throat  
Of such a thingness.

8.

She pointed out a hawk in a tree  
ripping at something that looked like nothing  
but strong bright blood.

She wanted to hear the sagging sacks  
of music box melody, wanted to gloat  
and say "Do you see that there?  
It means nothing to me, nothing."

9.

I don't make sense of your magnificence  
tipping it out to see the suffocated swarming of roots  
in the shape of their container  
trapping the heat—setting the soil on fire  
I need you to destroy me, to catch me and engulf me.

Instead: a metronome on the slowest setting  
for a song that lasts the rest of your life.  
Pour down powdered glass to break the bones  
but even my darkest animal is bright pink  
at the point of severance.

Again and again I bury you after  
I find you cold in the morning.  
Still I never regret your blowing float  
each time the ugly mouth and beautiful hands  
each time the pretty lips, harmful fingers.

Your hands already swinging away.  
Your body already dropping away.  
Your face is so far away.  
A dear face.  
Unclear face.

**MA↓GA↓ET**  
**BASHAA↓**

## Claire and the Demon Hunter Give It Up For Jesus

SHE:

Each time the same -  
I am holy, holy, holy, laid  
out as a banquet.  
His hands are plate,  
cup, and knife. Always  
a long table, a single  
high-backed chair.  
This is my body.  
He eats me up and I believe  
in transubstantiation,  
that I will awake someday  
in his veins, pound my fists  
against the walls of him.

When the demons come,  
they come for us both.  
I am walking with his feet  
now, I am stepping  
into the river. I have friends  
who are priests, yogis, nuns.  
They all tell me, *Claire,*  
*you foolish girl. You'll never*  
*get to heaven like this.*

HE:

I've walked up this hill  
for 10 years - crest  
always on the horizon.  
There is a voice to my right,  
a voice to my left, a voice  
behind me, but I am looking  
ahead to the sky or  
something like it. Ankles both  
twist, but the fault is not  
the stumbling, but to look  
down, to kick at this fissure,  
this image that clutches  
at me time and again.

The well-dressed men tell me  
God forgives, but I see  
no evidence of it - just this  
expanse of skin He made,  
these long girl legs He set  
to running. I ask you: In the end,  
who does not chase after  
all the sweetness  
their own mind dreamt up?

## Claire Gets Mad and Gets Even

If we are playing Jeopardy and I am the answer  
the question is "Who is not your mother?" or  
"Who will not lead you straight to the devil even if you  
touch her and touch her and don't stop touching?"

I met a boy from Milwaukee who drank whiskey,  
said he'd gag me and tie me to his hotel bed -  
the bigger the sobs the sexier the girl. I fixed  
my lipstick in the bathroom mirror, let him grab my ass  
with both hands, a sucker for sexual harassment.

I swear this is not a threat, do not want vows  
or a single shining thing from your pocket.  
You can keep Rodin's tools, the crown diamond  
of the last tzaritzza but I need to know when  
you will let your body be cut open, when next  
you will find me with hand and breath and light.

Ask yourself what it means that I collapsed a star for you,  
know how long it takes to fly to Tulsa, that I've learned  
how to deep throat, how to grill chicken.  
Darling, I've only just begun to stretch my legs.

1.

Percy looked like whatever you think an angel does.  
He was the one to stand naked on the roof in a storm,  
lay across train tracks and scream. Everyone knew  
which social diseases he'd contracted from a beautiful violinist  
in California, exactly what his foreskin looked like  
when stretched over a credit card.

He'd run afoul of the whole town at least twice,  
believed in monsters like any boy who has put on  
a pink thrift store prom dress knows to - their awful teeth,  
tobacco spit smell of them. He warded them off  
with dances he'd learned after smoking a pack of cigarettes  
and drinking cough syrup before bed, with shrieks  
from his deepest throat, barbed wire wrapped around his limbs.

2.

When the proprietor bought the old hotel  
all the townsfolk knew Percy would end up there -  
like a birthmark, a genetic map.  
What else is there to be said  
about the inevitable nature of things?

In the winter he and the proprietor huddled  
in the kitchen for warmth, electric stove on  
overnight at 450. They shared blankets,  
watched snowdrifts pile against the kitchen's  
one window. They joked about skinning the cats  
to make fur mufflers, line their boots.  
He realized he had never before known  
what it meant to be cold.

3.

His birthday was the worst -  
Claire and Mary both kissed his lover -  
a girl barely of age, flutist or ballerina  
no one remembers now.

later they ran him to the cemetery  
in darkness, stripped off their clothes  
and climbed monuments.  
Some girls never learn how to apologize.

4.

He knew better  
than daytime television  
or internet rumor  
the father of each baby  
in town, could get into  
a bar fight and back out  
in under a minute  
if it was karaoke night.  
He never lost a staring contest,  
but it turns out no one wants  
an honest stare-down.  
We call psychic hotlines  
so Miss Cleo will tell us he is  
leaving his wife tomorrow,  
the check's in the mail.

5.

He made himself into  
the hanged man  
when the sun slipped down -  
room full of chains  
on the third floor  
of the haunted hotel,  
blood in his head.

painted the walls full  
of sexless figures twice his size -  
silver-skinned, pale green,  
paler blue, in their hands  
always fire, always light.  
Single horns on foreheads,  
holes where eyes should be,  
snakes wrapped and wrapped.  
He wrote 100-page odes

about thin swamps,  
what changes in daylight.  
Only he knew their names,  
if they were what made  
the building's foundation  
shift and sink.

6.

There will always be accusations of violence here -  
that is what it is to live in a town like this.

The prettiest girl under 35 smokes a pack a day -  
ashes her cigarettes and plots her escape.

Percy knew he'd not be carried off by an older woman  
from the city, would never be scouted by a football team,  
signed by an alternative modeling agency.  
So he covered himself with paint, pried open  
his own eyelids when sleep threatened.

7.

This is conjuring a ghost. This is mourning.  
You left no number, no forwarding address.  
You've not been sighted in years.

Where are you? Where are you?

8.

How he left the hotel is a mystery -  
some say the holy water drove him out,  
others that he tripped and stumbled  
down stairs and he just kept falling.  
The ghosts like to whisper in their dust voices  
he walked out with a chair on his back,  
out onto the road out of town,  
past abandoned gas stations and he sits  
there even now, watches chemtrail patterns  
roll out above him, shadow people  
who file slowly out of town.

JASMINE  
DREAME  
WAGNER

## Blonde

You never wanted to go out. Just to stay in takes all your energy, and when you do go out you have to do all those exhausting things you thought you'd never do again when you went to prison. You must clean your contact lenses in contact lens solution. You must carefully suction-cup their blueberries to your almond eyes. Most of your pots and tubes of color have congealed into a petrified forest so you must make do with a brittle moon of face powder and a crow black pen. As you draw the pen across your lids, you remember how the salesgirl said that pink looked good on you, made you look sweet like candy. And now you apply the bubblegum gloss with its tiny fairy wand.

Cosmetics make you feel like you never want to get out of bed. In bed, you can burrow into your blanket, motionless, stale. At the club, everyone wants to talk. At the velvet rope, they talk to you about you and how they exist in the context of you. Who they were when you played that part, what your character meant to them. They can't separate you from the girl

on the screen. They think you have an in-depth knowledge of arctic espionage and celebratory shopping.

Windbreaker Man doesn't ask you about you or how you were made or where you went when you fucked up big time. Instead, he talks about his yellow balloon. He's trying to keep the balloon from popping.

"You like it?" he asks, tugging on the string. The balloon bonks you in the face.

"Better than a bomb, I guess," you say. It's been a while since you've been around people. Windbreaker Man grins. He thinks you're funny, maybe even as funny as you are in the movies. You don't actually have an opinion about the balloon; it could be a bomb for all you care. You're in that kind of mood tonight: a dark mood, a dead end mood. Actually, you do have an opinion: the balloon is lame. Your first manager told you to do that, to bring a prop to an audition so that you can dominate the space. Only this is a New York dungeon bar, not a

Hollywood meet-and-greet. And you don't like being bonked in the face.

"You want it or what?" he says. He winks at you. You don't like being winked at. You don't tell this to Windbreaker Man because he's hitting on you and because you don't want him to think you are difficult or antisocial. No one likes women who are difficult or antisocial. Everyone loves girls who love balloons, and it's important for people to love you.

"Okay, sure," you say. "I love balloons." Windbreaker Man wraps the balloon's string around your wrist. He ties the string too tight, then cups your face like you're the principal in a Godfather movie.

"It'll cost you," he teases. "One secret, that's the price of a balloon."

You could tell Windbreaker Man your secret, the reason why you're here tonight, why you're wandering alone through a nightclub filled with sexual dilettantes, drugged hipsters, gilded children, and possibly, a serial killer. You could tell him how, only a

few years ago, you could have packed this dungeon solid with friends, spraying champagne and screaming at the DJ. A few years ago, he would've been down on one knee, begging to be your daylight friend. But the truth is, you don't want to tell him anything. You don't want to be here at all, but you need the work.

You tell him it's your birthday. "That's my secret," you giggle. You do your signature eyebrow raise, the one you coined in *Bubbles Breaks Even!*

"Seems like today is everybody's birthday," he says as a troupe of tweens in plastic tops whoops and downs a line of shots.

Windbreaker Man offers you a birthday drink, his treat. You notice how his turquoise windbreaker has been tagged with "SAIL, SAIL AWAY!" in spray-paint typeface. It's the kind of windbreaker a stand-up comedian might wear. When the drink arrives, he flirts with the peacock behind you. He flirts and waves and keeps on flirting. You decide to call him Enya. Calling people names is the only deliberately mean thing you know how to do.

"No champagne, birthday girl?" the bartender says. You shake your head and pay. You only drink champagne with your sister. Two glasses of bubbles: that's what you ordered last time you saw her. A good luck toast. You'd just been released from Passages Malibu and Pax himself told you that you were cured. Your sister was about to go into surgery. You toasted her health and slid your full glass across the table. She pinched both flutes with her rose-tipped manicured fingers, and said, *to you*.

Enya taps his glass against your glass. He leans in close and sniffs your hair.

"If it's your birthday, where are your friends?" he asks.

"They live in LA."

"Sure they do."

The music modulates keys. The beat accelerates. The synthesizer melody soars overhead. Fluorescent tubes of men and women spin and rock on

the dance floor and against the red velvet rope where a flock dressed in feathers disappears. Tall, thin, their silver hair falls past their hips. People whose features you identify instantly. There is a table set in heaven for these people with their gold halos and frosted bottles and crucifix necklaces. They resemble a twelfth-century painting.

These are the angels of now. You were once an angel of now and now you are not. You are a mortal of yesterday.

The bartender recognizes you but pretends he doesn't. You know the look: the way his eyes gravitate to yours, then blink and hover over your shoulder. His face glazes over like grease in a pan. He reminds you of an actor you once knew who played a bartender in a popular sitcom. You once had a stylist like the girl on your left, who tinted her hair the same rose gold. They faded when your assets were frozen; they vanished when you went to trial. Careful, your agent warned you. Preserve yourself, he said. He also reminded you: your talent, besides the art of breathing new air into

beautiful archetypes, is the fine art of the hang. You are in New York to hang until your old life wakes up, undead.

And here you are, leaning against a tombstone wall. The stones are hot enough to bake a thin-crust pizza. A gaunt biker sulks next to you. He rolls a cigarette; lights it with a naked lady hologram lighter. He looks like an art director, so you ask him what he does and he says, "philosophy." His nose wrinkles when you tell him "that sounds cool." He raises an eyebrow, exhales and says, "sure is."

A girl with an afro reclines on a ledge. She's wearing a black bra and purple underpants under a sheer white unitard. She reminds you of a white, black, and purple tri-parti poodle. You tap her on the shoulder. "This place is hot as a pizza oven!" you shout over the music. "I can see your underwear!" The truth feels good in your mouth. You gulp your drink. So does the hot burn of liquor.

"Just wait until I start dancing!" she says, raising her cup in the air. You raise your glass and

Enya swoops in like a turquoise-tailed hawk and hooks his claws around you. His hands graze your spine like he's blind and you're a Braille edition. He waits for Poodle to slink away, then says into your ear: "secret fatty!" What's a secret fatty? "Photoshop pretty. MySpace photo pretty. One-camera-angle only."

Across the dance floor, Poodle pinches a purple satin poncho around her shoulders. She knows that Enya is talking about her. She knows what he's saying, girls always do. You've felt it. You know when someone is watching you watching them watching you.

"I'm glad the way you look isn't a lie," Enya says and you say, "oh yeah, I'm practically George Washington," but he's not listening, he's leading you and the yellow balloon around the room, showing you off to his friends. You know they know who you are because of the way they Instagram your hands, your elbows, your ankles, your shoes, your curls, your yellow balloon.

Enya runs his fingers through your extensions: crafted from real human hair, purchased on credit. Your teeth are newly capped, so you bare them. Also on credit. Enya snaps a photo with his iPhone. You wonder if he bought it himself or if he's on his parents' family plan. He spins you and you twirl like a Christmas ornament: gold, red, white, green. The philosopher's playing air guitar, hollering into a beer bottle microphone. The dance floor is a box of primary crayons: red skirts, blue pants, yellow tops—a kind of period costume, you think— (you worked as a kid; you colored in primary colors on set; you never had the chance to loathe geometry or slice up a frog, though you did play Ruth, the hot nerd who takes off her glasses in *StarGazers 2: The Forbidden Planet!*) (You understand formaldehyde because you've studied method acting. The holding of objects. The preservation and dissection of past selves.) (You wear your sister's promise ring to keep her with you.)

(At this point in the night, every thought you have floats in parenthesis until it flares and goes out.)

Someone's arms wrap around you. From the back—fingers cover your eyes. The embrace makes you feel like a jar of honey. You can't remember the last time someone held you. Maybe it was your sister, her arms bone-fine as porcelain. Maybe it was your agent, when there was nothing left that he could do.

You see slender wrists ringed with purple filaments, smell gin and lavender soap. Then you see her, the whole her: the purple poodle.

"You're beautiful," the Poodle slurs. Her breath reeks of gin and French fries.

"No." You try to pry yourself from her vise but she drags you beneath the shivering rainbow chandelier. The neurotic track lighting flashes: blue lights; pink lights. The philosopher-punk, his leather jacket gone, shimmies, his skinny torso slimy with beer and sweat. Poodle throws her poncho around your shoulders. She kisses you on the mouth: McDonalds. "I'm not into girls," you say as a circular shock of white light drops from the ceiling—you are in

the spotlight—and in the glare, you can see that Poodle is younger than your sister.

She clamps her hand on your hand. Like she's snorted the wrong pills. Or swallowed the right ones. "I know it's not too cool to ask," she slurs, "but I gotta know—are you famous?" Someone snickers behind you.

"No." You shrug off her purple poncho. She catches the poncho as it falls.

"Come with me," she says. "The people here suck."

"No," you say again. You're here for a reason. You don't know how to tell her this. Then you realize you don't have to. You have an idea: "All right, follow me," you say. You clasp her hand, clutch your yellow balloon, and exit into a hallway walled with LCD screens playing porno and Adam Ant videos. "Here—wait in the stairwell," you instruct, seating her on the concrete stairs. You convince her to wait for you there, even though you have no intention of returning

to this corridor—not now, not ever. Not even to leave. You'll find the rear exit.

Enya and the peacock are on the other side of the dance floor, leaning against a monster tank of neon tetras. You try to catch his eye. Finally he sees you. You wave wildly, trying to make him understand that you want him to come over to you, but he doesn't move. You dive into the crowd, clutch his arm and surface next to him like a swimmer clinging to the ladder at the deep end of a pool.

"I ditched her," you say, "it was so exhausting." Enya clinks his glass against the peacock's glass—"in a while," he says, and continues with the peacock—"you *know* what I'm saying about blue." You yank his sleeve and he spins and seizes your wrist.

"Are these real diamonds?" he asks. He points to your watch—a fake Cartier Promenade d'une Panthère—and you blurt without thinking—"Yes!"—a lie—the way you flubbed answers at auditions when you were a kid. Under the rake of scrutiny, the gel

lights, the drone of the mob, the *Shush!* and *Behave!*, nerves make lace of your brain. Enya's pupils dilate; black holes squint down at you. He is the same height as you but suddenly, you are tiny. A little sister. You always wanted an older brother, someone who would let you wear his Oakland A's cap, his shearling coat, share hot pastrami with you when everyone else on set was drinking celery juice. You're staring at Enya's neck tattoo, a chapel fresco of a feast you'll never sample and he shrugs and says, "it isn't really your birthday, is it."

"No," you say. "It isn't." You clutch the red string, draw the balloon close to your head like it might protect you.

Enya releases your wrist, slips his hand into his pocket. "Come to my night next week," he says, handing you a flier. "It's very exclusive." He takes a bottle of tea tree toothpicks from his other pocket, selects a toothpick and roots around in his mouth. He pats you on the hair and says: "Next time, bring a friend."

The bartender hands Enya a yellow drink. Enya downs it in one swallow, tapping a gold fingernail on the glass. "Pineapple juice," he says. Then he says, "your watch is ugly and you're trying too hard."

You want to slap Enya's juice right out of his hand. You want to tell him he's a shithead no-talent, a vampire zombie. You want to crack his head on the floor like a jar of salsa. Everyone here is trying too hard and you want to cuss them all out, you want to hiss something witty or sneer something sinister the way comics smack back at hecklers—but Enya is too fast. He is already across the room, his arm around an anorexic with rouged cheekbones and kohl-rimmed eyes. The girl looks like someone rubbed her face on the floor. She looks as though she's trying to smile about it.

You look around the room and try to smile about it. And then you feel it: what you've seen in people's faces in movies, in windows of fancy restaurants, in the film reel stuttering of trains you've sprinted to catch and missed—a swell, like an undertow, rushing you toward something you can't

quite see in the fog machine's mist. People you recognize from a popular band recline at a table, their arms folded across torn flannels and leather vests. Members of another band—you assume they're a band, they have musician hair—stand off to the side, whispering behind closed hands. You can tell by their eyes and by their jaws that what they're saying isn't nice.

And that's the truth: No one in this room is nice—not even you. You're not nice. You call people names. You slap and kick and lie. When you were a kid you pulled your sister's hair on purpose: *this is a beauty shop, it's what they do at the beauty shop, stop crying, stupid baby*. When you were a tween, you pinched her and called her dumb because she couldn't compose herself for a photograph. She sliced her thighs when your parents left her alone in your dressing room trailer. And look at you now: people don't like you unless you're reading from a script.

You: cheerleader you, hacker you, chess champion you, teenybopper trapped by a demon in a shoebox—all likeable characters. Not you. You need

more than character development. You need more than an antagonist, a climax, a family-friendly, child-approved predictable plot. You need to be utterly transformed. You want to hear someone ad lib something genuine, something kind like "HAPPY BIRTHDAY."

You want to hear your sister sing "HAPPY BIRTHDAY" over a blue and white ball gown ice cream cake with a doll's cold torso set in the icing. You want to hear your sister sing but she's on some kind of experimental chemical in a free clinic in New Mexico. Because your dad gambled away the money from *Twisted Tuesday* and *Harold the Bean*. Because your house burned to sand in a brush fire. Because you didn't pay your homeowners insurance because you were in prison. Because love, because drugs. Because your father, your agent. Because all your mother can say is, *Jesus Christ, what's wrong with you? For God's sake and for everyone else's, get back in the game!*

And there on the dance floor, where the dubstep breaks and the room quakes under the pressure of the pounding bodies: you melt into tears.

"Come on," Poodle says. She hooks your arm in her arm and you hobble out of the club: Poodle jabbing people with her elbow to part the crowd, and you, sobbing, cradling your yellow balloon.

The sky outside is violet. On the sidewalk, a homeless man sifts through a black plastic bag. He plucks a large plush maggot from the bag and hands it to you. Its peachy fabric is clean but bald in patches; you can tell it was well-loved but outgrown. You examine the plushie like it's a cartoon time bomb, ticking, while Poodle tries to flag a cab. The maggot has an empty tape deck in its belly. The homeless man looks directly at you and says: "HAPPY BIRTHDAY." You freeze in your stilettos.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY," he says, again.

"It's the only thing he knows how to say," the bouncer drones.

The homeless man looks at the bouncer and says, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY," and the doorman says,

"hi-five, my brother," and gives him a hi-five. You can see in the homeless man's wide-set eyes that the man is still a child, and you wonder how it is that the universe has placed you here with him, the maggot, the bouncer and the doorman, the students on the sidewalk, smoking along the velvet rope, awaiting their entry into a mythic scene you suddenly feel so grateful for (you grew up in clubs, the nightlife raised you)—and their eyes meet yours, yours meet theirs—and you want to apologize to them for everything you've done to hurt them, which is nothing, but you're not thinking or feeling clearly. In your mind you're back in the Viper, revving the engine, the mob slapping their palms on the windshield, screaming *slow down, cunt!* and *fuck you, bitch!* and *hey, over here!*, because that's when you made the most real mistake you've ever made—

A cab glides up to the curb and Poodle grabs you and you and Poodle and the maggot and the yellow balloon are speeding, the cabbie swerving, braking, hitting all the green lights like cash prizes or extra lives in a video game. The ride costs a lot of money. You're annoyed by the expense but you pay

for it. When you step out of the taxi, the streetlight on the corner goes out. The streetlight catty-corner goes out, too, as you dig through your purse for your keys.

"Spooky," Poodle says and you say, "I'm guilty, it's my fault." Streetlights go dark all over the city and you know it's not your fault but sometimes you like to think that it is. You like to imagine that even you, desperate has-been you, can have a concrete effect on something. Poodle does a thing with her right eyebrow that you know she isn't even aware that she's doing. You replicate it.

You and Poodle head up to the apartment you share with two of your sister's college friends: girls who can't take their eyes off you, who also hold you coolly at arm's length. They make you feel as though you've been cordoned off with CAUTION tape.

In the living room, Poodle makes a beeline for the stereo. She cranks it. One of your roommates has been listening to Devo and "Whip It" blares through the speakers. Jill, the roommate with the Shih Tzu named Bruce Willis and an internship at Goldman Sachs, opens her door. Bruce Willis is tucked in the

crook of her arm; the dog begins to yip and yap, one bloated red eye on Poodle, the other eye on you.

"Some of us have to sleep," Jill snaps. She whips her blonde hair from one shoulder to the other.

Next, your roommate Madison, the one with the rescue tabby and the internship with the production house that produced *The Producers*, opens her door and poses, hand on her hip, in the doorway, like you're all in a Neil Simon play.

"This isn't a party," she says. "It's a work night." The girl hasn't yet turned twenty and already she has bags as gray as Scottish lakes under her eyes. She glowers at Poodle, her bee-sting lip curling reflexively in disgust.

This is what you've been reduced to: these girls, this apartment. You were once a homeowner; now you're charity case in a Williamsburg loft where someone's dad hires a cleaning company to vacuum the living room and do the weekly dishes. Your roommates, they don't know what it's like to earn a

house. What it's like to lose a home. Their daddies pay their rent. Your father never paid for anything. You were four years old when you first reimbursed your dad for your commercial headshots.

Poodle stumbles from one roommate to the next, flinging herself at Jill and Madison like they're her long-lost sisters. She hoists Madison's orange tabby to her chest and coos "nice pussy, pussy" as she wobbles on her heels. Garfield the cat is fat.

"Everything's under control," you say. You try to pry Garfield from Poodle's arms. He hisses—you drop him!—and he darts under Madison's bed.

"Guess he doesn't like Mondays!" Poodle says.

"We'll be quiet, I promise," you promise. Jill and Madison don't look convinced. You point to your room and Poodle hauls you through the doorway and slams the door. She strips down to her black lace bra and purple satin panties and climbs into bed.

"Come here," Poodle says. You stand next to the bed, holding the maggot and your yellow balloon.

"You're good at taking direction," she whispers. Directors once said the same thing, but this is different. Poodle flips onto her side like a Sports Illustrated swimsuit model. "You know," she says, "you're beautiful. Being with you is like being famous." You drop the maggot onto a pile of clutter and scan the floor for your pajamas.

"You're not a celebrity, right?" she asks. "You don't like, have your own reality show, or like, webisodes?"

"No, I'm not a celebrity," you tell her, which is the truth. You haven't made a movie in years. It's been even longer since you last appeared on Page Six. Even the Church of Scientology stopped calling.

"You know who you kind of look like?" she asks, and you shake your head no, please God no, please don't ask. "You look like that child star who drove her car into the paparazzi."

You rub your eyes, a tic you picked up somewhere, a ritual that makes you feel like you've rubbed yourself clean of a lie. "That's not me," you whisper. "I'm not famous." It's not a lie: fame isn't fame anymore. It's celebrity. And celebrity can die. And sometimes you wish—if you could call it a wish—that you could die, too—that you could trade your life, your death, for your sister's. Then she would live, a real life, like normal people live, with a real death, because she would have made different choices than you, and if she lived normally enough she might thwart the strange failure of a death you'd given her, the death of yours, the life of yours that you'd glued onto the end of her own, like a hair extension, or a lengthening of a hem. You don't yet know the cause of your own death, if it will be peaceful or gory. But you would give her that time if you could.

"It's okay," Poodle says. "Come here." You recline next to her, taking care not to let the yellow balloon touch the hot pipes that run across your lofted ceiling. You feel like you're hosting a slumber party in a low-budget porno. Poodle is bra-less and ugly, but the ugliness is sincere. She has the mouth of a high

school guidance counselor. She stretches across your mattress, waiting for you to transform her, waiting for you to lay your fantasies on her bare materials. She doesn't know your name and she doesn't care.

Or maybe she's lying. Maybe she does know your name.

"Watch me," she says. She rolls down her underwear and wets her fingers in her mouth. You can't figure out at which plot point this version of the episode unfurled into action—you wonder if you misread the script—because Poodle's nipples are hard and dark and they remind you of your old terrier's nipples, how they bruised after she bore and nursed a load of puppies. It isn't a nice image, and it surges through your mind, monopolizing your thoughts completely. You can think only of the dog: how when she died, you and your sister buried her. Older and stronger, you did most of the work. When your shovel struck a boulder, you got down on your knees and scratched the dirt out from the edges, yanked the stone from the earth. Your father watched from the kitchen window. Why he was there, at your mother's house,

you can't remember; your parents had already been divorced for years. But there he is, splitting the blinds, hissing through the gap: "your nails better be clean for your audition!" as your sister wails and for a moment you feel the grit, the rock ragged beneath your fingertips, your sister's corn silk hair in braids. Her hand. She held your hand. A hand was enough.

Poodle comes and falls asleep. You gather your pajamas and step into the bathroom. You have trouble locking the bathroom door. Staring into the mirror, you don't see a girl who smiled in a fluoride infomercial, a Burger King commercial, a Disney after-school special, an Oscar-nominated feature film. You see a raccoon-eyed woman with a grimy mouth. You see pillied cotton, toothpaste crust, spit speckles on the mirror. You see a girl who used to take direction, now a woman who gets pushed around.

You used to see a girl who looked just like your sister. Your sister looks like you, but a *real* version of you. People used to mob her at the mall; she had to stop shopping when *Harold the Bean* came out. Every day, you try to forget about that movie, about

her stashed away in your dressing trailer, as you check yourself for evidence of her sameness, pressing and jabbing your breasts, and every day you find the same thin skin. The same smooth complexion bruised from examining yourself too hard. You remember how after your sister downed her champagne and slammed her glass on the table, she lifted yours, your full glass, and tilted it into the sun. You grazed her arm, its brittle stem, with your finger. For a moment, you saw an image of yourself in a Moët ad.

You spit into the sink. You could sleep on the couch, but instead you trudge upstairs to the roof. A light rain has misted over Manhattan, blurring the sodium streetlights, the red antennas, the white windows into an orange haze. You mistake the rumble of garbage trucks for thunder. You mistake the drizzle on your brow for sweat. You feel feverish. Maybe you're sick. You mistake the weather for karmic punishment.

A breeze lifts and tugs at the yellow balloon. It makes you feel heavy. Plump as your sister when she was a toddler—her dimpled cheeks, her heart-shaped

jowls. You loved her baby flesh: warm as candle wax, its bread smell, its starchy earthiness. You sister always seemed more grounded than you, more connected to the earth, and yet more volatile, her mouth red and glittering like a geode. Now, your sister is a twig. You wonder: if you were to tie balloons to your sister's bed, how many it would take to float her into space?—another awful image that consumes you completely. You've always hated balloons, even when you were in the Mickey Mouse Club. The chalky tartness, the taut rubber tweaking—the static electricity—the *rrreek!*—and then—*BAM!*—the blast, the flat air.

You untie the string, pinch it between your index finger and thumb. The balloon is an egg. No, the balloon is a rotten egg. No, the city smells like rotten eggs.

You let go of the string—just a bit—and the egg rises. You wrap the string around your fist so the wind can't draw it away. You stare into the night sky, at the golden egg in the orange pollution, and think about Enya: how small he must feel to feel the need to

degrade himself and others; how much a man like him depends on approval; how approval is a trap; how windbreakers don't actually protect you from the weather.

You hold the yellow balloon in your hands.  
You squeeze it until it pops.

**BRENNA**

**↑ LEE**

## THE EXHAUSTING OWNERSHIP OF BODIES

Consistently and unrepentantly confused by every motive every animal has ever had, even the ones that she keeps, even the ones who lay still with her in the dark, she drinks her tea, reclining in the cold room. *Object*, he says. *Place*, she lies. She feels very far away. The mantle is lined with candles, but none of them are lit. A dog lays in the corner of a couch placed across the room, sleeping. They will be wed in two weeks. All that she can think of is the dirt beneath her jagged index nail.

## FAMILY MEAL

On a place between sight and guile a surface she can read takes shape: against women in all forms ordinary language reflects sanctity. She winds her finger through the tea cup. She consumes the present tense. Dissolves headless liquid circles into mouths. Open. Salvation is synonymous with subordinate. Slave better in wait, in objects. The very same sentence surged paralysis stiff guilt. Bored with overwrought references that strained the extension of what; an old calendar, broken glass. An exercise in stamina and numb. Or the dream where he talks like her. Syntax as clue to car window shatter. Image gives way to the lust of shame found in voice when she says *once* and *forget*. The virtual materialization of past selves that linger and resurface in the middle of the fall. Splayed wide beneath a stranger in a room full of people who watch and crawl in the light.

## ARRANGING FOR HER OWN SCARCITY

Behind the mirror an organ plays the unease of body. Her separation of self begins far before the dissolve of choice and salt land. A rush toward the sound of leaves clapped against hands. Cattails burn in the brush. This is a diversion. The vivisection of membrane in broad daylight, an illusion of steadfast control. A woman holding an object recovered and lost. Symbol meaning thing meaning possession. The seer pulls a bouquet from her sleeve. This is a con. A lineage of charmers with tail held in mouth; a pendulum of snake and wheel.

## LACK

She is a woman who dreams of animals and hoards their skins. She stores them in her mouths, beneath her eyelids. She finds them in other landscapes. A book. A name. An act of aggression, misdirected or otherwise. To reside on the edge of a box fan, blade or doll. Eyes open. Watch. Here, he says *in general*. Now, a split, an omen. The power to name as bloodline. This is what it means to gift a head. The momentum of curve is an object to be measured and kept. A girl. A lie. A chicken dinner. Here, he says *is boring*. Expiration by broom handle in a white washed hallway, in his little boy bed. Now, she sees through the barbed black before flight. She is an animal who dreams of herself. She hangs, invert, in wait. On the side of the mill. A molten tree; rust fruit. Everything the color of ore and bridge eventide. Between her legs a bird monster sleeps. She sets traps; a bucket, a splinter of steel, a spike. Track by breadcrumbs and red. Smother the light. Skin her dreams. Watch. Abate her breath to nearly none. Quiet. Listen, the flutter of leather wing caught in throat, insect surge, or the high pitched cycling of blood in nocturnal body the moment before swell.

## THE EVENT RESEMBLES HER PHOTOGRAPH

The trace of light around a form in flux; an imprint that shifts until collapse. To swallow ghost choke that blooms beneath limp tongue. This operation of observation requires interruption. Or rather, to mistake silence for validity. The fraudulence of a body offered on ice, of pretending not to see. Unassailable in her passivity, she offers him sacred things; the quiet that collects in lungs. A bargaining of rites for answers. The mutation of direction to something untethered. Haunted objects suspend in forgotten space. A noise ridden with secrets as it carries away.

KATHERINE  
FRAN

i. RECIPE

for challah: six  
children who all think they can name  
the aleph-bet, but stumble through  
the vowels, sprays and spits of half-  
crosses. Blessings are breakings in  
their mouths, so used  
to tangled bread.

ii. I TELL MY MOTHER IT IS A PRACTICE

scar, that picking your way through  
Judgment, Numbers, Genesis  
leaves its stone-bright, god-  
tongued mark. Its trail, its  
papercuts. She presses  
three fingers to my forehead, names

me Best Daughter, because  
the shehechyanu can pull  
itself through my mouth. *baruch*  
*atah, adonai* –

iii. WHEN THE TORAH'S SILVER  
BREASTPLATE

is stripped, I bite down on the space  
between my hand and what I am  
supposed to be whispering to some holy  
dead. The challah twists in its stiffening  
frame, crumbles like the prayer  
my sister tries to pull through her  
doughy mouth, but can't.

ode to how my tongue weighs down now at one a.m.

O to how we spoon queens, O to the stone  
    lying in the ant-choked  
darkness, O to what star-  
    nosed moles root towards. This  
is what blinds; O my love, to my flayed  
    flailing rolling. To all of  
my tolled mouths. You are so  
    like a swallowed eye, you stone  
baby nestled above words so bloody  
    they become whole, sink  
down into the red row  
    of muscle that still seeks  
to hold you. That begs for teeth.

## Divorce

There is a crow, the law of tiny  
green and gray: the flickerings  
of primaries – pointed, black and  
hollow, choked with wind, always  
quivering. Here the claw-  
to-claw shift and strangled  
call will haunt where you don't look.  
The lizard's soldered toes clink  
against the hose; he lowers his  
head to where the water thrums  
beneath the green. His split

tongue, arching back against  
the nectar-feathered breeze. When I  
am finished with these ragged  
leaves, these bee-stained zinnias  
already sinking back to cold, then  
the plunge. Then the shift

through spiderwebs, all strung with hung  
glass, like insects plummeting  
through dreams of windshield  
factories. Everywhere a stack of crushing  
nothing. The beak's the only gold  
that a crow owns, used to cleave

the tail from flesh. If it could,  
it would say scales should be used  
to this by now, separating at the base. How  
cleanly it comes apart, re-  
multiplies once fledglings have  
gone. When I was young, my uncle used to  
separate his leg like this, rub at his red

spiderweb where muscle dug into  
the plastic knee. He said when he  
took it off, his leg got cold. Goosebumps. When  
he slept, when it slipped from beneath  
the blanket during an IED dream –

the oldest lizard has lost more  
tails than this. I wonder, when  
he bolts from the shadow of a rising, if  
tapered ghosts knot, hold him back. If the loss  
hurts more every time.

## On Choosing Empty Houses

Mommy's body is a child's  
fist; it cannot help but hold  
a baby like an onion split  
and peeled to the most  
tender parts. To

what makes her weep. Before  
me, there were five other girls, bruised  
jellyfish seeping into grout, stench  
of dry heaving and pine. What  
pours thickly from the yellow  
bottle, what she used to wipe

the shambles from the bathroom floor  
before workers stumbled on the stain.  
She'd drive anywhere not to lose  
trust in her own home. We ate,  
for years, nothing but tomatoes she

planted and plucked and carved herself.  
Meat's watery-eyed façade. Daddy,  
doctor, you know that the eye

knots itself first, before the heart  
is the body's mindless knead.  
Is that why they could leave before  
me, press their nothing mouths  
into the air? Surely there was nothing to  
see here but an unfinished chest;

the attic lined with toy boxes all  
stained with purpled roses and *Grace*.  
Once I clutched a yellow yolk by

its mother's membrane, the clear knit  
that held it bending beneath  
my nails. *Mommy, Mommy, look and see*

*how what I touch holds together.*  
Jaws of lashes chewing over  
my eyes – a fork through the center,  
me, stirring yellow in the pan.

JENN⇕FER  
MACBA⇕N-  
STEPHENS

## Clay, Lyme, and Sand

I could describe a feeling of hardness as trying to please a boss who had a father in the military or I could take a more tactile approach: burgeoning pain-hard is: your shin slamming into an open dishwasher door or hard is: nicking your thumb with a newly sharpened paring knife. Using a simple noun: hard is a brick. A brick is as hard as a jaw bone. A jaw bone is as hard as someone saying a painful cliché to your face. This is only as hard as sand and cement and rocks mixed together into a paste if you love this person with every multicellular fiber of your being. A fiber is like a length of twine bought at a craft store. When that twine breaks, that someone saying this painful cliché to your face is like having that aforementioned brick smash into the side of your temple. When your temple splits apart, it is like the rivulets in a stream that empty from an isthmus into a back yard and children pick up the drowned worms from puddles. They tie these worms around their index fingers as a reminder to ask about your day. A child asking about your day is like suffocating for a second longer than usual because this time you actually reflect on your day and brick by brick it is rebuilt from porridge to papers to bathing mongrels to scrubbing away other daily dirty tidbits to asking the right questions that will deliver the correct answers that bring about a genuine laugh. Then and only then the house is built.

T↑FFANY  
G↑BERT

Macbeth  
*for Ethan Hawke*

GIBERT

Entranced by the witches' breasts sagging in sway with their incantations,  
you've got a lot of nerve. One in your eyelid twitches. What is bad about a witch?  
They're unnatural but so is soda, Styrofoam, and the caustic fabric you're perched upon,  
and the people in Salem were probably high on LSD anyway,  
a perk of the crop supplies that ate away their nervous systems and made  
village life more interesting. When someone asks  
would you rather good things happen or interesting things,  
why ever choose the latter? You'd rather have that nice bouquet  
of roses than a newt's eye. Though—that would be interesting.  
You would rather scuttle onto the stage and beg  
the audience's forgiveness for not catching half, at least,  
of the actor's muddled lines.  
That would be good of you.  
And being a good audience member is better than being  
an interesting witch, even if their hooded cloaks look

finer than anything that's sheathed you. You would like  
to be hooded, actually. You would like to be  
hawk-hooded in the woods, seething vapors and clawing  
pine bark, blinded from that smear of red  
on your paper-cutted finger. Does anyone but you  
read theater programs as life-studies? —is interest inherent or an effort?  
You are interested in beards but compelled by nipples  
and by bloody plays about body parts being sliced.  
The tongue now pasty in your mouth.  
The spotlight on the cleft between your legs.  
Your interest growing like that encroaching grove of trees because  
you would rather see something wicked, coming your way.

EM↓LY  
MOHN-  
S↑LATE

## Confessions of a CSP

After my husband notices me doing it again

I google *how to stop picking skin off your fingers* and learn it's a real thing – Dermatillomania or compulsive skin picking (CSP).

They say people do it for lots of reasons:

Anxiety / OCD / ADD /

the comfort of smoothing an edge.

In thirty-three years, I've never reached skin fully smooth (not even after the women

at Angel Nails *tsk* at my cuticles and we bond through  
our imperfections)

and that's why I have to keep doing it, trying  
for perfection, which I know,  
philosophically, is possible.

An online message board offers wisdom:

*If you can become aware of what makes you want  
to pick, you can overcome it.*

People's posts make me sick –  
embarrassed to struggle with something so small.

But I like this place where people get

that hang nails are urgent.

I want to tell them about the film *Black Swan*  
how it haunts me – when Natalie Portman  
pulls a piece of skin entirely down one of her fingers  
then her hand.

I had to close my eyes, the violence too close  
to my own need, and of course that's when the audience realizes  
she's batshit crazy.

I learn in grotesque testimonials  
that some people pick their face, their neck, their  
palms, their toes, their lips.

I feel more normal. I start to pick my left thumb.

Someone writes, *I've noticed I do it less by doing yoga more.* There's always someone who counts on the Buddha.

My favorite person on the message board,

Song of Mercy, writes only this:

*I'm all better now!*

*I started smoking.*

REBE<sup>↻</sup><sup>↻</sup><sup>↻</sup>A  
AUDRA  
SM<sup>↕</sup>TH

Havisham Rewrite

*After Havisham by Carol Ann Duffy*

I've got my period. Not a month since last.  
I've sworn so hard, I've blood at  
the back of my throat I could swallow.

Day one: I stink and remember. Week spent  
in bed cawing why at the wall; white knickers  
smeared in the laundry, festering if I so much as look  
at a mirror I'll scream who thought

this up? Puce words that fall from my lips  
the curse, my lost girlhood hovers,  
my bloated body dripping, staining  
till suddenly chocolate, I bite awake.

A red balloon burst in my face.  
Bang. I made a bed from tampons.  
*Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.*  
Don't think it's just that time of the month  
that makes me talk this way.

MEL↑SSA  
D↑AS-  
MANDOLY

## ROOTED

The body is still known in the dark,  
known better; poem without the blind  
feeling for surfaces of recognition.

The anatomy of a poem is known  
immediately, and must be autopsied.  
Epidermal language of perception spider  
webs out from skin, woman, daughter, etc.

Dark freckle moles only appear suddenly,  
never disappear. The difference between  
*sexual* and *sexy* is the angle of my hips. The  
difference between "I" and I is perspective.

The cross-sections of human genitalia  
in high school text books never show  
the pink *womanhood*, for that we  
must seek out internet pornography.

Rooted in the words themselves:  
chromosome, derivative of *chroma*: color,  
*some*: body. In images: fluorescent x-ray  
where white stands for skeletal existence  
and black for lack thereof.

Tautological language is different from  
tautological theory. The difference  
is frequency. A statement is never false.  
The body doesn't disappear in the dark.  
The dark never disappears in the body.

## CRISIS

i'm done trying to leave this island: keep wading into different territories & turning back, running into people all the way underwater who point back to shore. wasn't born with gills, or, dysfunctional: feel them gasping for water, but under skin.

Mehran Karimi Nasserli lived in an airport for 18 years. expelled from Iran, passport stolen or lost, refused entry to London without a country of origin.

must've lost passport too. can't remember having one. waking with familiar: being somewhere you haven't been before — way you wake in someone's house after passing out.

Nasserli slept in same terminal 11 years before French government gave him a chance to leave, offering temporary residency. he declined.

you adapt after a while. at first halving coconuts with machete, but not as easy as they make it look. never hold still enough, spilling most in the process. learn from mistakes, but never the first time. *you know the definition of insanity right?* (according to Einstein)

French government identified Nasseri as Iranian but he ceased to be the day he was expelled. statelessness: legal concept for lack of any nationality. think *stockholm*, think *signs of being institutionalized* like *a long-term prisoner*.

there are other people here. we stare from between long palms. some nights we bump into each other in the dark, trail fingers behind as we pass. sometimes we fall in love / but always wake up alone.

Nasseri now in homeless shelter in Paris, never made it to London.

*home*: a 4-letter word here, though some owl coos sound just like it in wind. the kind of curse you enjoy making into someone's ear, like first one ever said privately, to self. taking pleasure in its existence & your knowledge of its existence & everyone else's oblivious faces.

**AMANDA  
McCOY**

## FIRE GODDESS

Even the lizards were fucking. There they were, on the tree nearest her, moving on top of one another in frantic, desperate, jerking motions. Aster took a deep drink of her rum smoothie and looked to a couple sitting by the lagoon, no doubt on their honeymoon, kissing as if no one was around. The woman's hand cupped the man's jaw, her diamond ring glinting in the sun. St. John was the best place for a romantic vacation. The air smelled of summer: sunscreen, coconut, the ocean. The atmosphere practically demanded sex. She turned back to the lizards and saw they were still going at it, fucking for survival, not love. When she screwed men now, she did it as the lizards did: out of obligation, necessity. It had never been that way before she started the fire.

Richard walked toward her with a bracelet he bought off a street vendor. Aster wanted to hate it, but the truth was it was beautiful and it suited her: brown leather braided with a turquoise stone. He tied it around her left wrist and kissed her hand. She continued to drink her rum and hoped to feel the buzz

soon, hoped to reach the stage in which she didn't remember much. Aster needed this to be blurry.

Later, in the Jeep, she stared out the window, watched St. John's lush landscape rush by. It was so green, so peaceful, so perfect for another couple. Richard preferred to drive fast; it was one of the few things she still liked about him. He moved the car with an aggression he lacked everywhere else. She still hadn't gotten used to driving on the other side of the road and each time a car came along, she envisioned an accident—the Jeep turning over itself, tumbling into the mangrove trees. She imagined Richard dead, his head smashed against the window, leaving a spider web of cracks in the glass. She saw blood snaking down her arms as she made her way out of the car into the trees. The car erupted in flames, but she emerged from the mangroves like a goddess with her arms high in the air. Aster blinked and the vision was gone. She turned on the radio. The lead singer's voice was husky and hypnotic. The lead singer was raising someone from the ground. She closed her eyes and let the booze and music move her.

When they got to the villa, she made a gin and tonic with too much lime and took it into the bathroom with her. Richard followed her into the shower. She was drunk enough not to care when he soaped her back and breasts. She got out before he did, went to the porch naked. Who gave a fuck if the neighbors saw her? It bothered Richard and that was good enough.

.

The next morning, while they were driving to get coffee and walk on the beach, Richard looked at her and said he realized how easy it would be to lose her. She rolled her eyes. She loathed conversation when music was playing. She knew she had to respond or he'd just keep blubbing. "Not sure what you mean."

"I'm not dumb, Aster. I know what kind of man you could get if you wanted to. And I know that we aren't well-suited, per se."

She looked out the window. "I hate when you bring up this shit."

“And I hate when you act like a sullen teenager,” he said.

“Well then maybe you shouldn’t be dating one,” she said.

He turned the music down. “Just do me a favor. Give me a heads up before I lose you. OK?”

She turned up the music.

Aster knew she was beautiful. She had large, black eyes and full lips. Though she was dark-complected, she had fine freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her teeth were perfectly straight and when she smiled her face transformed. She was tall and brown and thin. But what men found most appealing was what they misperceived as shyness. She was aloof, distracted, impossible to crack. She wasn’t shy; she was indifferent. She found that once men realized that, they hated it about her. They feared her. How could she be that inward?

Aster relished that moment, the moment they realized they were courting a cold girl, not a shy girl. Some, like Richard, thought it was temporary. Or they thought they could change her. But really, all she wanted was a distraction, someone to move through the days with until she found another one to take up her time. She could never be in love again, that much she knew.

.

That night, they went to a fancy restaurant so Richard could flaunt his money. It was his only way of wooing her. They sat at a table that overlooked the water. It was beautiful. Aster ate white, flaky fish that tasted of lime and coconut. The rice was jasmine and perfect. The waiter kept bringing her mojitos. They were tart, minty and refreshing. Richard insisted they take a picture and when she smiled she imagined her puppet face being pulled back into a forced grimace, mint glinting in her teeth.

When they got home from dinner, she opened a beer and sat in one of the oversized chairs on the balcony. Richard followed her out there, chattered

about their plans tomorrow, their last day of the trip. She stared out at the lagoon drenched in dark and shadow. Only the moon gave light, leaving a bright streak across the water. He pulled her inside the villa.

Of course, that night was no different. They tried to have sex but her body bled and he lost interest. And then Richard tried to be nice about it, but of course he was frustrated with her. Her doctor had said it was possible her body was rejecting him.

"I still don't know what that means," Richard said.

"Neither do I. But that's what he said last time I went in."

"He means you literally can't have sex with me?"

She nodded. "Yeah. He said that my body might be rejecting you. Literally. Which would explain the bleeding."

"Does it hurt?" Richard asked.

"No. Not at all."

"So why? Why would it reject me?"

She had a theory why it was happening, based on what the shrink said, but she wasn't going to explain it to him. It wasn't that she was protecting him by not explaining – she simply didn't care enough to get into it.

"I mean, I know you're attracted to me. I can tell you *want* to have sex with me. So that can't be it."

She choked back a laugh. He stood there with his hands on his hips. She noticed he was wearing the pleated khakis, the ones she hated. Richard looked so old, older than he ever had, in that moment, and she was drunk enough to be vicious. "Man, your plan backfired huh?"

“Plan?”

“Dating a girl my age – I bet you thought you’d get laid all the time.”

“You know it’s not about that,” he said. He paused, tried to compose a soft, caring look. “Aster, I could see myself falling in love with you.”

She snorted. “Too bad. Because for me, it was about having sex with an older man. Guess that’s over now.” She sipped her beer.

“You’re drunk,” he said.

Aster nodded. “So? What the fuck does that have to do with this conversation?”

“You’re cruel when you’re drunk. You don’t mean it.” He paused. “But don’t get me wrong. I love that you’re young. I love having sex with you. And before the bleeding situation, you seemed to like it, too.” He went to take a shower and she moved back

onto the porch and kept drinking. Aster wanted to be so drunk she couldn't remember her dreams.

The couple in the villa next door came home and she saw them moving through the rooms, turning on lights. The man pulled the woman's dress over her head. She tugged off his pants. Her bra and thong were next. The man's erection was visible through his boxer briefs. Their mouths kept opening and closing, fastening onto the other, and it reminded her of the fish feeding off coral. Soon they would be grunting and groaning, sliding into one another. They moved into a room she couldn't see. Their sex aroused her in the way Richard couldn't.

Aster stretched her long limbs and looked out at the water. Lately, she'd begun feeling envious of other people's lives, particularly how easily they fell into one another. It seemed as if everyone else was capable of pairing off, of sharing a life with another. People told her she would understand when she met the right one. But what they didn't know was that she already had. She'd had him. She'd loved TJ

ferociously. But he'd left her and so she'd started a fire.

She heard Richard moving around in the kitchen. She hoped he wouldn't join her. She thought about what he'd said, about the sex. He was right. When she'd first met him, six months ago, she'd actually enjoyed it. Richard was older and that excited her. A fourteen-year age difference felt perfect. It felt like a good idea. The possibility of settling down with an older man was appealing. She'd never been good at taking care of herself, and Richard was nothing like unpredictable, risky, jobless TJ who refused to plan anything. Richard owned a home and was self-sufficient. He took care of things, took care of her. He wouldn't hurt her; he wouldn't leave her. Richard hadn't been needy then, at first, and he'd given her space. But now, now ... God, now he was an old man who hovered and worried and reprimanded. He made her feel younger than she was.

Richard was the longest relationship she'd had since TJ. But the longer they dated, the less she enjoyed their sex. This was the way it had been with the last few men she attempted to date. Once they'd

gotten to know each other, she found it difficult to allow them to see her in her most primal stage. Sex at the beginning, before they were acquainted, was no problem. But it became nearly impossible to remain sexual once she'd gotten to know them personally. Richard's skin always felt like oiled leather and his penis was crooked, a trait she found appealing at first, but hideous now. She thought of the lizards, their frenetic sex. She thought of how effortlessly they moved on top of one another. She was incapable of that with him now, and nothing would change it. The gynecologist wasn't sure what to tell her. Shortly before the vacation, the bleeding had started, so she went to her gyno.

After her exam he'd said, "Have you ever tried using lubrication?"

She nodded. "It happens even when we do use it."

"Well, then I have no good answer. There is no physical reason for this to happen. You're healthy."

He paused and seemed hesitant to speak. "There is another possibility."

"What?"

"It's possible your body is rejecting him. As in, your brain is telling your body you don't want to do it."

"So you're saying this is psychosomatic?" Aster had asked him. "It's in my head?"

"I've seen it before. It's commonly associated with sexual trauma."

"As in...rape victims?"

He nodded. "Have you ever been raped? Or experienced that kind of trauma?"

"No. Not unless a break-up could constitute trauma." She laughed.

Then he told her she could go see a psychiatrist. She explained she'd already seen one. She didn't mention it had been mandated by the courts.

"Well, it can't hurt to see one again."

So she did. Two days before the vacation, she returned to the same shrink that had treated her after the fire. Aster explained the situation and the shrink paused, tapping a pen against her cheek for a moment before responding.

"It's possible that once you reach the stage of intimacy that your mind tells your body to stop," the shrink had said. "That intimacy was reserved for TJ only. So that explains why you can have the casual sex, but not the intimate kind."

"So what's the solution here, doc? Casual sex for the rest of my life?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. You need to get over the past in order to move on. You need to talk about *him*. I suggest you come see me weekly."

Aster said she'd think about it. Then she left for vacation with Richard knowing it was a bad idea. He'd planned the trip, she figured, in a pathetic attempt to salvage their dying relationship. He probably hoped that if they got away they would reconnect. The truth was she'd actually hoped that she would be able to have sex with him. That was the only enjoyment she had left. But it was worse here than at home.

Lately, she fantasized about being intimate with strangers, with people whom she did not form an actual relationship with. She figured she could still have that kind of stranger-sex. She thought about banging the pilot on the plane, the lone fisherman they saw in the morning, the sweating fat waiter who brought her drinks. She imagined knocking on the neighbor's door, asking to join them. What would it be like? Easier, she thought. So much easier than this. She could just do it and leave. According to the shrink, her body would have no problem with that kind of sex.

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Their last day, it was hot. The hottest day since they'd been to the island. They climbed out of the Jeep and carried their equipment and cooler toward the beach, setting up a spot and fitting snorkeling gear to their bodies. Aster moved clumsily into the water in her large flippers. Richard told her to wait for him. Instead, she roughly threw her body into the water and dunked her head under. She swam away from Richard and moved through the water with ease. She swam and swam and felt as if she could go forever. She held her breath until it felt like her lungs would burst. She thought of nothing. She simply enjoyed the feeling of her body carving its own space, her limbs moving through the waves.

When she finally came back, Richard was already there, reading in the sun. His skin glistened with baby oil; she imagined it hardening around him like a shell. She flopped down on her towel and he glanced at her briefly. It seemed as if he were going to say something, probably tell her he was hurt she didn't swim with him. But after a moment, he returned to

his book. She popped in her headphones and settled onto her towel. The music pulsed and throbbed in her ears. She felt the sun drying her suit, drying her hair. It was so hot that Aster felt as if her hair would catch on fire.

She thought back to the time she started a fire, to the reason she started the fire. She had come home to find TJ gone. They'd been fighting, but she hadn't thought it was over. He'd left a clichéd note taped to the fridge: *Sorry, A. You know we can't do this. We're no good for each other. We need to be with others. Sorry. Take care of yourself. Love, forever and always.*

She stood in their apartment that still smelled like him and told herself he'd be back. She made it through the next two months in a drunken haze. Then a friend told her that TJ had been sleeping around before he left her. When a few people confirmed it, Aster knew it was true. She was empty, a gutted fish. *Forever and always? Fuck him.* She couldn't bear to be in this place that held all of him that was left. So she started the fire and watched it hiss and pop and grow

louder and louder, closer and closer. Eventually the smoke had choked her and she passed out.

She woke when the firemen busted in her door. They were moving around her, spraying hoses, motioning to one another. One of them grabbed her, hoisted her over his shoulder and carried her from the room. She tried to claw at him. She tried to tell him to leave her. But he persisted. He moved surprisingly fast in that equipment.

While he carried her down the stairs, she coughed and coughed. They burst through the doors and the cold night air hurt her damaged lungs. The fireman hovered over her outside on the grass and the lights blinked and blurred. She thought of how when it rained she and TJ watched the trees kissing in the wind. She passed out again.

She woke again, still on the lawn, and the fireman was there, pumping her chest like she was made of play-doh. She smacked his hand away, mumbled she was fine. Her throat and lungs hurt and she coughed and coughed. Her ears were ringing but

the fireman was talking to her anyway. Finally, she understood he was asking her if she started the fire. He didn't have a fucking clue. An ambulance roared down the street.

“I wanted him to look for me in the ashes,” she mumbled.

When the fireman looked at her like she was crazy, she said, “Haven't you ever needed to start a fire? Who can live with all that stuff?” She repeated those phrases over and over until they weren't questions anymore. She rocked herself back and forth, back and forth. And then the paramedics were there.

There on the beach, Aster wondered what happened to that fireman. She wondered if he was still proud of saving her life. He'd probably told his friends and family he'd saved a crazy girl. Richard waved to her and she turned to him without removing her ear buds. He mouthed the words “TOO HOT” and then motioned to the water. She watched him go.

She thought of the time after the fire. After they released her from the hospital, she returned to her apartment. The fire didn't do nearly enough damage. Sometimes, in those first few weeks, she sat and traced the smoke patterns on the walls. She longed for the smell of things burning. She had trouble sleeping. When she did, she had fucked up dreams, nightmares with horrifying violence. She dreamt of snakes. She dreamt they were shedding their scales until they were raw, naked, dead. She dreamt of butterflies bursting through cocoons only to be devoured by red-eyed vultures that were waiting, open-mouthed. She dreamt of milky white spiders that ate their mother's body without remorse. Sometimes when she woke, she would be somewhere else entirely—standing in her closet, wearing the one coat TJ left that the fire didn't eat.

She'd been lucky they didn't give her jail time. Her lawyer convinced the judge she needed psychiatric care, not jail. They let her leave the hospital on the condition that she saw a therapist who could "assess her mental state." So she did. Aster refused to talk about TJ; she said she couldn't yet. She

found other things to talk about. She admitted to the shrink that she started sleeping with one of the young paramedics who was there that day. She liked that he had already seen her at her worst. She assumed he always screwed the women he saved, but she brushed it off because she liked the way he looked in his uniform. Aster didn't tell the therapist that she'd had to get sloppy drunk to have sex with him since she'd never been with another man. And when the paramedic slept with her friend a month into dating, Aster shrugged and said who cares. She told the shrink: "Who wants to date someone who saves lives? I don't."

Aster peered out at Richard diving into the waves. She knew they were over. She closed her eyes and lusted to feel the heat of the white hot flames. She rolled off her towel and onto the hot beach. She pressed her body against the scalding sand and waited for the pain.

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Back at the villa, they fell into bed together. Richard tasted of salt from the ocean and oil and his hands were all over her. His eyes flashed blue, the bluest she'd ever seen. She tried to channel the lizards, their animal sex. She tried and tried but she could not stop picturing TJ, could not stop her body from rejecting Richard. After a couple attempts, he rolled off her and pressed his palms to his face. She wanted to say sorry. She wanted to say that she wished she could. She wanted to say that she used to be good at this, that she'd be able to do it again. But she said nothing and he stood up and pulled on clothes. He kissed her on the forehead and told her he'd go grab a pizza for them for dinner.

Aster listened to the wind blowing in through the front windows. She walked to the balcony and looked out at the lagoon. The water was the brilliant blue you only see in pictures, paintings. The reef below the water was visible at this height. The sand was white and clean. This truly was the most beautiful place she'd ever been. If she couldn't be happy here,

she may never be happy. She dug the shrink's business card out of her wallet. She'd written her home number on the back and said it was for emergencies only. She had no idea what the time difference was, but she didn't care. She dialed the number.

"Hello?" The shrink's voice was muffled. Maybe she'd woken her.

"It's Aster."

"Is everything alright?"

Aster could hear rustling and she imagined her sitting up in bed. "Yeah. I just thought I'd check in."

"Where are you?"

"On vacation with Richard. In the Caribbean."

"How's it going?"

"Not well. The rejection thing keeps happening. Worse than before."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"This is the most beautiful place I've ever been. I should be happy, right? But I feel nothing."

"There are some kinds of trauma that never go away," the shrink said. "You can surround yourself with people and things. You can be surrounded by beauty, but that won't mean you'll get over the trauma."

"So what should I do?"

"The same thing I've been telling you. You need to talk about him, Aster. It doesn't help that you refuse to talk about him. If you do, if you talk to me about TJ, you will move on, eventually. We can schedule more appointments when you get home."

"I just feel ... powerless."

"I understand. When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

“Well, until then think of the last time you felt powerful and go there. Think about that moment. Think about how strong you felt. And try to live in that moment.”

“OK.”

“Goodnight, Aster.”

Aster hung up the phone. She went to the kitchen and poured vodka on the rocks. She took long, deep gulps and thought about what the shrink said. *The last time you felt powerful.* She drained the drink and smiled. It was obvious. It made so much sense. Why hadn't she thought of this sooner?

She walked into the bedroom and grabbed a pile of her clothes. She threw them on the living room floor. She went into the kitchen to grab cooking oil and a lighter. She poured the oil on the clothes and the drapes. She flicked the lighter and watched the flame emerge. She did the drapes first. Aster knew they'd be beautiful, the flames licking the fabric higher and higher; the sensual sexuality of the movement

reminded her of a man sliding his hand up a woman's leg. She did the pile of clothes next. After she started the fire, she sat there, watched it build and grow and become a beautiful orange-red-roaring animal. It was so goddamn beautiful she wanted to fuck it.

As the fire grew and she waited for it to consume her, Aster felt powerful. She didn't think of the memories people hold onto, the strange things humans are able remember while forgetting so much else. She didn't think of building forts in the snow pile the plow left on her childhood street, or crawling through the tunnels and holding her breath. Not of her little brother on his big wheel, his feet hardly reaching the pedals. Or her first day of school, the smell of glue and the scratchy material of her uniform. Aster didn't think of her dog, how she couldn't bear to go to the vet when her parents put him down. When the family came home, they found Aster curled up inside the dog's cage. She didn't think of the time TJ sang to her, softly, in his bed and how she finally understood what people meant about butterflies in the stomach.

Instead, she watched the fire grow and felt empowered by its strength. Aster removed her clothes, tossed them into the fire and stood naked in front of it. She raised her arms high in the air, like the fire goddess. This was the only way. The first fire had been a failure, but this time Aster would not come back, at least not this version of her. And she would be rid of him, the one she could not keep.

Aster closed her eyes and walked into the heat. This time, she didn't care who would look for her in all those ashes.

EM↕LY  
O'NE↕LL

The Age of Instability

When Winona says,

*have you ever confused a dream with life?*

I wander into Sean's apartment  
for the first time. He hands me a High Life—  
*welcome to college*—and we joke  
about how depression has come  
conveniently into fashion.  
*Miss the train? Kill yourself.*

When Brittany carved herself  
so thin she vanished,  
my doctor prescribed the drug that killed her  
and Sean said *at least you'll be skinny*.  
Eighteen was my mistake, but twenty-four came slowly over him,

too much champagne. The pair of us,  
psych ward salt and pepper shakers.

Susannah says,

*death can feel like a dream*

and I am nightgowned, perching on the bed's edge  
in Sean's Midas room, strings of fairy lights  
hand-colored gold. I am manic and in love  
with planning our escape. His absent smile,  
impossibly hip. No real shock there.  
My insistence on loving some light  
into our tired eyes. My hurt mirrored  
by his heart. My shaved head's debut  
to rave reviews.

Knife Play

the fastest way  
to cut a man

say  
*you weren't here*  
*first*

use your open  
palm

conjure  
back the branding iron—  
cocoa, shining  
windowsill High Lives  
I ground against

*who taught*  
*you that*

woman he stole  
false history  
suspended

between  
flight & skinned  
knees

slap him til he cuts  
new teeth

parlor trick  
right card drawn  
red in the cheek  
red, fresh meat of diamonds  
of hearts

say I've won  
*you weren't* already  
*the only one* pretty, pretty

don't worry  
your pretty little head

& when the canary stops singing

I curse that death. Carry it in a cage like a bird.  
Marry it. Name the belt & dagger a man now

in the sky. Orion painted with soot. Marry him.  
Sleep on his chest, that starry mouth in your hair.

Offer my lip & pray for blood. Offer a vein.  
When I'm too afraid to watch, witch my sight.

Catch the ghost in glass. What can I see?  
Is it how I loved the last one who bled

me like a lamb, hand on my head, saying  
*do not blame me for the blade?* I drown the past

down the mine, hold it under until it jerks & screams.  
Water howls if it rises quick. Me too. Me, blue

at the wrist. No yellow feather. I've offered  
plenty, been shucked like an oyster. This is how

a girl gets wanted. Pull me through your teeth like smoke.  
A cough. A coin in sand. A coal man's homely bride.

I can swallow the dark until lipsewn & fog-throated, my hair  
in an eddy every time I shave down to scalp.

CARRIE↑E  
HUNTER

## Cataphora, Dissemblage

In the memory of yellowed wounded obstacles. That famous Freudian joke. The scene was a wax-work show. The reinforced status quo. The six fabrics. The world against remedy. A blockage, a siege, upside down, opposite of where you want to be. On the right or left extremity lurks the bowing pillage. Issy's two personalities. Polymorphous beings, the two temptresses. Your plurality is my plurality. We are no longer waiting for anyone to arrive. Some messages still come in envelopes. To relieve oneself is to wage war is to let everything go. The museum, the marquess, the murderer. Joyce's yes. Dialect for again. Past tense for reset. Marble museum, murmuring.

## Revoicing

Death moves through like a lion in the way, swish.  
Look carefully, then shoot. Don't tell me how  
Copenhagen ended. The river's shattering form.  
Phonetic approximation of darts hitting a dartboard.  
You don't have to shoot it out from under me, I'll get  
off. The cat, the silence. Goa, I've come. What is  
placed under the horse's tail. Anna Livia Plurabelle.  
Contrasted with three cheers. Together a chapel. Like  
women are houses and there are too many chairs.  
Greek word for gloomy. In the air with too many  
chairs. Threats of what you must not tell. The place  
where she is seen (sitting by the window) is nowhere.  
We are not in a where.

## The Voice of the Abstract Audience

We won't leave this room until this is settled. The child and the dog skipping a thousand blows. Attached to my back again. Hobo stick drowning. With a drink and a jerk, who is next in line. Before pixels were pixies. Something is shining in the something. The annotation taking away the real meaning. Amy in rainbows with arrows. Pudenda changed into handgun. Not a real horse. A woman going around collecting "spoiled goods" in a sack. To gorge on gorgeous George. The christmas trope, the happiness trope, the everywhere trope. Jesus with the children, Moses on the summit, the promised land, the promised moment. Come unto me.

## Countercathexis

I whisper devotional. Fetishizations of the self. There never used to be a light here. He assumed the name of his mother. Chiasmatic references to trees. We'll hold a spinning contest. If the repressed personality wins, if that is who I knew. Behind the textual self. Supplying a deficiency. Borrowed. Burrowed. Buried. Something blue. Something bilious. Throw away the headlight. Forget to see. Famous for its buttons. Find my temper in my bag and my stockings in the rain. Quilt hidden by flasks. Clavichord. Places on the body. Maps of what is unasked. Discarded keys. Things I will inherit that I will sell. Heliotrope trousers. The night is for lies, garters, mismatched everything.

## Dyadic Ubiquity

Cremate them all together. Another form of mass. To steal, to fuck, to become. The hermit who seduces. The curate who abuses. The archaic cat. Contrasted with laughing. A male deer, a measure of corn. All the syghes. The bird, or the rainbow, seeing the sign of the ark. Crucifixion kiss kiss. If life ends, when life ends, kiss kiss. Typography's Satan or transmissional variant. My lines and your lines criss-crossed under the tea stain. True to the forbidden. The lost grammatical tense. Silence after prophesy. Allusion to the orange peel. I'm full of floral organs. The first offense is each next offense. The pleasure of bells, the pleasures of bells. The shipwreck is in the other room. Helen's cellphone ring, ringing ringing.

## Dispreferment

I've stopped holding my breath while passing cemeteries. Pills for dragonflies, a compass for rainbows. I want things to be cards but nothing is a card. Ninety-nine percent of what I noticed was noise. Making use of linguistic interchange for aesthetic purposes. Breakfast every day, suddenly. I see what the professionals do not. Missing the cavorters for the quarters, the counting, the sky, the bisecting meridian, times of day, four anything. Those-who-fly-through-the-sky's own tribe. Contrasted with three cheers. Lucy Snowe, answerer observer. Flashy flasher flashing like a flash. Night darkness a cancellation, a nothing snow which covers the disallowed. Windy is practice. Practice is not doing. You'll feel better if you cry. Trying to make it not apocalyptic.

KELLY  
CONNOR

## Wet Paint

This color called White of the Eye, I buy gallons, I spill deliberately  
I fall open jaw-first and find a hybrid form  
It must be mine, a splatter that spells out "Stay On Your Grind"  
I white out violently, not thought nor gesture but a vast washing-over  
A force for erasure. Not clean slate, but ghost sheet. Poor visibility  
And strangely placed peepholes, each sight incomplete and brief  
Like before, but something keeps moving in my sockets  
An awful oscillating. Counter-clock. I order a fire to do more

Than just warm the room. 2<sup>nd</sup> Day Air arrives and unravels

Me the hard way, like I like it, at the double-helix level

The worst way for things to get a little better

The best thing I get is wetter, ready to receive the subjective

I'm coming into my own new form of soreness

More devoted than before, soldier, patrolling the body

On limited loan. I'm so sorry I haven't even described

Your formal properties. The white floors from before

And now also a low moan, or the thought of it

The best laid, home sweet, away from the memory foam

From the mouth like rabies and by the mouth

I would unwife you all night, by the sight of my bare hands

When the walls fall I'll find I'm crawling up the floors

Yours, sincerely, on all fours. Love, the wolf at both sides of the door.

CONNOR

LISA  
MARIE  
BASILE

the aisle draped in calla lillies & papier-mâché  
she, in chantilly lace and audacious hemline,  
is a meadow, but she hides it:  
that open space inside her unfilled, she marries.  
a small sacred burst of pain,  
red wine flowing free between two legs  
as a barber shop, spinning on  
a sepia summer day.  
The gypsophilia stained  
with me  
so that I am eternal summer,  
am the elements  
waiting to be unhinged by god  
a predatory sea  
of mostly loss, mostly salt.

a whole sea.  
a white linen hanging,  
& inside, an embroidered bolero, a milk pitcher,  
olive & salt, and a love letter with marks of  
the mouth.  
the portrait of the end of my life.

and this earth conquered by the religion of fear.

i want to forgive.  
and for you to forgive the self

as a small bowl of lemons would when rolling off of  
the table,  
because we are the same as they are in end,  
only louder.

**RYDER  
COLL↕NS**

You are the ex-ex

If they see us at all, the neighbors pretend not to, is what you say to her. It is another workday & both of you have called in sick and which one of you has more to lose.

You don't know. There's a force at work here. There's a force that has been trying to bring you two together and pull you apart and bring you together and pull you apart. There are forces all around and there are people all around and all the people around you have been inside her, too.

Well, not all the people. Just the mens. They, like you, are all her ex-es.

This is something no one talks about. Even at the bbqs after the kids are all passed out and the adults are swaying drunk, your wife xanax-wined out even, no one talks about how everyone is connected. No one talks about the men and their part in it all. They just talk about the hater. How they hate her. How she is a force. How she lives among them and how they know

everything about her and how they know she hates. This is what they talk about around the dying bonfires in the backyards and this is what they talk about in the plush suburban living rooms with the giant Smart TVs with the facebook pix of babies babies babies (and some kitties) on them.

One will say, She hates.

One man or woman will giggle uneasily. They will be shushed.

Another will say, We should talk about something.

A woman will throw some green wood on the fire and the crackling pops will signal oppositely.

A man will say, Her blinds are always closed.

Another will say, You can only tell if she's home when the car's out front.

A mom or dad'll say, The kids. She yelled at my kids. They came home crying. I told them to stay away.

Someone'll whisper, We all shoulda stayed away.

The fire'll pop and everyone'll watch the spark fly away into the sky.

A wife'll whisper, How were you to know?

A husband'll say, It was before I even met you, dear...

They'll hold hands against their common foe.

Another wife'll whisper real quietly, Not true, here. Unfortunately.

Everyone'll hear, but no one'll acknowledge this. They'll start whispering more about her hate instead until it is very very late.

When it is very very late and they are sure you are not listening, they will start whispering about doing something. About hate. About love. About masks. About fire. About ways to breathe through fire. Bandanas and fire trucks breaking down. Fire hoses blocked.

The way the hater blocked their lives.

The way she drained their lives and how they were sent hither and thither when they'd thought they loved her. How they were brought here when they didn't.

You are not listening because you are thinking about the draining. The cock. The draining of the cock. The way she licks that big vein in your cock and then sucks and sucks...

You are hotter than the fire embers but they don't know; they're so focused on their hate, they don't see how you glow and glow.

They think you're all passed out; that you're all burned out like them. Like the fire. That you, too, are ash.

Then the next day, if it's a work day, they're all quiet at the breakfast table, even the children. They're all sheepish as they drink their homogenized milks and can't wait to leave or can't wait for the others to leave. Work is a place where the men can think thoughts they usually hide as they type and telephone and wheel and deal; school is a place for the children to be free from the oppressive atmosphere of something not quite right but everything's just great; home is a place where the wives sit and cry at the breakfast table after everyone's left. They know their place in their husband's life is safe but they never feel safe with her around.

& you eat breakfast behind your newspaper as usual while your wife corrals the kids and backpacks and lunchboxes. You drop a couple of neighborhood kids and your kids off at school and go to work.

You are tempted, always, to ask where all these kids come from. You never do. You know your son, the older one, would say something smart-assy like, the stork or the cabbage patch or even the penis being inserted into the vagina.

You want to insert your penis into her vagina again and again and again. You want to force her legs almost all the way behind her ears. You want to feel that force that's between you again. You want to somehow siphon it into a flask & drink it surreptitiously at night while your wife snores all xanaxy next to you. This is what you're thinking when your wife calls you midday after her wine lunch and subsequent nappynap; this is what you're thinking when your boss sneaks up behind you.

They are a force bro. This is from your boss. He has been talking the talk about the football. He usually talks about the football and he usually talks about the home team. The home team almost always wins.

The home team wins and the hater hates and the seasons change and you never wear the bottoms of your trousers rolled.

It is inevitable.

Whatever it is.

You once liked football and you once cared when the home team won. No, you loved football & you cried like a baby when the home team won championships. You played football in high school. You had big guns. All the girls loved you because of it. You had a high school sweetheart.

You didn't marry your high school sweetheart.

The whole time you were dating your hss you could barely stand her: her nasally Midwestern accent, her manicured nails, her very carefully feathered hair, even her tight sweaters. The whole time, though, you pretended you cared.

Now you pretend you care about football.

You grew up loving football; you fucking played football. What is wrong with you?

Now you just nod and smile at the boss when he talks about the force. When he talks about football. When he talks what he talks you start thinking about cotton and boll weevils and red Southern clay; you start thinking about 1877 collective movements you didn't even know you knew about.

You want to join them and pick cotton, and sweat off some of your extra flesh; you want to join them with the hater; you want to fuck the hater in the cotton fields; you want to be surrounded by white downy bulbs as you thrust into her cunt, as you hold her legs up straight into that blue sky, as you force her legs up as she forces you deeper in her.

You also want to join them to fight the Man, but, no, really you want to join the 1877 collective because you want to roll up shirt sleeves and you want to see the hater in a pinafore or some shit.

White cottony gauze and the sunrise & you  
can see her naked through and through.

You even wouldn't mind if that ghost did its  
slippery ghost dance all around the cotton stalks.

What the fuck is your problem?

Your wife just asked you that last night but she  
didn't remember this morning because of her xanax-  
wine combo she substitutes for dinner.

You can't remember the last time your wife ate  
something she cooked.

Your wife used to bake bread and be all giddy,  
flour-covered. She used to knead that dough hard and  
you would get hard watching her palm and thrust and  
punch. You used to bend her over that counter as soon  
as the dough was set aside to rise.

No, that wasn't your wife; that was the hater.

Irony or metonymy or metaphor? There is a clue to something here...

You don't know and you don't care.

You think you should go see someone about this.

There is no one to see about this.

↻ HLOE

↻ LARK

*Sistrurus catenatus*

There are some who will say that even the devil  
looks twice before he crosses the road  
and that every glorious act of creation is stopped  
at the door by that serpent in that tree at the very  
beginning of every damn thing but what about  
the other snakes, the ones who climb closer  
to the roots?

Of the garter and the red racer  
and even of the Massasauga, whose name  
rolls out of the mouth like doing the wave  
with your tongue, it's easy once you know how.

The color of the Western Massasauga is the color  
of the earth stripped free of plants, the bluffs  
depleted of their green, and it is to coil in stones,  
in crick beds run dry, in gravel roads where the sun  
hits just right.

A black rattler, a black snapper, a pit  
viper, a muck rattler, the great river mouth,  
names are easy, names are deceiving, names  
tell you nothing you wouldn't already have known.

One bite can kill, but how many people die  
of rattlesnake bites per year? When there  
are car wheels and cancers up from the bone  
and your own hands and the hands of someone  
you love and strangers even too.

Puss-in-Boots on the Tricking of Man and Existential Crisis in Footwear  
(after a Gustav Dorè illustration)

What a cape I have? What glory I have!  
I can swish and swash with it.

*What cat wears clothes? What cat is that?  
Not cat but fool, they have said.*

When I was but a young kitten, I drank milk from  
my mother and dreamed of jeweled days to come.

*Mother who nudged me, soft nose to fur. Mother  
who sang me lullabies of blind mice.*

When I speak of treasure, my body sings  
the purr electric. Purrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

*I try sometimes to remember the words to the songs  
of my mother. Most is gone but the tune.*

I have fallen, been bedraggled,  
and I have picked myself up by my bootstraps.

*Boots on a cat! The words they have said.  
Mother said she did not know me.*

Claws out and belt buckled,  
I have left Man bewildered and goldless.

*Mother's eyes were golden as coins. They sparkled  
amongst the darkness.*

I will dance down this path for I am  
the cat with gold.

*Sometimes I step past trees and see the faces  
of those I have known etched into the leaves.*

I am the cat of gold.

*The cat of golden eyes.*

K. JANE  
CHILDSDS

## Colorblind Double Bind

Pulse sienna pulse sepia sand

Shrill ringing burnt umber, bistre and bole  
Lonely as a Narcissus, mister or missus, divine after  
dinner, Andes // Olympus

Tactile like taxes  
like ochre, taupe, bone

Tide and time.      Need & pine.

Your mother would be a venomous vine.

Tongue-tied as chesnut, roasting divine      like rufous refined  
Dew dusking over skin, oiled beginning zoom in, cursor  
Languishing to untouch



[You] = Engine/{My}---Desire

welded to {chassis}  
blooded ← [cassis]  
Mine  
& [thrust]  
& [excavation] +  
mine among {Fitted Fustian}  
=[flux]=(fuck)=/future/=

{Ecstatic Rag}  
wrung  
\slide down [veins\  
((hammock among  
[branching ribs]

## Caramelize the Unburnt Cake

i built this persona to fence out the dark  
he reaches for us as if we are here  
your workshirt smells of burnt sugar

chantilly blood red revolver need  
burnished filigreed electric lute throb  
i built this persona to fence out the dark

synchronic stimulant bakery black  
the danger become charm of a sweetgrass smile  
your workshirt smells of burnt sugar

memory censer leaking acrid intoxication,  
diachronic maenad litany: apply lip liner first  
i built this persona to fence out the dark

mainline espresso piercings grown  
over, a wrinkled chef's coat conceals  
your workshirt smells of burnt sugar

bitten doll-fingers, hunger hum squeal  
he reaches for us as if we are here  
i built this persona to fence out the dark  
your workshirt smells of burnt sugar

JO  
GA↑≠FORD

## Vitamaxima

“Don’t forget to say the name,” was the last thing Gerard said to her. Say the name with gravitas and with confidence, as if it were the most important thing your audience will hear that day. As if it were the key to the handcuffs in an escape-the-tank-of-water Houdini trick gone wrong. Fix it in their heads so that it forms on their tongue more naturally than the word it bastardises, until the original looks bizarre written down, so that the mere sight of the leading letter makes them whisper it: Vitamaxima.

“It looks like a badly-spelled vagina,” she said, but Gerard didn’t laugh, didn’t tell her to take it seriously, didn’t even focus his eyes on her. He’d passed over the last rattling box of pills and left her standing on her doorstep with the word ‘vagina’ still rolling round her mouth. And a week before she was due to start her tour Gerard gassed himself in his garage and her new supervisor broke the news with the uplifting epilogue that Gerard’s client list would now be merged with hers, meaning she’d be earning commission before she even sold her first batch.

“It’s a small consolation,” the supervisor said, “But that’s what happens when you don’t believe in the product.”

Vitamaxima. Worship your temple. Vitamaxima. Live long, love life. Vitamaxima. You’ve never felt this good.

The day she took over Gerard’s territory she sat in her kitchen, outflanked by towers of brown boxes, all stamped with a seductively curving V. She considered making a fort. Instead, she made coffee, and while the kettle boiled she struck Vibrant and Vivacious and Victorious poses like the woman in the Vitamaxima advert. Arms stretched up, head thrown back, tits pushed forward, hips proud, feet pointed. “Vitamaxima...” she whispered, “The love your body deserves.”

On the first stop of the tour she sold three units – twelve less than her quota – and after her pitch she threw up in the backstage bathroom while the woman from Jubilant Juices held back her hair and told her that she should expect to make a loss in her

first year, everyone does, but not to worry because with Gerard as an area manager she'd be fine. Gerard was the best.

At the second largest supplement conference of the year she signed up nine subscriptions, sold nine units, and drank nine organic mojitos at the subsidised bar. She listened to the man from Traintex Fitness Bands talk about the benefits of static stretching for nine minutes before she interrupted him to ask when all the health-nut hippies had turned into white collar sphincters. He was silent for a single blissful moment before muttering, "I'm sorry about Gerard," and left her swaying on her bar stool.

A month down the line she whispered the V-word in her sleep.

"Vitamaxima," she said into the microphone, careful not to let the 't' spit or the 's' hiss. The crowd moved past her stage like pus from an oozing wound. "Vitamax...im...AH!" She pulled her tights a little higher, letting them ping back against her thighs, raising a tiny cloud of skin and dust that drifted up her

skirt. "Vitavagina?" she tried. A woman with an armful of paper-bagged free samples stopped briefly to squint at her. "For the life you dream of." The woman continued on.

"Vaginamax," she said, a little louder, with confidence, with gravitas. "For the faith you've lost. For the past you filed away. For forgotten friends and lovers you will never see again."

She reached her hands up, the mic wire trailing across her face as she assumed the position of the rapturous Vitamaxima model, making the signature V sign with her outstretched arms. After a dramatic freeze, she brought the microphone back to her lips, so close she could smell the breath of the pyramid-schemers who had pitched before her, "Your vagina deserves Vitamaxima." Shoppers began to drift towards the stage, forming a wavering line below her.

The innocuous PA piped vanilla-flavoured piano jazz over the heads of the vitamin junkies and though there was no world in which its musicality could possibly be danced to, she made a valiant effort

– an interpretive display of fertility, of vitality, of the transformative, transportive effects of Vitamaxima. When there was no more space in front of her little stage, when the audience from the live aura reading had abandoned their rainbows and joined her crowd, she brought them to a peak, dropping into a sudden crouch so that she could look her spectators right in the clearbright eyes of people who used SparkleWhite cleansing eye drops.

“Vitamaxima. Because your future is nondescript.”

A few from the front row began to slowly nod.

“Vitamaxima. Because gravity will never let you go.”

The heads of the audience became an undulating ocean of affirmation. Some began to hum a long, low mmm-hmm.

“Vitamaxima. Because you will not be content. Because it will never be good enough. Because you are too afraid of nothing to end it all.”

Her voice had dropped to a faint exhalation. At the back of the room, behind the mud wrap treatment that guaranteed the loss of three inches from thighs, waist and upper arms, she thought she saw Gerard, but when the man turned around she could see his profile was completely wrong. Too much nose. Not enough chin. A shame. The tour had banned plastic surgery two years before.

“Vvvv...” she said, and waited. The crowd’s lips began to vibrate silently.

You have to say the name. Say it and mean it.

“Vvvv...” she said, peeling layers of dead, dehydrated skin from her lips with her front teeth. The crowd leant forward as one.

The man who wasn't Gerard had gone. The stewards at the exits were talking into their walkie talkies and pointing at her. She let her hands drop to her sides. Sparks ticked between her polyester skirt and the head of the mic.

"Well," she said to her feet, "You know."

"Vitamaxima," the audience replied.

BRETT  
EL↕ZABETH  
JENK↕NS

## PILOT

This is the one where I begin. A pop  
song trumpet plays over the names of my relatives and there are action

shots of me biting my nails, or shoving  
a whole cupcake into my mouth behind the open refrigerator door.

In this episode, I am trying really hard  
not to do something, I'm learning to fall down with grace, no,

I'm telling secrets into a conch shell  
after everyone is in bed. Nobody knows yet about all

the scandal of season two, or the ways my body  
breaks in season four. The series finale is a glimmer in a glimmer

in nobody's eye, but the foreshadowing is there;  
it's in the way I butter my toast in the morning, and the way I hang

the laundry when it's breezy. Just out of range of the camera, a dog  
is hit by a car, and my tears look real.

## JERSEY DEVIL

My devil lives in the cupboard, inside a yellow mug.  
He eats Rice Chex that I purchase for him even  
when they're not on sale. My devil lives in a small flask  
I keep inside my breast pocket. My devil lives in New  
Jersey and says his love for me is eighty percent smog.  
I spend hundreds of dollars on plane tickets to go see  
my devil. I fly coach or sometimes business. My devil  
would fit nicely in the overhead compartment.  
My devil told me about the mile high club. *I came out  
with a blue foot*, he said. My devil stays rolled up in all  
the cigarettes I'm not smoking, crawls inside of worms  
he knows will be stuffed in the bottom of tequila bottles.  
How he likes to be sucked in, inhaled, to be devoured  
for luck. No, my devil loves the salt, and has a vacation  
home in all the sunken ships we haven't found yet. He  
scans the Bermuda Triangle for hats he thinks may  
come back into fashion. But if we're being truthful,  
and my devil loves when I am, I can't say  
where my devil lives; I'd be lying.

## NIGHT MATH

In evening, after the blinds are shut and the fan turned on,  
an endless computing happens in the recesses  
of my skull. It happens remotely, I needn't control it.  
I add together the bird chirps and cotton balls. In the purple  
dusk, the horses appear and ride a ferris wheel.

Now the crook of the bay is widening to receive me in a rowboat,  
Bon Jovi in the coxswain position. Only in the night math  
portion of my brain can I recall the word *coxswain*, just  
as I remember all the other things that have come to me  
and faded to these dark corners: the sweep of a grainy mustache

against my newborn forehead, the names  
my granddad had for me in the summer, and the squawk  
of a sun-hot clarinet. These quotients and products  
will evaporate by the morning, the remnants of you  
pulled up in the curtains of my open eyelids.

SOME PEOPLE WATCHING SOMETHING  
STRANGE

What ones of them did have their eyes open? They saw fire, they saw whiskey. Maybe it was a dark man with dark matters to tend to. *If something unsavory needs being done*, they say.

They all have different accounts of what they saw. One man said there was a man with no hands. One man saw the fire from the train window.

↻ARLEEN  
T↕BBETTS

we have a custom & the custom so named is fractionhood

we abandon our too-sudden bodies  
in preparation for the nothing underneath  
yet insist the dead are intact  
when we say bodies we mean migratory acts  
stuffed with flammable &  
radio silence &  
sacral shortcomings of all pretty things

we rise like science  
& sprawl oracular kingdoms of star charts  
this the whole of the island where we lagoon  
in vacant sleep & love nothing except our pelvic  
hollows & the shine  
of water moving true

## Disarticulation

*"delicate words simply dissolve when immersed in their meaning"-Christian Bok*

a sound, a word gone dead in the mouth

this demispeak  
this continual collapse  
this suffocation  
this pathogenic act

*language*

should velveteen as does shine culled from light  
should swan into spangle sounds  
should night-purr  
should hum [a bonesound slow-dancing through this  
soul suit] like marrow

*utterance* is really just another word for corrosion

AL↕ICE  
LADR↕ICK

## BARBY BITCH

guys I came up with a point  
get it do ya get it do ya get it but  
like of course you don't hello  
hello don't you want to no  
nevermind because I don't even

want to stop writing poetry  
want to stop the urges  
10 tips the government doesn't

want you to know to lose  
weight get light get it get  
into the point of point  
break the tip off the poem

## BARBY BITCH

just the tip  
of the poem just a little  
just to see how ugh it  
feels like shit I mean  
hello poetry hello how are  
you pretty dead thing

unpopular popular  
opinion on it like could it be  
over already can it be  
finished there's I mean  
honestly fuck you though  
point is plastic

## BARBY BITCH

the point plastic the point  
plastic is manufactured in factory  
settings restore to it restoration  
restoration everybody say with  
me I'll go to the beginning just of  
the poem just the poem that's as far

as I'm willing to go back don't  
lie to me tell me you'd do any  
different things stick em together  
with glue please water solvent  
because nobody knows anything so  
everything as made of meltables

## BARBY BITCH

everything mad of multiples  
no unique except on tv except  
on glee except on the gaga  
cd except on the appropriation  
machine-made in mexico  
the meachine and where it

runs to pretty plastic pretty  
girl pretty plasticine bitch  
mad of multiples conglomerated  
avoidables haha jk nothing  
avoidable about t his plastic  
wrap up get it to the point

MARY LOU  
BUSŪH↓

## Metals

You will need an electrode holder, ground clamp, metal to be welded, a chipping hammer to get rid of the slag, wire brush to clean the welds. Safety gear: helmet, welding jacket or cotton sweatshirt, pants without cuffs, work boots, gloves, safety glasses. No tennis shoes, frayed clothes, t-shirts, shirts with open pockets, or sleeveless shirts. Radio on loud: *Bodhisattva, would you take me by the hand?* Prepare the area to be welded. *Can you show me the shine of your Japan?* Remove all flammable material. If others are present, set up welding curtains. This will protect you and them. Years later, *when the razor boy comes*, will be an ear-worm cycling inside you. You should be using amperage of around 90-120 amps, although, this should be adjusted for metal thickness and electrode diameter. *Act natura, I like you don't care.* Use acetone to clean oils off the metal. *Cause I am worried about the future now.* Never use a chlorinated solvent, as the reaction when heated with a welder can kill you instantly. *Or maybe this is it?* And just because the metal is shiny, doesn't mean it is clean. Use a hard grinding disc to remove the layer of mill scale, until you are down to the bare metal. *You might live until Saturday.*

ANDREA  
KNEE↑LAND

## The Ghost

There are a lot of ghosts in the forest. A lot of ghosts of the forest. Of the forests the ghosts. The ghosts of the forest. The ghosts eat a fox in the forest. The fox of the forest. The fox of the forest in the ghost. The fox now a ghost of the forest. The forest of foxes. The forest of foxes eats ghosts. The ghost is a fox of the forest. The rest of the fox. The rest of the ghosts in the forest. The rest of the ghosts rest in the forest. The fox eats the ghosts in the forest. The fox sleeps in the forest. The ghosts are like fog in the forest. The blanket of ghosts. A blanket for the fox in the forest. The fox dreams of the forest in the forest. The fox dreams a ghost in the forest.

## The Trap

The fox sees a trap in the forest. The forest is a trap. There is a trap in the forest. The fox sets a trap in the forest. The fox lives in a trap in the forest. The fox escapes the trap in the forest, in the forest. The trap is the fox in the forest. The trap traps a mouse in the forest. The trap is the mouth of the fox in the forest. The mouse in the trap of the forest. The mouse in the fox. The mouse in the fox in the forest. The ghost of the mouse in the fox of the forest. The forest of mice. The forest of mice sees a trap in the forest. The fox is a trap in the forest. The mice live in the trap in the mouth of the forest. The fox is a mouth in the forest. The mice lick the mouth in the forest. The fox is a tongue. The mice sleep on the tongue of the fox in the forest. The fox dreams a mouse in the forest.

## The House

There is a house in the forest. The house of the fox in the forest. The fox in the forest his house. The dish in the house in his forest. The mice in the dish in the house of the forest. The ghost in the wash in the house in the forest. The fox is a tongue in the forest. The fox in the glass of the house of the forest. The wash of the tongue in the forest. The laundry of ghosts in the forest. The trees in his house in his forest. The tongue in the fox in his forest. The mice wash his face in the forest. The glass of the ghost in the forest. The fox in the glass of the house in his forest. The mouse in the pit of the forest. The glass of the pit of the forest. The fur of the fox of the mouse of the forest. The bottom dark pit of the forest. The fur of the forest. The bottom dark glass of the pit of the forest.

## How to Mount

The reader should not set too high a standard for his work. It is distressing to nick oneself while skinning out a specimen. There are many ways you will soon find of making, of discovery. This is an art form in the present tense. This is a rightful art form. This is a present, rightful art form. This is present, but is built on a dreamlike state of memory. Do you remember when discovery was an art form? Do you remember when it was possible to climb ashore like a finless seacreature, point, shoot and skin the other finless creatures? Do you remember when discovery was right? People will tell you now that it's wrong to discover out life for yourself with a bullet. People will not tell you now that it's wrong to form out art for yourself with a bullet. You are not wrong. You are right, and you are present. There are things that you will make: leather; buckskin; rawhide. There are things that you will discover: novelties, like foots. Foot novelties. You will prepare and preserve the skins of vertebrates and mount them in a lifelike manner.

## Wives and Mothers

Wives and mothers will usually agree to some reasonable compromise when tactfully approached. Negotiate a light source. Negotiate a water supply. Negotiation is a form of compromise. A compromise is not a defeat. A compromise is a transaction. A transaction is a form of payment. Wives and mothers should be involved from the start. It pays to have them involved from the start. Neatness and order simplifies the work! Basement; unused room; garage; wood shed; obsolete outhouse. Build your own structure if these don't exist. Do not do your work in a cave. A space for a man is a man made space. A space for work is a man made space. Make your own space for your own work. This is where game begets work. This is where work begets art. This is where your art transforms a bulletted skin to a lifelike ersatz of fur on wood. A man made space for man made eyes; ears; nose. Glass; perforated sheet lead; plastic; papier maché. Pronounced "paper mashay." A man made space for a man made. Your own space, with a light source and a water supply. A space for skinning, for fleshing, for making. Actual mounting work can be done in more comfortable corners of the home. Involve the wives and mothers before you prepare your tools. A man made space for a man.

## Meat Saws and Tamping Rods

You cannot do work without tools. Your hands are not tools. Better, is a fixed-bladed surgeon's scalpel, that is used by all taxidermists. Tools should be properly organized and kept sharp. Tools of discovery are sharp. Do not call it your discovery. Call it your art. Do not call it your killing. Call it your trophy. Purchase a lock for your door. Purchase a key for the lock. The key is a lock for your door. Not so fast notsofast. The so-called "blood-groove" on any knife is unnecessary, and serves only to weaken the blade. Do not make your work a work of haste. A key is not a knife, whetstone, skin scraper, needle, forcep, scissor, nipper, file, tamping rod, twist drill, meat saw, spoon, stapler, paint brush or tape measure. Every tool has a use and none of them are the same, and none of them are your hands or are your keys. Discovery takes a great deal of intervention. Not so fast this is discovery not art. This is a man making art. This is a man made art that requires a great deal of care. Do not make your work your work. Each tool is a pleasure. Notsofast. A man's pleasure is not fleeting so not so fast. The first requisite of any knife

is that it be sharp this is where the whetstone comes in. The size of the knife is in keeping of the job required of it. As with needles. With needles, if you are sewing a skin, it is a man's work. Do not use the needles of wives or of mothers. A pen knife can be used on birds. Also, wait. Also, tamping rods, hooks, scrapers, etc., made to suit each purpose as the need arises. Some of these tools may have already been mentioned. Not so fast. Don't forget the key. Patience is also a tool. Do not forget the meat saw.

DENA  
RASH  
GUZMAN

## Honey Snuff

When drones hover in a cloud over the hive, the queen takes flight  
to fuck. Drones bleed out post-coitus, the penis remaining in the queen:  
royal sperm stopper. The queen carries in her sperm-bag

5 million sperm. This sperm can stay alive for eight years.

Queen to hive to brood, perhaps only upon her death to leave.

Her death. Her death will leave with her. Another drone will die.

The drone lucky enough never to have mated is evicted  
from the hive at summer solstice. No bee can live without its colony.  
No colony. No bee. No use. No purpose. This destiny is this destiny.

## Occupants of the Hive

They do poop only outside the hive  
as a measure of dysentery prevention.  
Undertaker workers remove the dead from the hive.  
Sanitation is of utmost concern for youth  
stays close inside to the queen,  
teenage bees attending to her,  
to her young baby bees unto death  
until years later she dies or  
is killed. She only flies once.  
The oldest bees fly miles and miles  
to suckle nectar from hot flowers.

## Swarming

Scout bees, gorged on honey  
choose some little knothole tree trunk  
and flood the colony with pheromones,  
cloud to land of course all because

the queen said, of course.

**AMANDA  
BRAHŮEK**

## Giving Thanks

Mr. Miller tore the bread in two and asked what we had learned.  
My brother pulled ribbons of meat from the bone,  
and held his hands like wings defeathered to stop the grease from oozing down.

We had passed the shovel back and forth. No one was around  
to see us whack a chicken. We pinked the snow and watched the feathers dance like ghosts.  
The beak drooled molasses and the eyes, dumb as diamonds, turned toward heaven.

Before this, I would have said that chickens are bloodless beings, made of the silky flesh  
of dark-haired girls sewn together with sinew.  
Now, I would say that death smells of corn millet and diesel  
behind the Miller's shed, on winter nights, as children play.

## At the Sink

Yolk's wandering goo  
coils and sags in fat suds.  
I plunge my hands in. They  
are lost in the cloudy water. Wet worms  
strangle fingers beneath the gray.  
An exotic fish glides below—  
tinny scales slice skin: a drop  
of blood bobs in the murky milk.

He asks:  
where's your ring?

*Beside the raw chicken, below  
the unpeeled lemon, where leeches  
ooze and your tongue parts cherry flesh.*



## Homeopathic Remedy II

Grandma lowers her mass into a tub of peat moss,  
her skin is so thin that the blood crawls

along her veins like blind moles in the dark.  
She soaks for hours as Grandpa watches.

She says the peat pulls the toxins out  
like a doctor ripping a baby from the mother.

This is why Grandma smells of earth and Grandpa smiles.

D↓ANA  
T↑URKEN

The family departed, James Reed descends into madness due east of the salt flats

There were two shots left by the time I was done  
But I was not finished

The sagebrush more sparse than usual  
The sky shot up  
swallowed the shard with a hard  
fixed quiet  
I am fixing myself one too

A full mouth and belly of desert silence

I've gone as west as I can  
The tin would have bounced off the horizon  
If it were a wall  
Or unscaleable mountain

The grass loses green to straw the straw breaks to sand

I made the mistake  
of building a house  
solely of windows  
couldn't keep it dark if I tried

a saguaro is a child with spikes  
inside the trunk is a thin milk  
it flows after the first cut  
it follows the hard whack of callused palm against meat  
the whack that splits the meat  
all milk follows the same law

at night it seeps into the earth  
mimics an eastern current  
four feet of dirt to stifle the echo

I had a horse once, with two eyes and four legs  
a switch of a tail. a canvas house.

I rested my back in the spokes of a wheel  
wood split like a femur, we baptized our bruises in the cup of the axle  
a first split to save our bones

when they left I noticed my heels were cracked and bled into the dirt

Virginia Reed finds her hands

it was cold  
on the ground and it crept into our bones  
while we slept  
snuck into the hollows of our femurs  
laid against  
the rock

snow ate the marrow from the inside  
settled like a house cat

we looked at the sky like a slate  
hard and white  
hand drooping along the smooth surface of stone

the eye  
forgets  
the word for snow

my mother has turned hollow sack of unnamed sensations



in the corner of the clearing  
his left eye     a still pool of milk

not of this family

he eyes my back like a clear dry pass  
a break in the storm  
while his limbs slowly petrify   and leave

my eyes burrow through the snow  
my body will follow unrecognized

I am  
blasting at mountains  
cause I could never hit a woman

in my fist I hold  
solid packed gold  
but I grab for you in the dark  
and find soft skin  
a whiteness that  
glows like the moon

the water answers a sharp pitch  
rocks fall like streams  
then roots  
then dust  
water follows  
being just that

some things call for dynamite and for  
some my hand has a name  
and creeps towards permission

when it is not allowed  
by geography  
or law  
the hand finds a point  
to sharpen towards  
i accuse the mountain  
for it cannot reply

i imagine  
it must be a relief  
to fall away around the lode  
like linen

i fill my pockets to wade  
in the river and float  
with the weight of fortune  
despite which my foot leaves  
no mark

when you raid a mountain  
you must tiptoe  
away lest the coon  
or the fox come  
find you

i require a certain  
softness but I demand  
a prolonged roar  
in the bar  
so the returning is a  
slow stagger uphill  
a measured defiance of gravity  
an old hounds hunt  
for home  
i could break the rock  
for I was sprung from the  
earth in a knot  
but I could never strike a woman

## Circling

When the sky collapsed there was a roar that woke  
    the children  
    before dawn  
the men were running  
    barrels glinting across the plains  
        an oxidized flickering  
kicking up salt and matted fur  
black slivers of sky fell at our feet  
through the meat of our legs  
    the sky pinned  
        our skirts  
        to the wooden wagon wheels

    it took  
one look from me and the children sucked back  
    their voices and hid under the blanket  
that smelled of horse sweat  
    we do not have  
        water enough for washing  
and so we rub dirt into the linens to scrub away the filth  
we hide in the dust but  
    the desert keeps coming

if the roof tears  
    if the canvas is shredded  
we will mix the dirt with our remaining whiskey  
    and dry it in the sun  
like meat  
    which tastes of loam



V↕OLET  
VA↑E

I

Just like my love & Just like the love of her Admiral too  
Adelpha- my California sister was a hybrid with eyes as  
lost as the Xerces Blue. Something so fragile-- last seen  
fluttering in an abandoned military base-- Had been taken  
up on gossamer threads, abashed forever like the spreading  
of urban development. On those wings she had found flight  
for the first time & After winter passed the Admirals were  
ravenous, confused-- devoid of nectar & sap-- hidden in the  
alcoves of rotten fruit, feeding- thriving in the bright berries  
of spring. Many a time & oft- I had trembled in place waiting  
in humpbacked sadness like others who have longed for  
siblings to be freed of beige chrysalis arriving.

## II

O listen, I brood so easy, from sea-side to timberline.  
I had been surviving off sugar milk & honeydew secretion  
In my travels I have seen some of the finest midnight boys  
You would have loved them, gleaming of moonstone & pale fire.  
Our hips tied with silk, low-flying & thriving on starry-night birches.  
Eyelashes floating in the breeze had never landed on fingertips  
for wishes & only in his beauty had the coming of such beauty  
been detained with skin, pale translucent-- a wavering  
blue-pink spreading of iridescent madness, but oh,  
you are blue too. O sister- the willows & poplars droop  
in your absence. Deciduous forests have devised and decided--  
It was in your likeness that a soft wind blows to & fro,  
I have camouflaged myself on a speckled nose, waiting  
soundlessly in quiet anticipation. O I whisper endlessly--  
"If only you had known her..." I weep tears brined of fluffy  
molasses, The beauty that destroyed you- is now destroying me.

## III

(Once again in continuation of a spring, long, long ago)  
I am attracted to a puddler in the evening sun; The dried minerals  
gleam like Australian jades. I am wild in the shallow well,  
A sugar crystallization, a decadent quart riot I am absorbing.  
Court & mate-- with wings open, with wings closed.  
In the moist grasses or streams of the east, In the aster swamp  
milkweed of thistle and ironweed of the west-- There she lingers!  
Waiting to be freed, I allow myself to exist as menially as  
the floating spring forgetfulness will allow memory to retain--  
Winter means a creamy chrysalis child shall be birthed again.  
Tired of mimicry, tired of pinching back faded petals for the bloom  
Of fake antennas and blind-eye spots, of corrugating new born wings,  
I am freed.

VANESSA  
↻ OUTO  
JOHNSON

ver(bat)im

I am absorbent. I begin to feel your cadence in my throat. Expression.

I read a list of names from the diaphragm. Abecedarium to lung capacity. Inflect.

When I cut open the pomegranate, I am afraid it will stain my clothes, which I put very far away. The red seeds climb our bodies like ants until an ultimate swallow. Satisfaction.

Peel of exoskeleton. Your lizard eats crickets whole then sheds her skin under unnatural light. A little bit remains on the nose.

As I cut cubes of steak, I say meat is the best candy. You understand the Japanese men behind us, their plans not secret. My salad not undressed.

I twist to each spinach leaf. You respect fungi but will not eat them. You have only eaten venison in Slovenia in a park with deer. Let me. I will change that.

d(inner part)y

You sit as clear as a hologram across from me, our eyes nibbling. A fuss over your height, a grandmother quips you might be sitting on a bible. Unseen unknown.

There is always something on my facetious. Glutei maximi say no grace.

And this is not the mess of a garrison. Retired veterinarians approach a tank of fish they never serviced. Gumbo served; two occupants order.

Somewhere, a student spells *protestants* when she means *protestors*. This is not a country but citizens eating at three pushed tables. Colon colony of semicircle after semilunar.

Sniff night's last crescent. I would pull your smiles to my chin. But we are unattested to these witnesses. In their presence, we keep our feats to ourselves.

Still, our eyebrows were grown to raise. My retina to your retina, my nerve to your nerves. These cones are not occult.

Hundreds wore robes today, a redundancy of students in that same stage. Then scattered.

The grandmother misnames clouds as the Milky Way. Chicken tomato-blushed looks cardiac on your plate. I polish my own eyelids, knowing I cannot risk a touch of you tonight.

Teach me how to say *Dedalus*. You and your waxed luck. Myths were your bedtime stories.

*Labyrinth* scared you, but I, at 20, laughed at a baby on inverted stairs. You became the kind of man who goes the long way down the ski slope.

A bump on the head is worth. The opposite of an Icarus. The signs told you what to do. You did. With Dublin in the summer.

The mind itself is a symptom. It builds, thinking *I can make it across Berlin on foot. Or study the English language in Austria*. Valid and possible, but thickly odd.

That is a beauty. Pareidolia puts its eyes on you and itches. Rubs like the best cat. If a cat were named after an herb.

Tell me of that chicken dish you can make. The one with frozen butter. An analogy was once sent to its room. Without dinner. Pacing until a new feeding began, the taste of sleep to full wake.

di(splay)

I want to call a rose the other red meat. All of the thorns removed except one. Tilted to me by myself through a pinch of the stem. Then to you.

We submit to paid parking. So many meters hooded by black plastic bags. Now bus lane.

Banners for mammals. Say the synonyms for behemoth. The museums become more historic each day.

Gift shops are believe-it-or-not's, that someone may want the solar-powered trinket. A breathless half-life-size plush horse waits at the entrance. I ask if you want a photo with it and somehow am serious.

The dying mall filled with chainmail equivalents. Putting on a storefront. Pull into a cold shoulder because the food court is so '90s.

Divert into the car. To coffee shop. I should not have drunk the smoothie so rapidly. But I am pleased with how you interpret the curtains, pointing at the crinkled red signs.

RAÛHEL  
HYMAN

Dear S--

Cold feet means we made it. I think about N's poems, and how the barest words  
can move the grindstones against. It's easy. I'm struggling,  
heard her say.

I keep time to the beat of that infernal drum.

Dear S--

We know ourselves to be unreliable narrators,  
tragic for sure.

It's hard not to exist,

but ultimately everything fades to black.

Dear S--

Fortune gambols;

life is about coming to terms with life itself; the hand we're dealt.

HYMAN

I stacked my deck and watched it fall.

Dear S--

Okay,

I've created a corner and backed myself into it.

Great.

I'm so embarrassed of my hands.

Help me navigate out of this  
cut-up hell.

Dear S--

You're Bowie and I'm space girl. We had to pin our hopes on  
some such phantom,

hero or otherwise.

When the world finally ends, I'll be here waiting to be saved.

Dear S--

*Yes.* And we must keep singing towards the improbable light  
towards the gates before they  
clang shut.

In the beginning there was momentum.

There was a moment of rolling back over and over.

No, it was a lifetime.

Today I feel tenuous. I can't picture the place where I grew up.

Dear S--

I live in fear of alarms going off.  
Forgetting is a ritual.

I'm lucid in absentia.  
I don't believe I ever came back home.

And I quote: life is a series of shatterings,  
punctuated only by your voice  
in the wind.

Dance, matryoshka.

## CONTRIBUTORS

KENDRA ANNE BARTELL received her MFA from the University of Washington, Seattle, where she teaches poetry and composition. Her work has appeared in *So to Speak, Utter, The Light Ekphrastic*, and *Timber*. She also writes poetry reviews for [monologging.org](http://monologging.org).

MARGARET BASHAAR's first full-length collection, *Stationed Near the Gateway*, is due out from Sundress Publications in early 2015. Her poetry has also been collected into two chapbooks and has appeared in dozens of journals and anthologies. She lives in Pittsburgh with her son, her partner, and their kitty cat, where she edits Hyacinth Girl Press and writes for Luna Luna Magazine.

LISA MARIE BASILE edits Patasola Press and an online magazine, Luna Luna Magazine. She is the NY Editor for The Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review, an online and print literary & arts journal housed at The Johns Hopkins University, M. A. in Writing

Program. Her work has appeared or will appear in PANK, Best American Poetry blog, The Nervous Breakdown, Coldfront and other publications. The author of a few chapbooks (Andalucia, triste and war/lock), her first full-length, APOCRYPHAL, will be released in the summer of 2014. Lisa Marie also teaches poetry and is the communications manager for the Annual NYC Poetry Festival. She is a graduate of The New School's MFA program for creative writing.

AMANDA BRAHLEK has her B.A. in English from Florida Atlantic University and currently teaches as a special-learning-needs English teacher in South Florida. Her work has appeared in Coastlines Literary Magazine, and Middle Gray Magazine.

MARY LOU BUSCHI's poems have appeared or are appearing in FIELD, Willow Springs, PING PONG, Four Way Review, Menacing Hedge, Cream City Review, Pank, Thrush, Radar, among others. Her chapbook, The Spell of Coming (or Going) was published by Patasola Press (2013), and Ukiyo-e, her second chapbook, was published by Dancing Girl Press (2014).

K. JANE CHILDS is a poet and erstwhile fictioneer living in Charleston, South Carolina. Her work has appeared in Revolution House, DREGINALD, and Pentimento Journal, among others. Additional pastimes and callings include: sauteeing greens, attempting romantic interpretations of post-avant poetry, drinking whiskey sours with her life mate, and reading for [PANK].

CHLOE N. CLARK is an MFA candidate in Creative Writing & Environment. Her work has appeared such places as Booth, Sleet, Menacing Hedge, and more. She enjoys baked goods, magic tricks, and ghostlore (not necessarily in that order). Follow her @PintsNCupcakes.

RYDER COLLINS has a novel, *Homegirl!* Her chapbook, *The way the sky was now*, recently won Heavy Feather Review's first fiction chapbook contest. She has a chapbook of poetry entitled, *Orpheus on toast*, and another on the way called, *i am hopscotch without hop*.

KELLY CONNOR lives in Nebraska. Her work has appeared in Smoking Glue Gun, Black Warrior Review, Ghost Proposal, and elsewhere.

CASSANDRA DE ALBA lives in Massachusetts with two other writers and a cat who won't stop hitting her. Her work has appeared in NAP, Illuminati Girl Gang, Drunken Boat and Strange Horizons, among other publications. She's read poetry on stage in at least 12 different states, but still doesn't know how to ride a bike.

MELISSA DIAS-MANDOLY lives in Pittsburgh with her cat, Catrick Bateman. She has degrees in poetry and film studies, and currently works for the University of Pittsburgh Press. Her work has been featured in or is forthcoming from PANK, Bone Bouquet, Barzakh, Storm Cellar, and more.

SARA FITZPATRICK COMITO has written poetry for more than 30 years. You don't want to read the older stuff. The newer stuff can be found in places like Thrush Poetry Journal, A-Minor Magazine and Mad Hatters' Review. Sara and her husband are

systematically conquering their former sandlot of a Florida backyard with tomatoes, flowers, butterflies and bees. Their 13-year-old boy has recently started writing poetry.

KATHERINE FRAIN has three job titles, two of which are unpronounceable in any given human tongue. The one she can tell you about, poetry editor at the Adroit Journal, may or may not be the coolest job in the world. She will be an incoming freshman at Princeton University this fall, where she will study psychology and creative writing.

JO GATFORD wants to live on your bookshelf. Her debut novel, *White Lies*, will be published by Legend Press in July 2014. You can find her short stories and flash fiction in *The Fiction Desk*, *Litro*, *Open Pen*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and various other places. She lives in Brighton where she wrangles two insomniac children and writes swearsy social media content for a pair of rude cartoonists. More info and story links can be found here: [www.jogatford.com](http://www.jogatford.com).

TIFFANY GIBERT is a writer, editor, and reader who lives in Brooklyn. She serves on the Brooklyn Poets Board, has written essays and reviews for *The Millions*, *The Lit Pub*, and *Kirkus*, and her poetry has appeared in *The Mackinac* and *The New Poet*.

DENA RASH GUZMAN is a beekeeper. *Life Cycle*, her first collection, was published by Dog On A Chain Press in 2013.

CARRIE HUNTER received her MFA/MA in the Poetics program at New College of California, edits the chapbook press, ypolita press, and is on the editorial board of Black Radish Books. She has published chapbooks with Cy Gist Press, Dusie, Arrow as Aarow, Lew Gallery Editions, Birds of Lace, and gavia immer. Her full-length collection, *The Impossible*, was published in 2011 by Black Radish Books. Other work has recently appeared in *Armed Cell*, *Finery*, *Eleven Eleven*, *sparkle + blink 51*, and *Scud Magazine*. She lives in San Francisco.

RACHEL HYMAN lives in Detroit, where she co-curates the Motor Signal reading series. She is the co-editor of Banango Street. Recent work has been published or is forthcoming in *Illuminati Girl Gang*, *The Scrambler*, and *The Bakery*. See more at [www.rachelhyman.info](http://www.rachelhyman.info).

BRETT ELIZABETH JENKINS lives and writes in Saint Paul. Look for her work in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *PANK*, *Revolver*, *Paper Darts*, *Sixth Finch*, and elsewhere.

VANESSA COUTO JOHNSON earned her MFA from Texas State University. She is listed as a Highly Commended Poet for the 2014 Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Little Patuxent Review*, *Eratio*, *Hot Metal Bridge*, *100 Word Story*, *Word Riot*, and elsewhere. She runs [treksift.com](http://treksift.com), blogs at [meansofpoetry.com](http://meansofpoetry.com), and has a BA in both English and philosophy from Rice University.

ANDREA KNEELAND's work has appeared in more than 50 journals and anthologies. She has three

collections forthcoming: The Translations (Plain Wrap Press), the Birds & the Beasts (The Lit Pub), and How to Pose for Hustler (Civil Coping Mechanisms). More info at [www.andreakneeland.com](http://www.andreakneeland.com)

GINGER KO studies at the University of Wyoming's MFA in Creative Writing program. Her poetry and reviews have appeared in or are forthcoming from The Pinch Literary Journal, Vector Press, likewise folio, Toad, smoking glue gun, Anti-, TYPO, inter|rupture, and HTMLGIANT. She is originally from Los Angeles.

ALICE LADRICK is originally from Cincinnati, OH but is currently a transient of the midwest, having first migrated north to Oxford, OH where she earned a BA and an MA in English from Miami University, and then even norther to South Bend, IN where she has just finished an MFA in Creative Writing at Notre Dame. The next stop is still norther in Milwaukee, WI, where she will never go to school again. You can find some of her poems online if you like to google!

BRENNA LEE received her MFA from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. She is the Art and Interviews Editor of *Gesture: Press & Journal*, where she writes the 666 Interview Series. She also works as an Event Coordinator and Instructor at The Four Directions Center for Arts and Healing. Brenna lives and writes in Pittsburgh.

KRISTIN LUEKE is a Californian by birth, a Chicagoan by choice, and a writer by trade, though she's never made a penny from poetry. Her work has appeared in the *Acentos Review*, *NAP*, *Untoward Magazine*, *El Mestizo*, and elsewhere. She's the author of a chapbook, *(in)different math.*, published by Dancing Girl Press.

JENNIFER MACBAIN-STEPHENS graduated from New York University and currently lives in the Midwest. She is the author of the chapbook "EveryHerDies," (ELJ Publications, forthcoming 2014.) She has written four YA non-fiction books (Rosen Publishing) and has many poems published online and in print. While living in Iowa City, she participated in Iowa City's 2013 Poetry in Public

Project, and placed in the Midwest Writing Center's twenty-four hour writing extravaganza: The Iron Pen Contest. Recent work can be seen/ is forthcoming at The Blue Hour, Red Hill Paint Quarterly, NonBinary Review, and The Wisconsin Review. For a complete list of publications visit: <http://jennifermacbainstephens.wordpress.com/>

VICTORIA McARTOR is currently pursuing an MFA at Oklahoma State University. She was recently named a member of The Honor Club with Mutual of Omaha. Her poems have appeared in H\_NGM\_N, PANK, Hobart and others. Her fiction has appeared in Passages North and Cease, Cows. All of the above appears at [victoriamcartor.com](http://victoriamcartor.com).

AMANDA McCOY, the affectionately-labeled black sheep of her family, has been a writer since the third grade. She exists in a family of surgeons and veterinarians and teaches college English and writing to disadvantaged veterans and traditional college students. She recently finished her first novel titled *The Accident Collectors*, which examines the repercussions of an accident from several points of

view. Amanda has published non-fiction pieces about veterans in local Cleveland magazines and papers. In addition to writing and teaching, Amanda is a co-ed sport champion who is proud of her broken fingers. This past January, her flag football team won the National Title in the B Division. She lives in Cleveland, Ohio with her mutt Harper Lee.

EMILY MOHN-SLATE is an MFA candidate at the Bennington Writing Seminars and the recipient of the Liam Rector scholarship. She teaches first-year writing at Carnegie Mellon University and is co-director of the Social Change Semester. Her poems have appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Pittsburgh City Paper*, and *The Fourth River* and are forthcoming in the *Indiana Review* and the *Motif-v4 Anthology*. She was a finalist for the 2014 Indiana Review Poetry Prize and co-runner up for Free State Review's 2014 John Elsberg Poetry Contest.

EMILY O'NEILL is a writer, artist, and proud Jersey girl. Her recent poems and stories can be found in Muzzle Magazine, Paper Darts, Sugar House Review, and Whiskey Island, among

others. Her debut collection, *Pelican*, is forthcoming from Yes Yes Books in 2014. You can pick her brain at <http://emily-oneill.com>.

REBECCA AUDRA SMITH has recently graduated with a Masters in poetry from Manchester Metropolitan University. She is a regular performer at Manchester poetry nights, and is published in Loose Muse Anthology '13 and '14. She is part of QuimPerfectTense and Artipeeps Transformtions collaborative projects. She regularly runs poetry workshops and delivered one at the Suffragette Conference Manchester 2014. She is one half of Stirred Feminist Poetry collective and has self-published a small chapbook, *Wives & Mistresses*, which you can find at [beccaudra.wordpress.com](http://beccaudra.wordpress.com).

CARLEEN TIBBETTS lives in Chicago. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Coconut, H\_NGM\_N, Sink Review, dusie, inter|rupture, Iik, decomP, DREGINALD, Jellyfish, Swine, Thrush, The Laurel Review, The Pinch Journal, Big Lucks, and other journals.

DIANA TURKEN was born and raised in Los Angeles. She grew up in West Los Angeles, spending her time at the beach whenever possible. After moving to the Bay Area, she earned her MFA degree in Poetry at Mills College. Her work is focused on Cowboys, Outlaws, and the cultural history of California. She is a cable news junkie, an avid baker, and a Dodger fan. You can find her work in Slake, La Petite Zine and Bangout. She lives in Venice Beach, where she is lucky enough to be close to the ocean. Diana frequently travels throughout California in search of adventure, and during a recent tour of the decommissioned aircraft carrier USS Midway and a turn in the flight simulator, she discovered just how much she dislikes being upside-down.

VIOLET VALE is a poet, novelist & dreamer who hails from the Chicagoland area. She describes herself as a 'writer by instinct,' with a style that is often ethereal or haunting coming from her strong attachment to nostalgia and beauty. She spends her time writing and attending local poetry meets/workshops in the city and her other work can be found published in In/Words & Thistle magazine.

JASMINE DREAME WAGNER is the author of *Rings* (Kelsey Street Press, 2014), *Rewilding* (Ahsakta Press, 2013), and *Listening for Earthquakes* (Caketrain Journal and Press, 2012). Her writing has appeared in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Blackbird*, *Colorado Review*, *Indiana Review*, *NANO Fiction*, *New American Writing*, *Seattle Review*, *Verse*, and in two anthologies: *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral* (Ahsakta Press, 2012) and *Lost and Found: Stories from New York* (Mr. Beller's Neighborhood Books, 2009). A graduate of Columbia University and the University of Montana, Jasmine has received grants and fellowships from the Connecticut Office of the Arts, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Hall Farm Center for Arts & Education, Summer Literary Seminars - Kenya, and The Wassaic Project. She teaches creative writing at Western Connecticut State University.

SARAH ANN WINN lives in Fairfax Virginia. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Apeiron Review*, *Flycatcher*, *Great Weather for Media*, *Lost River Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *Rappahannock*

Review, among others. Currently, she teaches poetry in public schools through a Sally Merton Fellowship. Visit her at <http://bluebirdwords.com> or follow her @blueaisling on Twitter.