



RIPRAP 48

OBSESSION

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JOURNAL
ISSUE 48
OBSESSION

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RIPRAP LITERARY JOURNAL

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POWER



FLAMING B

DEVON BALWIT

THE HYPOCRISY ESSAY: NOBODY HAS EVER WRITTEN ANYTHING GOOD

E.L. HOWE

Nobody has ever written anything good.

This is my latest take, and I'm very proud of it. I work in a college library—a prestigious college, an ugly library—and I flip through the periodicals on my breaks. The Paris Review, The Iowa Review, The Quarterly Review, The Weekly Review, This Review Is Everyday, Oh God Oh God We Review So Much, Yelp Reviews. I flip through them, and this is what I think—

This is bad, this is terrible, boring, pretentious. These people don't know how to write, they just know how to write down words which people read and then think, wow! this is pretentious: *let's publish it* and charge twenty-two ninety-nine and pay him three dollars.

Everyone reading the Paris Review could instead buy a romance novel for half the price from Wal-Mart, one of the ones that has a cartoon cover of a tiny blonde woman and a large angry man and if you flip to an open page it says *throbbing* and *slid-in* and *rod* and you have to close it because, Oh God you're in Wal-Mart the next aisle is where they keep the LEGOs. But then these literary magazine people could put it in their cart and no one would know that it says all that because that cover is downright *cute*. And they'd get a hell of a lot more pleasure out of it than a goddamn lit journal, and it only cost nine twenty-five.

This is, of course, simply a hypothetical, because no one who purchases real good pretentious literary magazines would ever darken the automatic doors of a Wal-Mart. They'd have a good reason for it: they'd say that Wal-Mart is anti-union, that it's a huge polluter, that it is a case study in the problems of Capitalism and Monopolies and Other Words people who went to fancy liberal arts colleges like to bandy about. They could pull up Wikipedia, as I did, for examples. Did you know they release 15.06 million metric tons of CO2 into the atmosphere a year? Did you know poor people shop there, and I'm afraid of poor people? And God Forbid we bring up animal rights.

I write this, as any good and non-existent writer does, out of hypocrisy. I've got a tab open with a half-filled submission form to the Paris Review: that's why I was reading it during my break. I wanted to say in my cover letter: 'ah, yes, of course, my writing fits your wants and needs and pretentiousness perfectly, because last month a woman wrote something about sexual harassment and the month before someone wrote something about birdwatching and I wrote about a house that is actually heaven if you can even believe it.'

And of course that hypocrisy extends to wherever you read this: I don't want to self-publish—I am terribly pretentious, so I will inevitably never self-publish this online. Unless it's been published in some magazine for years and by then I'm very well regarded and I put it on my blog or something and say 'ah, hah, look at the good old days when I was poor and might even consider shopping at Wool-Mahrt' (because of course by then I would have a snooty British accent as all prestigious writers should.)

So I plan on submitting this to a number of journals or magazines, probably also pretentious ones but pretentious ones which have a tiny sense of humor; or, at very least, a sense that by accepting this, by publishing it in their very own pages, they will appear to have a sense of humor and will save themselves from critique by saying 'ah but look at this author, she lived in her father's basement when we published her, and she made fun of us!'

So no, of course, this is not *good*. The piece in the next tab which I will submit to the Paris Review as soon as I finish writing this is not *good*. Nothing that's ever been in the Paris Review is *good*. And yes, this includes Adrienne Rich and Jack Kerouac and my dear James Baldwin and all the other people listed on their history page who I am not pretentious or educated enough to know. Art is dead but was it ever really alive? I think art's been dead since the day it wasn't born and we've all just been saying shit, throwing it at a moving target that some powerful omnipotent guy is throwing around like pizza dough for shits and gigs.

Before I wrap this up, I feel like I should tell you: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is staring at me. He stares at me literally every day—I'd say he's obsessed. I'd report him to HR but he always stays on that wall, so I figure he's harmless. God only knows he's harmless; he's rich and dead, and living on the wall of a college library—prestigious college, you remember, ugly library—so what better things does he have to do than stare at librarians and college students all day.

In conclusion, as I was always taught to end an essay, and then told very clearly that it was terrible form,

I think that what I am actually upset about is not pretentiousness, it is the fear that I will never be good enough to also be pretentious and look down on others. And also maybe it's the fear that I will, someday, want to be pretentious. I'm a mess when it comes to forming solid opinions.

In second conclusion, I love art. I love bullshit and I hate rich people and I hate art and hate bullshit and love rich people and pretentiousness and the Paris Review and romance novels from Wal-Mart that are essentially erotica and ugly libraries and prestigious colleges and writing and whatever journal/magazine/place this ends up in, and with that I take my bow, because God only knows I'm not gonna be the first to write something good.

ROY GEE

OLIVIA FIGUEROA

An incident occurred at Stop - I don't -
With one of those who see red and go,
like hungry children in front of a slice of cherry pie
Who stamp their little feet down rewing for a piece
 before they realize it isn't time,
And mother's hand comes down on their fat
 outstretched little tongues
And yells *Stop!* like
the man who yelled at me in the car
he called me an ass and when he saw I had tits too he
 added bitch and offered one finger,
wagging it out of his window like a thin pink little tongue
 looking for something sweet in the sky,
and his bald head was red as an angry child, watching a
 smoggy sunset, with pie all over its face.

And I was half tempted to respond with a few of my own
 fingers, and to race after him and rip his stem off,
 but then he'd be a bitch too and: we don't want him.
Besides he's stuck, like a whole cherry lodged in the
 throat of a greedy eater,
it's all about being pushed out again and he's having
 trouble and it isn't my job to pull him out,
My girls are watching from their carpal balconies through
 the squint in my stomach and they're rooting for
 fruit, fruit, fruit!

They don't know the end yet, nor does he, the script is
being written like a recipe
all the while the increasing heat reduces the ovens
hospitality
and they are all going to be flushed out of the theater in
a red thrush
and seen out of the big opening at the bottom of the
building, never to be baked,
the vacant rows no longer wet with blushed breath and
moist with anticipation of the show to come.

It may always end this way for us, nothing red to serve up
with a smile and slice,
I've chosen an impotence, a finger, no batter.
The secret ingredient to be kept from me, by lifestyle.
A difference in taste perhaps. I see green.

WORSE THAN A DOG

ALEJANDRA RIVAS

You'll never see me again. I kept repeating this mantra. Like a prayer. Willing it to happen. To take effect. Like a gas-limiting bill that toys with the senate. Flirts with a democrat during midterms. From you, I'd get the same giggle a defeated environmentalist would let out at the promise of a preservation bill. You always knew. You thought me incapable of it.

It takes three years to drive yourself into insanity. I know this statistic well. It takes a calendar year and then some to find you've completely lost it. Any semblance of a person you once were. All it takes is tethering yourself to a man more than twice your age. Three years to forget what once was. Those years, he made of me a coroner. Those years I became a paleontologist.

All he touched was sacrosanct, personal artifacts. Small tokens he gave me were relics no more revered than a catholic would the finger of Becket. It was all moved by him. For him. I ached for him, painstakingly. A festering itch I couldn't scratch. His bolstering laugh, its smooth crescendo. The way the low street lights doused his side profile at night, I'd trace the outline of his nose with tender precaution. I have loved men, but none have carried the weight of his. He was my favorite mirror to hold. The heft I longed to have tower over me. I imagined him breaking me, crushing me, pulverizing me every time I saw him. And when I went a month without seeing him, I nearly lost it. I spent much time recovering from that month. He was my spark for it all. My brain was a lexicon of everything he'd ever said.

When misplaced, love becomes a parasitic thing. It becomes a nasty blue-colored bulge that pesters the skin. When allowed to fester, the pus that fills the love-sick thing bleeds onto everything. It all becomes awkward and misused. You can find it in the longing hold I'd take over my steering wheel, imagining I was holding the nape of your neck- running my fingers through your silver ringlets. With no place to let it rest. It ate at my insides. And fell from me. Oozed onto anything and everything I touched. The handle of the door, how I would let my hand linger on it. The bag you used to carry, I'd caress in a way one would the arm of a lover. I used to let my eyes trace over your body, shamelessly. It was all wrong. How does one free oneself of a parasite? Of an infection.

That year. The year that I waited for longer than I ever should have, everything was a sign. Somehow inching me closer to you. I became a heretic, a lunatic going on about their insurmountable connection to the divine. It was all a sign from the universe, or god. Or god speaking to me through the universe. Whichever came first. They tried to talk to me, I thought. In ways to make what they were saying digestible. Palatable to a girl of 22. I was in a continuous conversation with myself and the universe and god and you. We never stopped speaking. I tried to decipher it all.

I was to blame for every ecological fluctuation that year. Every spike in heat, every unpredicted scatter of rainfall- all my doing. The roadkill on my drive to work. This is god speaking to me, I'd think. This is God telling me to stop. To let him go. To turn around before my hands get scars on them. Before burns go from second to third degree. There was unusual fog that July morning, I did it. There was an earthquake in the city you live in, I caused it. The heat wave we had in February that year,

can be traced back to me. God gave me a toothache and patience.

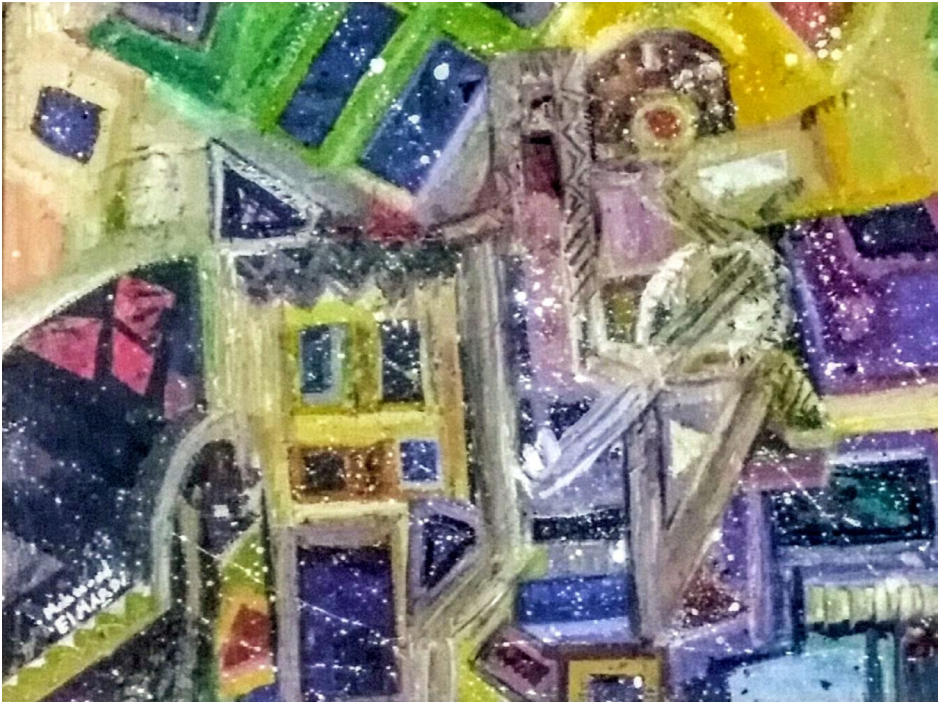
I'd have moments of sobering realization periodically. Where I'd swear it all off. This was the last time, I'd say as I would watch you drive away. I'd become weird and awkward, sighing all the time. Wondering if you've eaten lunch, if you were sleeping enough. Lingering over the objects you'd touch in passing. I cleaned your computer. Love will find you with a stained book in one hand, while you clean the laptop of a man twice your age. You made a relic of my pencil. But I kept telling myself: this is better than nothing. I can live like this, I know how to make a life out of reduced oxygen.

I'd find myself begging, "please still be there," just to prove to myself that I could refrain. And I could never tell who I was asking. You, or god. I'd rationalize: recently, I tend to conflate the two.

It was easier to quit smoking than it was to stop seeing my blue-eyed "fix." It came in a spring epiphany. Small bouts of reactionary-rage swelled and lulled over the course of years, wafting over me. This was not new to me, but this one was different. And I was right. It was the last small jab I needed before I was level-headed again. A normal person. I had grown to fear myself. The contorted vessel of a person I'd become. At the sight of myself. The mirror showed a girl who was proudly boasting a seething smile full of bile, and pustules on her forehead. All signaling, "I love him, look!" When my eyes saw him for what he was, not what I saw. Turns out, I have an insurmountable skill for translation.

No man is all that you were once. I am telling myself, and trying. I had made a martyr of myself. Never make a man

of god, or a god of man. No man is a mountain.



ECHOES OF THE LAND

MAHMOUD EL MARDI

A FIELD GUIDE FOR CHASING FAME

SAMANTHA SONET

As a child, consume unhealthy amounts of media and dream of being famous like the actors and singers on TV and in magazines. People fawning over you and begging for your autograph.

You think how easy it must be to act because it's just like pretending. Audition for the school musical. You're cast as an extra. No big deal. Everyone has to start somewhere. Spend hours after school every day rehearsing. Realize that remembering the choreography and where to go when is harder than you expected—and you don't even have any lines. During opening night, be a step behind everyone else and trip over your flared jeans trying to catch up. Want to lie down and disappear. Decide that acting is not your thing.

Try singing instead. Sing all the time. You think you sound pretty good in the shower. Tell everyone you know that you want to be a famous singer, and when they ask if you're any good, affirm confidently, but humbly decline their requests to hear you sing. Daydream of wowing a crowd with your voice and being discovered. Stare out the car window while a sad song plays on the radio and imagine you're in a music video.

Continue to only sing in the shower where the water covers your voice from your family. In May, sign-ups for the annual talent show open. Your oldest friend, Kelli, urges you to sign up for a slot: "Come on, Dana. If you're ever gonna be discovered, you have to sing in front of people." She's got you there. So you write your name down on the clipboard hanging outside the auditorium.

Smile demurely to yourself as you think about all the time you'll write your name on papers and pictures being thrust toward you by your adoring fans. Practice your autograph. Cover all your notebooks with your name.

The day of the talent show, feel too nervous to talk to anyone. Sit silently through class, lunch, and on the bus. Dress up in your favorite outfit to feel more confident. The music teacher running the event announces your name. The walk to the microphone feels like an eternity. The silence is deafening. Someone coughs in the crowd. The music starts. You get through the first verse unscathed, but you trip up at the chorus. Your voice cracks. You try to push forward, but your attention is drawn to the sounds of people shifting in their seats, and before you know it, you're running off stage in a panic.

When you're 8 or 9 and riding in the backseat as your dad drives you to—dance or the dentist or baseball practice—it doesn't really matter, that's not the important part, someone in a red pickup comes up behind the car. You see that familiar look in your dad's eyes as he glares into the rearview. Your car slows down, and dad's full attention is on the pickup truck. He mumbles under his breath, and a wicked sneer spreads across his face. Eventually, he pulls over, exits the car, and walks over to the driver, hopping down from the pickup. You can't make out what they're yelling at each other, but before you know it, they're rolling on the ground. It takes other drivers to separate them. Your dad silently reclaims his post behind the steering wheel, covered in dirt, drying blood, and bruises. You shrink in your seat, fearing that his anger might make you its next target. This isn't the first time, but it's the first time you most vividly remember.

You change your focus to athletics. Join the high school volleyball team and a travel team. Feel like you don't fit in with your teammates. Realize that you can't jump for shit and that to become better requires a lot of sweat. Slowly remove yourself from this environment. Disappear.

Question whether fame is worth it or even possible at this point. Give up. Graduate. Go to college. Get an office job. Get married. You're not worth fame and should just have a normal life.

Sink deeper into depression. Hate everyone. Explode with rage. Follow people when they wrong you or piss you off. Cut you off? See where they're going. Give you a dirty look? Fuck them. Tailgating? Slow down.

Go the distance when you end up with the asshole who cut you off when you were the only cars on the road in the back parking lot of a rundown shopping center at 1 am. Grab the knife that has been sitting in the glove compartment for a year after the carjacking near your job. Approach the other car without hesitation—your father's blood coursing through your veins. Plunge your knife into his chest so quickly that he can't finish his sentence. "What the f—"

Feel more alive than you have in a decade. Drive home calmly. Sleep like a baby.

Watch the morning news. Overhear coworkers talking about it. Listen to the radio. Everyone is talking about you. Calling you a monster. A sicko. But they're talking about you.

The police have no leads.

Your kills become more vindictive. You allow yourself to completely feel your rage as you violently slay your victims.

As all your victims' bloody remains are found in or near their car, you're quickly dubbed the Road Rage Ripper—a name you absolutely adore.

You live for this feeling until anonymity eats at you and you yearn for people to know your name. One morning, after a truly gruesome murder—you bound their hands to the steering wheel where they remained after you sliced through your victim's wrists—the papers were alerting the public to the increase in brutality of the city's most recent serial killer. You are on cloud nine the entire day. The police chief gives a press briefing that evening. She pleads with the public to keep a sharp eye out for anything that might point them toward their killer. They still don't have any leads. To someone who lives for the kill, this would be good news, but to you, who yearns to be recognized, photographed, and interviewed, this news sucks.

Toss and turn that night, unable to rid your mind of the taste of fame that's slipping through your fingers. At 2:00 AM, sit down at your desk and write a letter to the local paper. You even sign it RRR (Road Rage Ripper). Letter after letter and murder after murder without the recognition you deserve, your rage becomes unbridled. An electrifying jolt shoots through your body every time your pseudonym appears in the news.

Despite the increase in brutality, you soon fall out of the news cycle. Your kills are no longer breaking news, and your letters begin to collect dust in the evidence room at police headquarters. It's like they've figured out

what drives you and are trying to lure you out of hiding.

But what would that do for your reputation? Years pass, and with every new ailment, your disillusionment grows. You're just another automaton in this gray machine. Too weak to kill. And too old to make it any other way.

They make movies about the Road Rage Ripper and speculate who it could be. Online sleuths investigate what the police missed, yet no one points to you.

You tell the nurse at the home that you're the Road Rage Ripper, and she responds, "Of course you are, Ms. Dana," as she helps you into your chair to head to breakfast. You die later that night, having confessed one last time to your crimes and once again being overlooked.



UNTITLED

TETIANA YATSECHKO-BLAZHENKO

I ♥ NY

FINN HOLMGREN

1.

You say you don't.
There's not nearly enough space
for your music room.
Grand piano dreams don't quite
fit in a shoebox studio.
Shoved between two weeks
of takeout and dirty boxers
that greasy haired boys
leave behind.
But you'll wear the shirt anyway.

2.

Once, after saying
your name like a prayer
that never made it past
the backs of my teeth,
I ask you what you wanted.
You tell me about rooms,
and the people
you would fill them with.

3.

Now, picture this:
I am standing against a wall.
It's blue.
No, it's green. Forest green.
You wanted forest green walls.
I am standing against
a forest green wall,
I'm laughing.
No, you're laughing.

You wanted rooms with laughter.
So maybe we are both laughing.
Yes, we are.

4.

The other day I swear
I saw you in a car
outside of town.
Driving fast,
2011 Benz a royal blur.
I rolled the window down,
shouted your name.
I think the wind threw my voice
into all the wrong ears.
Keep on driving.

5.

I keep dreaming about
your neck.
The inky darkness
of the cross tattoo
you hide with your hair.
I wonder if the dream
is supposed to be about
you or God or
maybe you as God?
I think I am trying to say
I love you in the way
I love a God I'm not sure
I believe in. That is,
when I stand before you
I will kneel and whisper
only you, only you.

6.

There's paint all over
your white t-shirt, now
it just says "I ♥".
I'm laughing because
We both know you don't.
Now the walls are cerulean
because once you met
a boy with cerulean eyes
and his boxers
are still in the corner.

7.

Have I told you yet
about the time my dad,
crashing through trees,
asked me how
I will find love now,
his car speeding against forest.
Green splotches make an ellipsis,
I suppose that was my answer.
He says he's just worried
I'll be lonely out here.
Keep on driving.

8.

You confess into my ear
that you are lonely out here.
Voice real quiet,
afraid the foundation
would collapse
if you said something
and meant it.

9.

You ask me what I wanted,
in a dream that is.

There's a cross nailed
above the window and
the door is ochre

because once I met
your eyes and
now everything is ochre.

Your shirt says "I"

in case I forget you,
you're laughing because
we both know I won't.

You ask me what I wanted.

I kneel.

BITER

EVAN FANDREI

If there's anything to say,
it's to keep your distance
from a biter.

Though they may seem like a normal lover,
the danger is not in the passion
like it is
in the teeth.

For them, the extension of an arm,
tilt of the head, or gentle grip
of the waist is nowhere close
to enough.

It might seem vain or like
a childish game at times,
but I promise you they simply
aren't looking beyond an excuse
to chew.

Every word you say is a different flavor.
Your existence is a siren
and at times
it's the only sound they wish to hear.

I'm sure it feels unbelievable
for them to want anything more
out of you than
just a mouthful,
but you've yet to hear the craziest,
most preposterous part.

They're probably not even hungry.



MY BUGS

VERONICA GUTIERREZ

Passion



Voyeur

Wym Green

Fractals

Daniel Putney

"If you're going [to] hell, keep going."
—Winston Churchill, *sic*

Twinless (2025), dir. James Sweeney

I learned, at an early age, obsession was the key to a man's attention. If you talk to him about his favorite football team, the time he backpacked across Europe, all the misses in his love life, he'll look at you. Really meet your gaze. If you let a man inside you, let a man inside you, man inside you, he'll say, "I love you." And he means it, if only for now.

My father, now a decade dead, was primarily interested in my intelligence; he possessed a Mensa-level IQ and wouldn't let anyone forget it. High school: my 5.0 weighted GPA. The subconjunctival hemorrhage junior year because I was a "hard worker." The trophies I brought home from speech and debate tournaments. As long as I performed, I was seen. As long as my "life choices" were invisible, my body was material, if only in ephemera.

An expert in transference, I became an adult slut. A connoisseur of patency, orifices agape. I've given away my body as if I owned it. Every story begins like so: Man approaches bar. We talk. [He's divorced? His fiancée left him at the altar? His wife is out of town?] Dance, sweat. Closer. The inevitable kiss. Cocaine in the restroom. Making the Uber driver uncomfortable. A body meets a body meets a body meets. Dark bedroom. Goodbye. No hello.

Call Me by Your Name (2017), dir. Luca Guadagnino

I stayed with a man for almost nine years because I thought he was the only one who could love me. It doesn't matter what we want; that's romanticized garbage from books and TV shows and films and. I settled and believed it my limit. Insecure, has daddy issues, is brown, uses they/them pronouns, "too smart for [their] own good," an Aries. I said butterflies were a lie—it's about being good roommates. You see, we have a house, three dogs + two cats, a life a life

But no real conversations. No growing together. I failed him, and the ex-Catholic in me lives every day post-breakup as penance. I don't get to have reciprocity; I'm an addict. I obsess and send unsolicited Facebook messages in New Orleans and bring all the gifts and stalk his Instagram and loop conversations in my head to find hermeneutical nuances (the true takeaway of an English Ph.D.) and immolate. Each man in the after is proof of insanity.

Red, White & Royal Blue (2023), dir. Matthew López

The British detour. I knew he was the one; I felt it. No matter I was healing from sexual assault two months prior. No matter the intellectualizing away my addiction. We laughed about the shitty men in our pasts and believed ourselves different. He told me about his London drag queen ex and I thought I could be her. He loved androgyny. He loved trans porn. My dresses, fishnets, lipstick, boutique earrings, shared closet with my mother, soft soft body. We fucked four to five times a day and called it amor. "I love you, too," he always lied. Me, desperate, no touching the truth in my gut—what butterflies, only Icarian moths. I fell in love with delusion,

the happiest I ever was.

Brokeback Mountain (2005), dir. Ang Lee

Recently I grinded on a Mormon at the local gay bar. He was thrilled at our synchronicity in the go-go cage—but no kissing. I knew that already. Celibate eleven months to heal, going to therapy for my sex and love addiction (+ cocaine and ketamine), and still a body remembers. I've memorized loss of personhood, the pyre of flesh I become. Because he's looking. He looks. Always my father's eyes.

In the arms of a Mormon, I don't feel shame. In the arms of a Mormon, I need not reflect inward, the common denominator, desperation gusting backward any real real. No longer the flawed human, the captain of self-dissolution. I learn his family name, the name of the street nine-year ex and I lived on, town legend, "beloved by the community," and name my own becoming: Hail Mary.

So semi-erection meets damp denim. So our sweat cries indelible on the cage bars.

Supernova (2020), dir. Harry Macqueen

I know I love too hard, expect too much. Like not being an hour and a half late to a date, like wanting to make defined plans.

There once was a teacher, somewhere in the middle, segue into obliteration. I thought he saved me. Nine years of lying to myself meant I could arrive at his doorstep. I looked past the living with an abusive ex of twelve years. The abusive ex's (early forties) young

boyfriend who was groomed at seventeen. I played the game, played it well, played it through my car being stolen and vitriol about me and no dates no plans and the cosmic hole widening in my chest. As the quiz bowl captain during high school, the valedictorian, the person who's mastered worth through external accomplishment, the model for model minority myth, I come, came, will have come to win.

But.

All of Us Strangers (2023), dir. Andrew Haigh

Too much [for him], so drifts into the ethereal. I'm ashamed [again].

I wish I were never "gifted and talented," that competition weren't my birthright. SLAA talks about entitlement to love and sex. I asked God why nobody loved me and believed His absence to mean a forthcoming. "It gets better." I prayed and prayed and prayed and. I understand. Oversimplification, teleological thinking, narrative building—epistemic tools to construct the world around us. I braid together vignettes and call it a story. I say I'm tough because of the death, the rape, the faggot faggot faggot.

In the end, really, it's theodicy. Except I'm playing good and evil. All parts—daddy's bo[i] and teacher's pet and "good little slut" and cum stains on my dress and promises forgotten. I confess, I confess.

Only one question left: Can I save me?

I Am Nothing But Yours

Jay Shifman

I devour
 the way you walk
 the way you stand
 the way you
 shimmer

can you see my lust
how it lumbers
how it violates my vision
and slanders
my stability
you stole my common sense
and held me
 shivering in your grasp

I beg you please
do not set me free
make me suffer make me weep make me yours
own me
 like I am nothing
 like I am less
 like I exist
 only for you

oh heavenly queen
mistress of manipulation
goddess of sin
 you control my every destiny

you
 hold my life in your warmth
 my being in your wetness
 my future in your revolution

What Love Is

Matt Zambito

"[...] two amorous donkeys who were separated after an outcry over their lovemaking have been reunited at a zoo in Poland. The couple, together for [ten] years, got into trouble when mothers expressed outrage that children had to witness their mating."

—Vanessa Gera, *Associated Press*, 9/25/14

The children didn't *have* to witness anything:
you don't *have* to take your children to the zoo.
Love is not taking your children to the zoo,
because zoos incarcerate animals in camps
and call it love. And while it's rare for poetry
to include travel tips, even a donkey can't
hump a donkey in Poland in peace, so be sure to
steer your neocon uncle clear of vacation
disappointment. Love is not hating a whole
group of folks because of nonsense they believe,
so, let's just say that I have a lot of *like* in my heart.
I save my love all day for a particular her,
and then we breathe together in the same room
for hours while other things seem to happen,
but shared air matters. They have human names,
these equines, besides the ones they bray
one another's way: Antosia and Napoleon.
We were assigned appellations as if the same.
All four of us remain caged by skin and ribs
and skull, doomed to identical escapes, and if
I can't love her in the next life, it's not for me.

The Art of Avocado Picking

Alexis Ragan

You must not be in a rush
to feel the outer rim and sense
any softness at all which is
a good sign you must not pick
too soon the fruit has to be allowed
to take its time ripening there
in piles hasty eyes pass by
before taken home in a bundle
or sometimes one to be cut
in two for toast in the morning
for lovers who waited to meet.

Hands, yours.

Olivia Figueroa

Hands spilling fingers trickling down your face from
your eyes wafting across the bridge of your nose to
your lips that ask for hands whose nails polished or
unpolished color
your closed eyes red or peach or white or assiduously
brushed blues.

Hands that comfort your sniffing nose and rub
your open throat and gather up the nets of your hair and
cast them out again over
your shoulder into the deep abyss of bedsheet bliss
looking for the next big catch like
your stash of unmentionables that you keep in the
drawer beneath the waters,

Hands that select a ruffle or a series of buttons to trace
along
your chest, ready to be filled with all the treasures that
these hands possess,
your bones shivering at the sight of Hands whose fingers
run rampant down the dock from
your solar center to the skin constellation that gives to
the celestial fish who breathe milk & hum

your heartbeat
Hands chasing sweat beads, an ode to gravity, or sources
of
your sound, echoes from caves and the drawings we see
in text but now in flesh, in flesh
your symmetrical hands that meet mine, mingling when
grabbing for
your jar of fancy plant juice, brushing them under hems
and holding them interlocked in pockets,
believing it to be more comfortable than walking arm in
arm. Being right. Being always right.

Apapachame¹

Marilyn Ramirez

I concern myself with love because it is beneath me :
meters deep,
a cenote swims in our eyes to compose a new crystalline
of memory. On
the Chetumal-Puerto Juárez, a tree shaded in pink
hammocks
tells us to slip into each other's mouths, or mouth into
each other's

ears. Both are fine ways to realize touch is a beam, gaze is
a web – listen
what I mean. In the bus, I dream we are our neighbors
back home,
cupping each other to our wall to become you & me :
you & me sutured
eternity, forty days of sun and stars, swaddled clouds
warm with words.

Apapachame² : this is the word I want the most –

Still You

Matt Zambito

Vegan me could go for a *foie gras* sloppy joe,
or gas-station turkey jerky,
or even conveyor-belt sushi in Fayetteville
with you! Oh, yes, with you
by my side, awful food is only awful
later. My mind's lone multitask
keeps you in my heart-fueled imagination
while anything goes: Canada
rightfully balking at a peace accord
with Walmart; an earthquake breaking
the imagination concentrations of daydreamers
praying to comprehend a chemical
combination they're close to creating, one
so seismic it'd do away with a disease
the public knows from the news; thirty-thousand
cows mooing at the Moon; and still
you, just being your you-ness. I could go
for precisely two days without you
saying my name before ending up exactly
as Three-Mile-Island as Three Mile Island,
so why *would* I? I can hear you
announcing me into the Olympic stadium now,
a slightly-saggy runner in the race
to understand your improbable love
before we kiss this dimension goodbye.
Before we kiss this dimension goodbye,
we need to think of something new to say to
the rest of them, and the so-and-sos,
and every-distracting-one else
when they ask how it is
we bumped binaries online, and walked into
a martini bar one Cinco de Mayo,
and turn the rest of the world into the joke.

Untitled

Evan Fandrei

I wanted you
to be elastic for me,
to stretch,
bend,
and twist
into the perfect lover.

I wanted,
for a while,
to uncouple my jaw
so as to take the widest bite
out of how you used to
make my days
feel like everything
and make
everything
feel like nothing.

From the Walkway

Daniel Garcia

When Benji had finally convinced himself to get out of bed and go for a walk, it was already a quarter past noon. He'd promised himself all week that when Thursday came around, he would make the most of his one day off, wake up bright and early, and go for a couple laps around his apartment complex before eating a bowl of oatmeal for breakfast. He was trying not to beat himself up over the fact that he was already starting to slack off on the first day of his new exercise routine.

Benji was an everyman type of guy. He worked six days out of the week at an Italian restaurant that paid him less than minimum wage. His boss didn't particularly like him, and his coworkers got along better with each other than they did with him, but Benji enjoyed the bustling of the kitchen and felt proud when people would compliment the food he sent out, so he considered the restaurant a place where he belonged. Outside of work, he lived with a pleasant woman named Leslie. She worked long hours as an English teacher at the local high school and was quite fond of her students, though she wasn't any of their favorites. They read challenging, yet inoffensive material, like *The Stranger*. She would stand in front of her class and say, "Now, was Meursault being prosecuted for his actions or for how he acts?" and all her students would stare at her like little porcelain cats. She used to tell Benji that she wished the kids cared more; he would say that if she were his teacher, he would come to class prepared every day.

Her schedule was opposite to his, since he worked mostly afternoons and late nights. Yet they made the

the most of the little time they had together. Sex was reserved for late nights or early mornings when he still smelled like garlic from the kitchen, and when she had to be up in a few hours for work. Yet, they both looked forward to it.

Though they were more like passing ships in the fog of night, they left notes for each other around their apartment.

"You make my heart go boom. And you have a nice butt," he'd write in chicken-like scratches on a Post-it that he'd leave for her on the counter for when she got back from work.

"Your eyes are my moon, your gaze my guiding light," she'd leave for him in neat handwriting on a Post-it on her side of the bed for him to wake up to after she left for work.

Benji never fully understood what she meant most of the time. Her notes were a little too flowery for him, and he always had to remind her that English was his worst subject. But her words made him feel special, even though he understood them no better than he understood Shakespeare. He never told her this, and she wouldn't find them until after he passed, but he kept her notes in his wallet because it made him feel close to her on those long days in the kitchen.

They shared a lease on a one-bedroom apartment at the Idyll Homes complex. And even though they paid more than they could afford, and though their walls were paper-thin so they could always hear their neighbors fight (and they were always fighting), and though the facilities that were promised to them on their initial tour

He saw her as his woman. She saw him as her man. Together, they saw a family with two girls and a boy, a house, a dog, and a literature-themed restaurant called 'Omlet' (a reference she had to explain to him), where he would only serve her favorite breakfast foods, and where she would host a book club every night in the month.

When Benji got back from the doctor and told her the scale read 336, he said he wanted to start taking better care of himself.

"For you," he told her. "Even if it means I have to give up powdered donuts."

"No," she said. "Do it for you."

Her voice upset him. He didn't understand why she would reject him. But he also knew she wasn't trying to hurt him. That night, he made himself a salad with two hard-boiled eggs, a pinch of mozzarella cheese, and a few glugs of balsamic instead of ranch, and told himself that come Thursday, he would start his new fitness regime, and would do it for her, even if she asked him not to.

Of course, there weren't any clouds in the sky, and the sun was especially hot. But he didn't mind. The apartment walkway was much more beautiful than the cramped walls of the kitchen at Giulano's. Besides, Leslie would be proud. So even though his feet were already starting to hurt, this was a pleasant change of pace.

He walked by the jacaranda trees, appreciating their purple glow. He said hello to the ducks that drifted along in the complex's creek that ran along the walkway—he had lived at Idyll Homes for a year and two months, and he never knew there were ducks. He thought about what

he'd eat when he got back, maybe those Pop-Tarts in his pantry. *No, how 'bout an apple?*

He saw his neighbor, Robbie, was out for a walk too, with his teacup schnauzer. He was approaching on the walkway with his head down, looking at his phone.

"Hey, Robbie, tell Jenny I said hi."

"Benji? Holy hell," Robbie said. "Where've you been?"

"Been around," Benji said. "Here and there, I suppose."

"No shit. I didn't know you were still here," Robbie said. "I see Les around all the time, but you- I assumed you were gone."

"Yup, still here. Was someone trying to get rid of me?" Benji said.

"No, no. I just- you know what I mean. It's good to see you, is all. I'm glad you're still around. Where you off to?"

"Nowhere. Just out for a walk."

"Hey, man, good for you. Maybe next time I'll go with you. I'll bring Jenny. You bring Leslie."

"Sounds good. Take care, Robbie."

"Benji," Robbie said. "Take care of yourself, buddy."

"I'm trying," Benji said.

Off he went, thinking about how good he felt. He didn't think much about the shock on Robbie's face. He figured he was just excited to see an old friend. Benji was already telling himself that he was going to get rid of the mint chip sitting in his freezer and dump the soda in his fridge; he didn't care how much of it was left.

He waved to the baby who was looking out the blinds of the second-floor window, and tsk, tsk, tsked to the cats that played behind the green gate on his neighbors' patio. There must've been a slight incline, or the sun was getting hotter, because as he stepped, he felt his heart working harder.

He pushed for a few laps, and when he thought he was done, he went for one more. He wanted to tell her he walked for ten-thousand steps on his first day, and that next Thursday he would do more. He pushed through the knot that was starting to form in his chest and told himself that when he got home, he was going to look at Buzzfeed's top ten healthy dinner ideas list and would cook the one he thought she would like most.

Home was just around the corner. He was thinking to himself that actually a scoop of ice cream wouldn't hurt on a hot day like today.

Then he took another step, his heart worked even harder. His chest grew unbelievably tight. The California sky was bright and sunny. The Idyll Homes complex looked blindingly serene. He clutched at his chest and fell to the ground.

Benjamin Ramirez Jr. was experiencing a lethal heart attack. He would die from heart failure by the time he landed on the walkway. He would not feel the impact of

his face hitting the cement or the cuts on his right cheek that he would sustain from the fall. His neighbors in the Idyll Homes apartment complex would not find him until seven minutes after he had fallen, and by that time, he would have been dead. The EMTs, Eric and Rochelle, who would arrive first on the scene, would attempt to resuscitate Benji, but to no success. His fiancée, Leslie, would be notified an hour and thirteen minutes after his passing, in the last 30 minutes of her sixth-period English class, and she would rush out of the room, leaving her students in silent confusion. His boss, Antonio Giulano, would curse him out for three days for no call, no showing, before being told that Benji, his salad and appetizer boy, had passed. His coworkers would not be given the rest of the day off. His father, Benjamin Ramirez Senior, would be notified, and he would hang up the phone without saying a word.

As he fell, Benji didn't think about those long days he worked in the kitchen where the ticket orders flowed from the machines like water. He didn't think about how content he felt behind his station serving up calamari and mozzarella sticks for others. He thought very little of the compliments he received on his cooking after making the staff dinners, and even less of his coworkers, who always talked about starting their own restaurant together.

He didn't think about those days as a boy when his mother would yell at him to stop eating after catching him sneaking cereal from the pantry after dinner. He thought nothing about how ashamed he used to feel for still being hungry after meals when everyone else was done eating. He didn't think about the time he walked home from the bus stop in tears after the other boys on the bus told him his body was too big to be run over, and

not even the bus could kill him. He didn't think about those days as a teenager, when he snuck food into his room after midnight, and how it made him feel like he was doing something worse than drugs.

He thought nothing of his only girlfriend in high school, and how he never worked up the courage to kiss her. Or the Jeep he bought at 18 after saving up a year's worth of paychecks, or how it was a piece of crap that burned gas faster than he could pump it, but it didn't matter because of the loud music and the road was worth it. He didn't think about the first time he had sex; he was so nervous that a little bit of his dinner came back up, and tried to swallow it again without her noticing.

Before he fell onto the walkway, he remembered the stuffiness of the kitchen. The sweat that dripped down his forehead. The ache in his lower back as he hunched over the counter to cut garlic and onions. The cutting board slipping against the countertop with every slice. The callous forming on the bottom pad of his index finger against the spine of the knife. The gentle humming from the gas flame that burned on the stove, and the pot of water that refused to boil. He remembered the silver lid on the salt container that popped off as he seasoned the water, and the panic he felt as he watched the white-grained waterfall cascade into the pot. He remembered the taste of the noodles that were much too salty, saltier than the sea. The wave of heat that hit his face when he opened the oven, and the graying chicken that was refusing to brown. The pop when he opened the jar of Alfredo sauce that he used because he was too nervous to make his own. He remembered how he waited in the sauce aisle at the store to see which jar the old Italian-looking woman chose first, just for it to be the worst thing he ever tasted; no amount of milk or cheese

made it better.

As he got inches away from the walkway, where the gray pavement was all he could see, he remembered the surge of lightning he felt through his chest when he heard knocking at the door. He still wasn't ready. The pots and pans were all over the kitchen countertops. He ran to the mirror in the restroom to see his hair standing up from how many times he had run his hand through his scalp in stress. No amount of water or combing made it look better. His chest pounded when he opened the front door for Leslie the first time she ever came over to his childhood home, when they were teenagers, all those years ago. He stood in the doorway, without saying a word. He was yelling at himself to say something, but he was distracted by her brown eyes in the golden evening light because they were more beautiful than anything else he had ever seen. When he did finally say something, she laughed, and he laughed too, but he had no clue what he said. He didn't know what to do with his hands when she walked right in and hugged him.

When it came time to eat, his hands were shaking as he put the plate down in front of her. He was already thinking of all the ways he could apologize for ruining dinner, and wanted to explain to her that nothing he did went right; how that was the story of his life. He couldn't believe the glimmer in her eyes as she took a bite, as if the golden light was still in them. And his heart stopped when she said, "This is the best pasta I've ever eaten." He lifted the fork to his mouth and was shocked by how everything tasted just right now that they were together.

Do it for you, do it for you, Benji thought to himself. I do it for you.



Flower Bouquet

Elaine Verdill

despair



la llorona

wym green

*this city is a fresh scab and i'm going to pick it
'til it bleeds*

audrey sterzick

See, I know these roads like my own veins.
Each bend, each dip, I've been the carsick kid
tracking the path home with my eyes closed, so
it's not the metaphor that makes it misery.

No more two lefts and a right. If you drive
up Laurette Street, I can teach you the geography
of *never again*, the way it stings like knuckles against
stucco.

The lesson ends, *this wound can seep forever*. Here,
the magnolias cannot greet me with anything but falling
leaves.

When the winter gutters fill, I follow
the sidewalk's cracked bones to the red curb flaking
into the storm drain. You can tell
when this place is sick of itself and yet
I keep coming back to the mall with its ghosts
and the lead in the paint.

We used to joke, *that's what makes it home*.

in remembrance of james t. reason

stina pederson

This part isn't real, I assure you
now, so you can handle the unease. I've

been away and I forgot to ask anyone to care
for my rat. She's half-starved, barely alive. I

want to hurt myself, I hate myself, how
could I, I'm sick, the pain feels too real

until part of my brain invades the dream to say, this
is a dream, this rat died a long time ago, she was old.

* * *

There's this thing our brains do, called automaticity.

You drive
the same route every day, you cease thinking about it.

You don't
notice the bird of paradise blooming, you aren't paying
attention

to what you're seeing. Our brains create shortcuts for
repeated actions
so we can think about other things, like that person we
need
to confront, or what to have for lunch. The routine
changes, but our brains

are on autopilot. When Mommy is sick and Daddy has to
take Baby
to daycare, but Baby falls asleep in the car and Daddy
goes to work

without dropping Baby off, he didn't mean to kill Baby.

* * *

James Tootle Reason, a psychologist with an apt blend of a name, the right dash of silliness to prevent it being too perfect for his profession, called it the Swiss cheese model. When the flaws in our brains' defense systems align to create a tunnel not safe to enter because you can't see what's coming and you'd never knowingly, through which the fatal error can occur.

* * *

When Lochlan was an infant, I spent hours reading about ways real babies died. Cords, blankets, buckets, packing peanuts, hot cars, dressers. Didn't those

parents do all they could to keep their babies alive? Their porous brains didn't foresee every risk, so I would seek out every story, to know, to save

my child by knowing. I swear I'm not a masochist, but I don't see the point in not thinking it through, like disaster preparedness training.

* * *

One father died by suicide shortly after finding he'd forgotten his baby in the backseat and I

find myself disturbed by how much this seems like the most reasonable response to me, to

a brain that could betray me like a serial killer . I can't reconcile myself to untimely death. I don't want to if I can help it.

idle hands

thomas misuraca

I can't scratch my face again. I've already scratched it a couple of times, if I do it again, this girl's going to think I'm crazy. I can't help it. It's all her fault. She's talking too much. I have to do something with my hands.

Rubbing my chin will make it look like I'm interested. I can feel my five o'clock shadow. I should have shaved before coming out. My right cheek feels rougher than my left. It's tricky to get a close shave under my neck. I think my mole is getting bigger. And sprouting hair.

Must stop touching my face and focus on her. She's still talking. Now my nose is itchy. Just a little scratch. People always scratch their noses, nothing wrong with that.

Rubbing my eyes is not strange either. I took a crusty spec out of the left one. She won't notice if I slide my hand under the table and drop it on the floor. Then I'll keep my hands there out of view.

Why am I running my fingers through my hair? She'll think I'm trying to make myself pretty for her. Oh no. Did I just pick the dead skin off my lip?

She's not going to want to go back to my place after this. She's looking at me funny. Am I bleeding. I touch my napkin to my face. No blood. Good.

Maybe she won't notice if I clean the wax out of my ears. I'll wipe my fingers on the napkin.

Dinner is long over. Perhaps we should leave. But she wants to talk. I don't want to blow this one like all those other dates.

Now my chest is itchy. I bet I'm breaking out in hives. She won't notice if I scratch over my shirt. Why did I wear a shirt and an undershirt? I'll just open one button. No, I'll need two to get my hand inside.

She's stopped talking and looking right at me. I take my hand out of my shirt and look back at her and smile. She continues talking and I scratch my chin in interest.

Both my arms are now itchy. I can pretend to fold them in order to scratch them. Again, the shirt is in the way. I lean back and roll up my sleeves. They itch so much I scratch furiously. Now the skin on my arms is all red and bumpy. I need to keep my hands under the table and on my lap.

My legs are itchy.

No. Scratching them will look strange for sure. Maybe I should excuse myself and go to the bathroom.

Instead I fold my hands and keep them on the table. I try to ignore my itchy legs and the tickling on the soles of my feet. And my underwear could really use a shifting. But no. I must sit still and look interested.

What the hell is she talking about?

spinal landscape

robert sparrow downes

Looking up at the branches of a tired elm—
the angels are no longer here. They must
have fallen off with the leaves. The branches
are dead, the bark all peeled back.
Storm clouds linger as the moon rises.
I'm waiting for the sun—it will turn up tomorrow,
so I hear. But often that sun
does not align with mine. The air
congests me; the breeze carries with it
unholy memories. Whistles of ancient melodies,
smells of primeval flowers from a psychic zero—
traces of a spinal landscape.

spoiler alert

alexis ragan

Hope will outlive even your most final death. Right, I didn't think that would surprise you, so let me try again. Ships of doubt are bound to sink from a single steel prayer, and you will find yourself humming underwater before cutting adrift from old obsessions you thought would lead you to the Titanic's ballroom of sunken dreams. I won't defer in breaking this to you—lifespans are not extended by expert worrying. But you found that out already, didn't you? After waking up by a grace so strange, you were left speechless on the sawtooth shore.

the seagull

finn holmgren

*KONSTANTIN: I had the dishonour to kill this Seagull
today.*

I'm laying it at your feet.

-Anton Chekhov's "The Seagull"

Tell me I'm violent enough
to be forgiven.
Tell me it was for devotion
for my hands were starving
and a bullet is just warm enough
to taste like Spring coming.
Mom, I'm trying to say
I swapped my pen for a .45
and if I twitch my finger
quick enough
I can bleed saltwater
and create a sea so large,
you can drown before
her teeth have time
to shred the horizon.

Tell me there's no difference
between milk-blue birds against
a gunpowder sky
and a comma of a sentence
that never makes it past the throat.
For the body knows the most space
it will ever have
is the gap between breaths,
the beating of wings.
This is creation, the brutality of change.

God please tell me there is time enough
to be forgiven
for my hands have never truly been mine
and neither is the feathered
softness they crave
Mom, do you too hear the sound of the
Earth living?
The call of all things to
return to soil.
The echoes of loneliness.

neverending

stina pederson

Laundry, clutter, fireworks, YouTube shorts, stimulation, lack of sleep, dog hair, cat hair, dead children, dust, dirty floors, stuff, to-dos, bombs, raining bombs, overwhelm, emails, dishes, dog poops, litter to scoop, chronic conditions, murder, murder in the passive voice so you don't think of it as murder, subscriptions, deadlines, dead bodies, body aches, food to make, guilt, daughterly guilt, motherly guilt, loverly guilt, unread books, unscrubbed tub, impunity, children's glee, hope



blue and yellow abstract

elaine verdill

FIXATION



CONSTRUCTED REALITY

MINDY KOBER

SELF-PORTRAIT AS CICADAGIRL ATTEMPTING AN ARS POETICA

AMANDA TROUT

Count the number of cicadas in my poems:
I'll show you broods upon broods in these lines,
covet whirring tymbals and crystal wings
alms for this chronic victim of blank pages,
daughter of broken chords and missing strings.
Ask me how I learned to love these insects—

consider I hold the title "little insect"
inside me, have written many poems
crafting myself into carapace, stringing
an obsession web beneath shell. These lines
detonate on impact with their pages
and metamorphose to buzzy and winged

creatures of habit; meanwhile my own wings
incinerate in obsession. This miserable insect
can't fly to save her life, just fill pages
and pages and pages with cicada poems
desperate for the moment her shoulders line
apical cells down her back, genetic strings

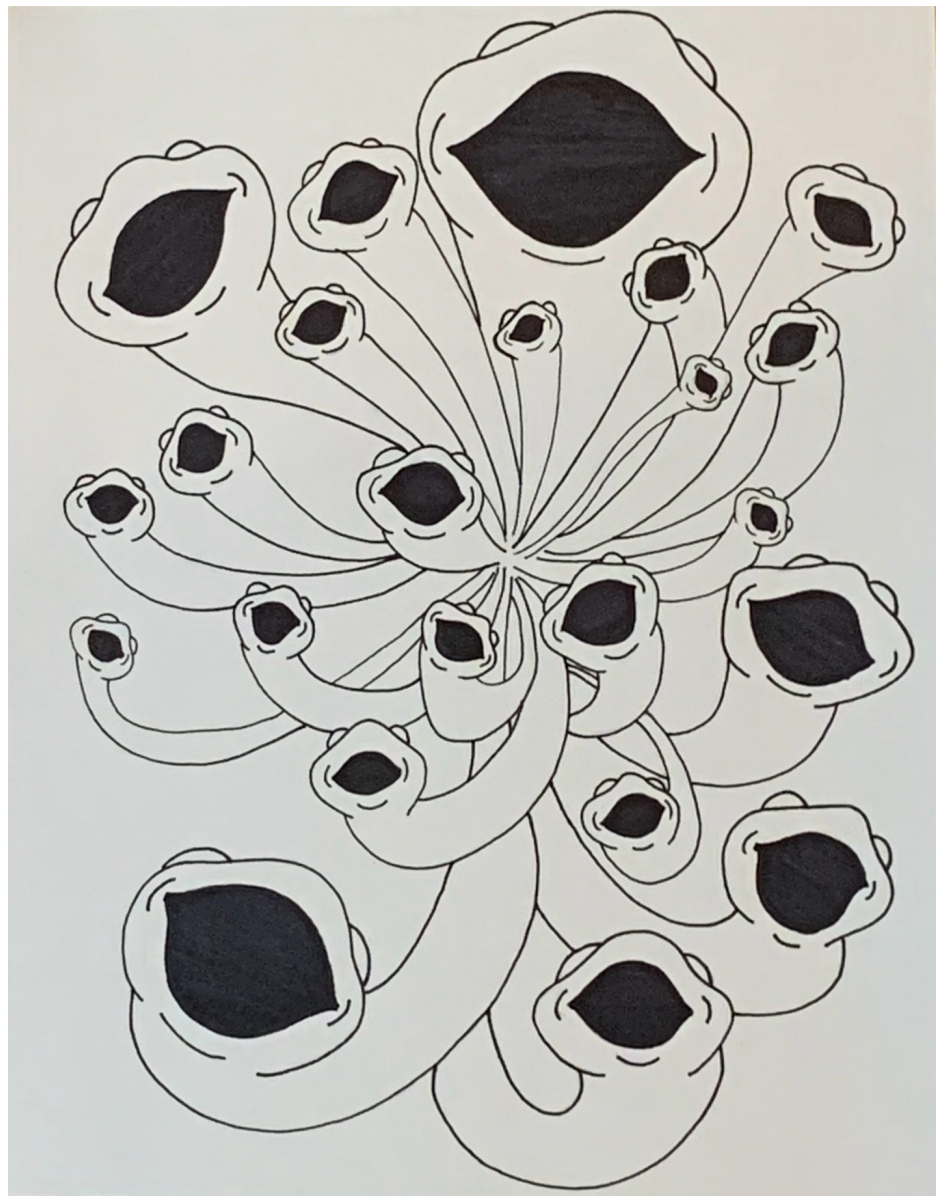
celloed bass clef vibrato like her favorite string
instrument. I self-identify as winged
cicadagirl small and tymballess, lineate
all my words to insect song metrics. I inspect
dogwoods and sycamores for more poem
aspirants and, come summer, page

cicada multitudes. Can't you see this page's
insectification mounting, cicada songs

creeping my alliteration, claiming poems
all for themselves? Can't you feel the winged
drumbeats, screams of tymbals, every aspect
acclimating to its place in the cicada bloodline?

Clearly I'm no longer sole poet of my lines;
I'm ghost writer translating, to physical pages,
cicada melodies. For once I am the string
added to the cithara of Eunomos, more than insect-
dedicated lyricist. This partnership wings,
ample ascension until I understand these poems

come from pages of intersections, this poem
is strung nonexistent denied incessant lines,
collapses—crushed insect—without its wings.



TEEMING I

ZACH MEDWAY

CHILD OF AMPATO

DANIEL WHEELOCK

The hunt for a heartbeat lasted all of five minutes. Lit only by the spectral glow of the ultrasound monitor, the sonographer, a narrow-eyed woman wearing teal scrubs and scuffed sneakers, smiled politely but said little in her search. Camile took Owen's hand in her own and squeezed, fearing the worst as twelve weeks of anticipation culminated in sustained silence. Eventually the woman shook her head. The sonographer offered evasive answers to Camile's frantic questioning before leaving the room, handing Owen a roll of paper towels with which to clean the ultrasound gel from his girlfriend's exposed belly. Camile simply sobbed. She waited in the car as Owen sorted out the insurance.

The drive home was grim and plodding. Owen dropped Camile off at the apartment and went into the office. Emails were skimmed. Thin coffee burned his tongue. Under buzzing fluorescence he clicked away the hours, and it was that evening that he returned home to find the mummified remains of a young girl sitting cross-legged on the guest futon.

Owen wasn't afraid, or even surprised. His only reaction was one of curiosity, for he recognized the girl, had seen her picture, earlier that morning after flipping to a random page of Camile's anthropology textbook. Her name was Juanita, the Ice Maiden, a moniker given by the team of climbers who first discovered her, frozen for centuries on the slope of a Peruvian volcano. Seeing the girl up close, Owen marveled at her state of preservation. Juanita still had eyelashes. Where there should have been nothing but a bald pate of sun-bleached skull, long black

braids fell over her leathery face. She was a tiny thing, seated in a reclined posture and dressed in ceremonial vestments of beaded textiles. Her expression was serene, like that of a dreamer.

Owen kicked off his shoes quietly as if he might wake the dead girl and turned to check on Camile. He peeked inside the bedroom and found her where he'd left her that morning, snoring softly. It was dinner time and his gut rumbled, so he headed to the kitchen. There he found Juanita, seated on the dining table, watching him through slumbering lids. He scratched at his stubble and pondered the situation as his microwave lasagna slowly rotated. Owen decided to take his dinner at his desk but found Juanita back on the futon opposite his computer chair. Well preserved though she was, Owen still found her quite grotesque, odor and all. He thought about covering her with a blanket when a soft knock at the guestroom door startled him.

"Yes?" he said, his mouth full. It was Camile. Her hair was disheveled, her eyes still puffy from the morning's ordeal.

"How was work?" she said.

"Nothing to report," Owen shrugged. "How have you been holding up?"

"How do you think?" Her eyes fell to the floor. Owen could only nod.

"If I ask you something," she continued "will you promise not to get mad?"

"When do I ever get mad?"

Camile inhaled deeply and gave Owen a hollowing stare.

"Why didn't you cry?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"This morning, when the doctor said what she said, I turned to you and you barely had a reaction. You almost looked... relieved."

Owen glanced at Juanita, unsure if Camile could see their new houseguest.

"That's ridiculous," he said.

"You didn't say anything," Camile pressed. "I started asking questions, and you had none. You just sat there, speechless."

"Can we not do this right now? Can we just process this shit for one second?"

"I've been processing all day."

"Well, I didn't have that luxury. I'm tired, and so are you. Go get some rest." Owen said, turning back to his dinner. Of course he'd reacted, he thought. It was terrible, terrible news, and he was just trying to be strong for her. He'd even put a comforting hand on her shoulder. What more did she want? When he swiveled back around, Camile had gone.

The morning was bright and humid. Owen awoke to find Juanita where he'd seen her last, still at rest in the peaceful grip of death. She shadowed his morning routine, always appearing from just around the corner of his periphery. She lingered in the kitchen to watch him

brew a pot of coffee. Distracted by her reflection in the steamy bathroom mirror, Owen nicked himself shaving. Juanita rode shotgun in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, tempting Owen to sidle into the carpool lane. She sat in the corner of his cramped cubicle all morning, and at lunch time, followed him to the taco joint down the street, silently watching as he tore at salsa packets with his teeth.

It was the same the next day, and the day after that; Juanita was there in the morning, followed Owen throughout his busy day, stood watch as he drifted to sleep. At work, Owen found himself glancing up at Juanita every few moments, making simple yet glaring mistakes until his supervisor, Carl, stormed his desk and told him to pull his head out of his ass.

It was Friday afternoon when Owen received a panicked call from Camile. He rushed from the office to her university, weaving through traffic as he caught glimpses of Juanita in the rearview mirror. The doctor said over the phone that there wasn't anything to be done, just to keep an eye on things and go to the emergency room if the bleeding worsened. Camile gritted her teeth in the bathtub for hours that night. Owen had never felt so powerless. As he sat on the adjacent toilet, rubbing Camile's back, he spotted Juanita, perched on their bed like it was a throne, taking in the spectacle.

Owen met his child around midnight, just a lump no bigger than an avocado pit. Camile asked him to save it, to put it in a plastic baggy so the doctors could perform their tests and they'd know what to do differently next time. Owen knew that was a waste of time that they couldn't afford, but did as he was told. That was how their kid came to live in the freezer, tucked behind a box of

chicken taquitos, waiting to explain what went wrong. In the weeks that followed, Owen tiptoed around Camile and the mourning process. He found it funny that the six-hundred-year-old dead girl who followed his every step was only the second most surreal part of his life, as ever since Camile came bounding into the room waving that pale blue line in his face, he'd been thinking about all the magical and terrifying ways things were going to change, and then they just... didn't.

Months passed since the ugliness in the bathtub, and Owen could no longer keep his eyes off Juanita. Sometimes he would stare at her for minutes straight, oblivious to the rest of the world, and the longer he studied her, the more a certain beauty revealed itself. Owen learned that Juanita was only twelve when she died on her mountain, and even though her skin looked like turkey jerky and she smelled like an abandoned tannery, her beauty to him was not an unsavory passion but rather an objective truth. In life Juanita had been a gift to the gods. It stood to reason that she'd been beautiful, and to Owen, she still was. He remembered the mild annoyance he felt when she first appeared, how her incessant presence felt stifling and eerie, but since he'd placed his child in the freezer, he couldn't imagine his life without her. He found her to be a terrific listener, telling her things he'd never told another soul, living or otherwise, and when work was stressful or he and Camile would argue, Juanita was always there to center him, to ground his spirit.

After some trips to the local library, Owen started to read everything he could about Juanita, about the Inca, about Peru. He learned that she was part of a ceremony

called *qhapaq hucha*, the “royal obligation.”

She, and many other children like her, was chosen for her purity, unblemished by a single freckle or scar. These children came from all over the empire, usually in times of drought or famine, and spent months in monk-like prayer, preparing for the honor of their sacred duty. The holy men gave Juanita everything she would need in the afterlife, and when she was brought to the top of the mountain, stupefied by altitude, ayahuasca and corn liquor, they killed her.

Owen found it grisly and fascinating, how the Inca could worship such selfish deities, gods whose whims demanded the greatest sacrifice that could be given — their children, their hope. For the good of the empire, a child here or there must have seemed like a bargain, a veritable *kid pro quo*. Owen brought his research to work to read on his lunch break, his internet browser peppered with bookmarks about the indigenous cultures of the Andes. Quechua proved to be tricky to pick up, as the grammar was nothing like the bit of Spanish he had taken in high school. It was discouraging to know the language he was failing to learn was still so wildly different than what Juanita must have spoken in life. So much was lost to the march of time — there were so many things about Juanita that he could never know. Where was she from? Who was her family? Did she have siblings or pets or a favorite meal? What was her real name, and was she afraid of dying? The questions gnawed at his mind and clouded his thinking.

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By the time what would have been their due date rolled around, Owen was forced to admit to Camile that he'd lost his job. Up to that point, he told her he'd been working remotely as he continued his research from home, day after day, Juanita sitting by his side in loyal silence. Where there had once been a model young

professional, a wild man now stood in Owen's place. His beard had grown bushy, his hair long and greasy. He showered only occasionally, ate little and slept less. Camile watched as Owen began to transform into someone she didn't recognize, his obsession growing more pronounced until it was all he ever talked about.

It was a Wednesday afternoon when she arrived home from class to find Owen at the stove, brewing another batch of chicha. She set her things on the counter and approached cautiously.

"Happy birthday," she said.

Owen stared at her, mildly perplexed. He'd recently switched over to the quipu calendar, a system of ropes and knots used to keep records and tell time, but he was still new to it and must have miscounted the days.

"I called your office to see if I could surprise you with a gift," Camile said, "but they told me you hadn't shown up in a long time."

Owen shrugged and turned back to the stove. "I was fired."

"Yes. I know. Why didn't you tell me? Why lie all this time?"

Owen looked for Juanita, who was seated at the dining table.

"Because you wouldn't understand what I've been going through."

"Oh, what you've been going through? What about

me? About us? We lost a baby Owen. It happens, life sucks, but not once have you asked me how I've been feeling about all of this. You couldn't care less. All you talk about are llamas and Machu Picchu. You don't shower or brush your teeth, and now you don't even remember your own birthday? When were you planning on telling me you were fired?"

"Never. None of that matters."

"But making our apartment reek of rotten corn cobs does?"

"Maize," said Owen. "It's called maize."

It was then that Camile fell silent. She headed toward the closet, collected her suitcase and proceeded to pack.

"I'll come for the rest of my stuff later," she said, the wheels of her suitcase clunking out the door until Owen was alone, with only Juanita to talk to.

The flight to Cusco was eleven hours, with the jump to Arequipa adding an hour more. The trip was pricey considering Owen had to buy two seats. He left the terminal and found his driver, a lively man who agreed to drive him the two and a half hours to Juanita's mountain, Nevado Ampato, stopping along the way so he could buy some climbing equipment. They made their way down the desolate two-lane highway in a dented taxi, with Owen up front and Juanita in the back seat. The landscape that whizzed by was gray and cold, consisting of barren Andean high plains with a panorama of snowcapped mountains on the horizon. It was almost dusk when they arrived at El Refugio, a small complex of stone buildings with tiled roofs which was to be Owen and Juanita's inn for the night. The owner's name was

Maria, and she had lived at the base of Ampato all her life, raising llamas and sheep with her husband José. In the morning, before dawn, José drove Owen the rest of the way to the base of the mountain.

They arrived near the basecamp when the sun was rising and the air was blisteringly cold. Owen thanked his host for his hospitality, grabbed his pack and turned to find Juanita sitting fifty yards ahead, beckoning him onward up the poorly marked trail. Putting his pack on, he climbed for hours, stopping to rest frequently along the bouldered slope. Owen kept his eyes on his steps for most of the climb as the path was rocky and uneven, but each time he glanced upward he would see Juanita, sitting in the distance, always ahead of him, always ascending.

As the sun began its descent in the afternoon, Owen crossed a colossal granite ridge and finally reached the summit. His face was red and wind scoured, and he was feeling nauseous and chilled to his core, but he'd done it, had reached Juanita's holy resting place. He took off his pack, and from it, retrieved a little plastic baggy, the bag that contained what was once his child, the lump now turning black from the unrefrigerated journey. He dug a small pit in the snow and buried the baggy, sitting on his haunches at the top of the world. The earth below him seemed to wobble as dizziness took hold. He looked for Juanita, desperate to ask her what the next step was, but she was nowhere to be found. A panic washed over Owen as he turned in frantic circles, looking for the dead girl.

A wall of wind knocked him to the snow, and he felt like he was about to vomit when he was blinded by a flash of light, a massive gust hurling ice and grit into the air. Owen opened his eyes to an astonishing sight, a figure he recognized from his months studying the Inca. The

sun god towered over him, holding white fire in each outstretched hand, his eyes raging orbs of golden flame.

"What tribute do you offer?" Inti asked. His voice boomed off the ridge and crackled in Owen's ears.

"Everything I have..." Owen stumbled over the words, gesturing toward the small mound before him. "Everything I was going to be."

The god paused in deliberation, and Owen shielded his eyes, kneeling in the snow. Each second in Inti's presence was overpowering, his radiance both soothed and seared. Owen felt the cold creeping into his bones. He wished to see Juanita again and longed for Camile's loving arms, longed for the life they had before... before...

"We are most pleased," Inti thundered as Owen began to weep. "Why though," the god asked, "do you kneel?"

Owen felt his weight begin to shift out from under him, his boots leaving the ground as he was pulled upward. A sensation unlike anything he'd ever felt took hold, an impossible warmth that coursed through his veins. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words no longer held any power.

"Rise," said Inti "and revel in your ascension... for you... are one... of us."



CITY OF LIGHT

MAHMOUD EL MARDI

HOW TO MEASURE A GARDEN

JASON MACEY

I've fallen in love with my garden again. In some years, I'd watch as nettles and gill-over-the-ground grew among the flowers, but I'd rush past. I'd open the door, sigh, and go on. Eventually, the faint scent of my roses, the gentle edges of irises, and the pomp of gardenias could all draw me back. Weeding would then keep me returning. I'd sit or kneel and dig with my trowel. Roots would loosen, and I'd feel the connection between one nettle and those nearby. Other years, I'd plant and water and weed as if the routine were a part of the movement of the sun, or a part of my day's peregrinations where, at last, I found rest. But most every year, it happens this way: I get to a point when I'm pulling weeds when I realize I'm deeply happy. That happiness seems to come out of the soil with the offending weed. For the rest of the season, all I need in order to make my day better is to work in my garden for fifteen minutes. In that time, I'd pluck away the stress of the rest of the world, and I'd leave it with the weeds in a pile along the stone fence that runs behind my home.

Some of my neighbors argue my garden isn't a real garden at all. I grow no crops. I don't cut my flowers. For them, gardens aren't purely ornamental. They can eat out of their gardens, and they expect other gardeners to be able to do the same. The closest I have to produce are chives, and I've enjoyed their aromatic flavor as a compliment to steaks. I've also planted a raspberry bush, but it's going to take at least another year until I see any raspberries. Until that time, I don't know that my neighbors will accept my garden as legitimate, but it makes little difference to me. I keep earth boxes for easy

produce, and I don't have to worry about fencing them in, as I keep them on my deck. For six months of the year my garden, on the other hand, is the last thing that I see when I leave my house in the morning, and it's the first thing to greet me when I return home at the end of the day. The greatest thing it produces is serenity in me.

When I was growing up, my mother's garden consisted of raised beds framed by eight-foot lengths of two-by-sixes. She kept two beds that totaled eight by thirty-two feet. In spring, my father would add ash to the garden. We would turn over in the soil until the two became one, and then we would plant tomatoes and lettuce and strawberries. My mother would ask me to water the garden regularly, and I would water it after some bellyaching. Then I'd sneak strawberries and cherry tomatoes and come back into the house sporting a mischievous grin. This was my first experience of gardening, and, in my youth, I made the mistake of assuming that gardens were all roughly the same.

So I was always puzzled when I had classmates who would occasionally grouse about soreness from gardening. I scoffed at this exactly once. I was on a run with a friend, and he said that he was tired from gardening. I asked him how that was possible.

"How big is your garden?" he asked.

After I told him, he laughed. "Our garden is half an acre," he said.

And, unlike many of my classmates, they gardened by hand: they cut furrows, seeded, and harvested without the aid of power tools. Learning this, I felt envious and grateful simultaneously. Knowing about how big half an

acre was, I suddenly had a newfound respect for my friend.

I became fascinated with classmates' gardens after this. Many had gardens exceeding an acre. The largest I remember was three acres, which I protested was impossible without the equipment they owned for their farm. He concurred, but added that the bulk of what the family ate came from their garden. The fields produced forage. The silo held silage. The garden was for the family. I learned these things, and my mother's garden now seemed tiny. I considered my own behavior. I had complained for years over a minor chore.

This wasn't the first time I learned to doubt my assumptions, nor would it be the last. Yet, years would pass before I would suspect that definitions could be as problematic. A larger set of assumptions are built in our language. How to measure a garden seems subjective to me. Perhaps even more subjective is the matter of how we view that garden as based upon its location. Urban gardens can confer an air of serenity, wisdom, and beauty merely based on their location. No such benefit extends in the country, where gardens are commonplace. Additionally, we have built bias into our language: rustic, provincial, and rural have degrees of negative denotation. Even farmer can mean "[a]n unsophisticated or socially awkward person from the country." Yet the peace I feel when I'm tending to my garden is as vital and meaningful to me as the peace that comes to the person tending an urban garden smaller than my own.

My roses grow with the help of the same nutrients as their roses. My garden is dwarfed by countless gardens I've seen around my home, but I'm sure my garden occupies my mind and heart in the same way it does for

those gardeners. And in no way are any of us unsophisticated in nurturing the connection we feel between ourselves and our little patches of earth.

Through the toil I've grown to love, I know how to answer the two key questions regarding gardens. What must a garden contain? At least one weed which the gardener may pull. How big must a garden be? Large enough that the gardener's spirit may take flight even as the gardener drives roots into the soil. After years of coming back to my garden again and again, I can say these are the only measurements that really matter. After years of patient labor, I can say it's only through pulling the weeds that the gardener can take to the air.

Some of my favorite days with my garden are the last days in each season. I've weeded my garden when the first snow of the season flew on several occasions. Last year it was the day after Halloween. I picked up two glow-in-the-dark bracelets children left during the previous evening's trick-or-treating, and I pulled weeds. I lounged on the ground and pulled at bits of gill-over-the-ground. I brought it to my nose and smelled it. It brought the same aromatic scent of mint to my nose as it did in the spring. Then, the sky turned. A cold, wet wind blew, and snowflakes danced in the gusting wind until falling to the ground and melting on contact. I smiled, my roots digging downward as I heard an eagle cry in the distance.

DEEP INSIDE THE ANIMAL

after V. Penelope Pelizzon, "Call & Response"

TERRAN NOREYKO

I tucked a dragonfly under my tongue
in case I encounter anyone with a sense
of wonder or a mosquito to be eaten.

Just like my flimsy-winged friend,
I, too, play dead around aggressive men.
That's why I let her wriggle in between

my teeth—a reminder that caught things
can still move; agendas only perch,
even with eight legs. The Widow Skimmer

pokes its eyes between lips as I speak
but doesn't dare turn around. The spot
on the back of its head too skittish

to be anything but blind. As you caress
the underside of a thumb with the top
of your scalp, would you consider the dread-

ful red of a throat-tight tunnel
to be a better option? Inside
my body lives the shadows

cast on walls behind dusty glass bulbs.
Their momentary existence preserved
when I keep them in my gullet.

Though they whisper, they can't
crawl their way out either. So, she rests
under veins and spits, waiting

for the noises to stop, my mouth
to open a little wider, to no longer have wings
wet from my attempts to swallow.



TEEMING II

ZACH MEDWAY

TEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT THE SKIN ON THE BACK OF YOUR HAND

TERRAN NOREYKO

I.

Like a worn down cotton
top sheet strewn across
a young girl's knees, the skin
lays thin on the back of your hand.

II.

A secret is poorly kept in veins—
whispers protrude from
the back of a restless hand.

III.

I'll never forget the fists
I made. Indents ingrain
on a thin skinned knuckle.

IV.

Scars are rare to fade
from skin rarely felt:
the front of a mind,
the back of a hand.

V.

Soft are the grooves on the back
of a woman's hand, compared only
to the callouses she carries.

VI.

My grandmother shelters my hands
in her palms. Sanctuary has always

looked like a wrinkled wrist
and blood beneath the surface.

VII.

Lift the skin off the body
it covers. The back of a hand
waits only for itself.

VIII.

Drain the blood from your right
hand and let the joints lament.
Stroke the skin of what is living;
know what it is to be touched again.

IX.

The true connective tissue
of limb to digit exists as more
than the back of something.

X.

Become acquainted with body parts
others think nothing of. Within the skin
live friendly mites and petals on fire.



HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU

DEVON BALWIT

GOD, THE MISTAKER

MEGHA MOHAN

The moon's surface is covered with impact craters. It's nothing new—I've known them since childhood. Those shallow wounds bared open. *Impact* means something pummeled the moon with a force that left a half-nothing behind. Something scooped out enough rock to hurt, but not enough rock to forget. Bad things have happened to me. I remember how it feels to be carved out. Like I was rotten when I was smooth. Like I deserved an impact.

#

"Bharata Vedamuga" by K.S. Chitra is a song from the Bollywood film *Pournami*. I've seen the music video thirty times. The character Chandrakala performs a dance for the lord Shiva, asking him to end a drought. She's dancing and singing and the storm clouds are gathering, but this is Bollywood. The villains don't know when to let it rest. They throw glass onto the platform she's supposed to walk across, hoping to stop the ceremony. The protagonist, Siva, notices, but the priest holds him back.

Appakudothu, the priest says. That's the Telugu way of saying, *Once you start praying to God you can never really stop.*

Chandrakala is still dancing. She has three pots of fire, one in each hand and one on her head. Her feet are about to get torn to shreds, so what does Siva do? He dives onto the platform and shields the ground with his body. She steps on him, he rolls on glass. It's Bollywood.

His shirt is bloodied after a single scrape. He, battered, runs off to fight the atheists when they make it to the altar (though, altar is the white man's word; we call it a lingam). Chandrakala pours fire into the Shiva lingam's basin. Knees smack onto painted concrete. Hands, head, everything bowed.

And then it rains.

Not just rain, mind you, but a thunderstorm. Water pummeling the earth, holy in its drenching. Shambo, shankara! Siva is back after single handedly taking out six Bollywood bad guys, pink shirt soaked, Chandrakala soaked, and for him she runs across the glass. She stoops to touch his feet, him the altar, and when she rises he sees the face of his dead lover.

Pournami, he says, but her name is Chandrakala. Everything you wanted has happened. Are you happy? Dead Pournami nods. Her alive sister Chandrakala nods. He hugs both of them at once.

Recap.

1. Siva was God to Chandrakala
2. Chandrakala/Pournami was God to Siva
3. God was God
4. They asked for rain and God gave it to them
5. God was there
6. Wasn't He?

I'll say God here like it means something, but I come from a place where there's millions of them. So when I say God I could be talking about the Christian one and his son, Jesus, or Lord Shiva and his son, Ganesha, or

Allah, or Yahweh. I was raised by my father to believe in all of them. So whatever God I'm talking about is the one you're thinking about. Whatever God you're praying to is the one I'm talking about. I'll capitalize He like it means something. I'll talk about Him like He's listening, like He's here, because I don't know any other way to speak. God, on the tip of your tongue. God as a taste. *You should feel blessed, you know.* It feels like I'm being cut into when I talk about Him. I have not prayed in years.

#

Trivia time. The reason Indian kids are so hard to pronounce is because we're all God-named. My name means rain Shiva. My father means Shiva Shiva (variant name: *He who holds up the moon*). Shiva has more than one thousand names. They all do. When you're calling for your kid to come load the dishwasher, there's a good chance you're actually calling God. Look at that. God's in the kitchen and He shatters a plate on the tile. At least He's there. Does that image feel wrong to you? Are you wondering if God would actually make such a mistake? Look at that. God's somewhere making mistakes. I'm cratered. For my sanity I have to believe that was an error on His part, otherwise it really just does look like I deserved it.

#

My fifth grade best friend and perhaps would-be lover Carter Castillo had a superhero name like me, and we ran laps together at Seven Pines Elementary in the wintertime. That's when I learned what a body was and what it felt like to be in one, lungs burning with the frigid air, pinched diaphragm, shaking legs. God doesn't have a body. I learned about my shadow on that track. Me and

first grade best friend and perhaps would-be lover
Nathan Something waved at our black forms spilling
onto the paved turf. God doesn't have a shadow. I think
He was there.

#

Sometimes when I look back God is there and other
times He is also there. I ask anyway.

Two hospitals. Was God there?

Car crash. Was God there?

The stadium. Was God there?

#

The thing about a crater impact is I was blown into
by a genetic asteroid and I could only be loved from a
distance. Imagine a thing with a body and a shadow and
half-holes, deformed cavities where an absence would
have been fine, orbiting around you, unrelenting in its
showmanship. *I was impacted, see, right here, I could
have been a whole of a thing but I'm dented like a victim
planet. I was supposed to be hallowed out but the big
rocks missed.* It's all very shameful, the discardment.
Maybe if I was smoother I wouldn't have sucked the life
out of everyone. Imagine a body-shadow orbiting around
you but it grew impatient and now wants to attack you
instead. It's ramming into you on all sides, it's impacting
you. You'd rather run to the opposite arm of the Milky
Way than let this one rear back, but it will and you can't.
I want to ruin something. I'm always on the verge of
ignition.

#

#

Three hospitals, pneumonia, van door, clean fracture, metatarsal, septoplasty, heart condition, nicotine, asthma attack. Was God there?

#

Maybe God's ashamed. I know shame. It moves you to silence, to inaction, to violence. It's that dead volcano on the dark side, the moon in Shiva's hair. It's knowing I should care about someone else's suffering but I take it too far and suddenly I feel suffering everywhere. Suddenly I'm God and you're Job. I'm pushing you to the brink and you're still praying. *Get up, says Me, says God. Our cheeks are burning. I cannot save you, I cannot be proud of you, I can only sit here and be ashamed of myself, so get up.*

Appakudatho, you say. Prayers never really stop. They just fall asleep for a while.

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At temple I was always more preoccupied by the feel of the carpet than God. No, that's not true. I walked my fair share of circles around the statues, a prayer and a thank you between each pass. Thanks, Krishna, for stopping my father's seizures. Thanks, Lakshmi, for bringing my mother to America. She's still worried we're poor, but she hasn't stopped calling your name. Can you hear it, up there, by the moon? She says it like it's her last chance every time. *Megha. Megha. Megha. Megha.*

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Bottles and bottles and bottles from Total Wine, the five minute drive for a brown savior moment, a fall from the nosebleeds, incredible longing, *that voice never shouts, it only whispers*, chief meteorologist Mike Buresh, Nepal, Dubai, Mysore, Richmond, purple potato fries, solar eclipse, death, pronouns, cancer cocktails, IV drip, chemistry class, football field, dab pen, diagnoses, Valentine's Day. Was God there?

#

I think if anything, I'm being haunted by God. I think if anything He's *always* there. Ghosts don't have bodies or shadows, which means they could be all of it—that first asteroid, then a downpour of them. My dad believes ghosts cling to people with *negative energy*, or people who've been cratered by all the bad things that were pummeled into them. Look at that. My God, the one you don't recognize and the one I'm haunted by, is a ghost who pretends to need me, and I treat Him the way I mourn the dead: I see His face everywhere. I wish He were still alive.



RipRap is the literary journal designed and produced annually by students in the Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing program at California State University Long Beach (CSULB). Since its inception in 1951, the journal has evolved from its original title, Hornspoon, until it was renamed Gambit and finally, in 1979, RipRap.

RipRap highlights new and emerging writers from across the country as well as interviews of award winning, published writers. We offer a humble invitation to talented and aspiring writers of short fiction, flash fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, as well as artists producing photography, illustration and comics. The journal is especially interested in work that is innovative, forward-thinking, and as entertaining as it is thought-provoking.

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