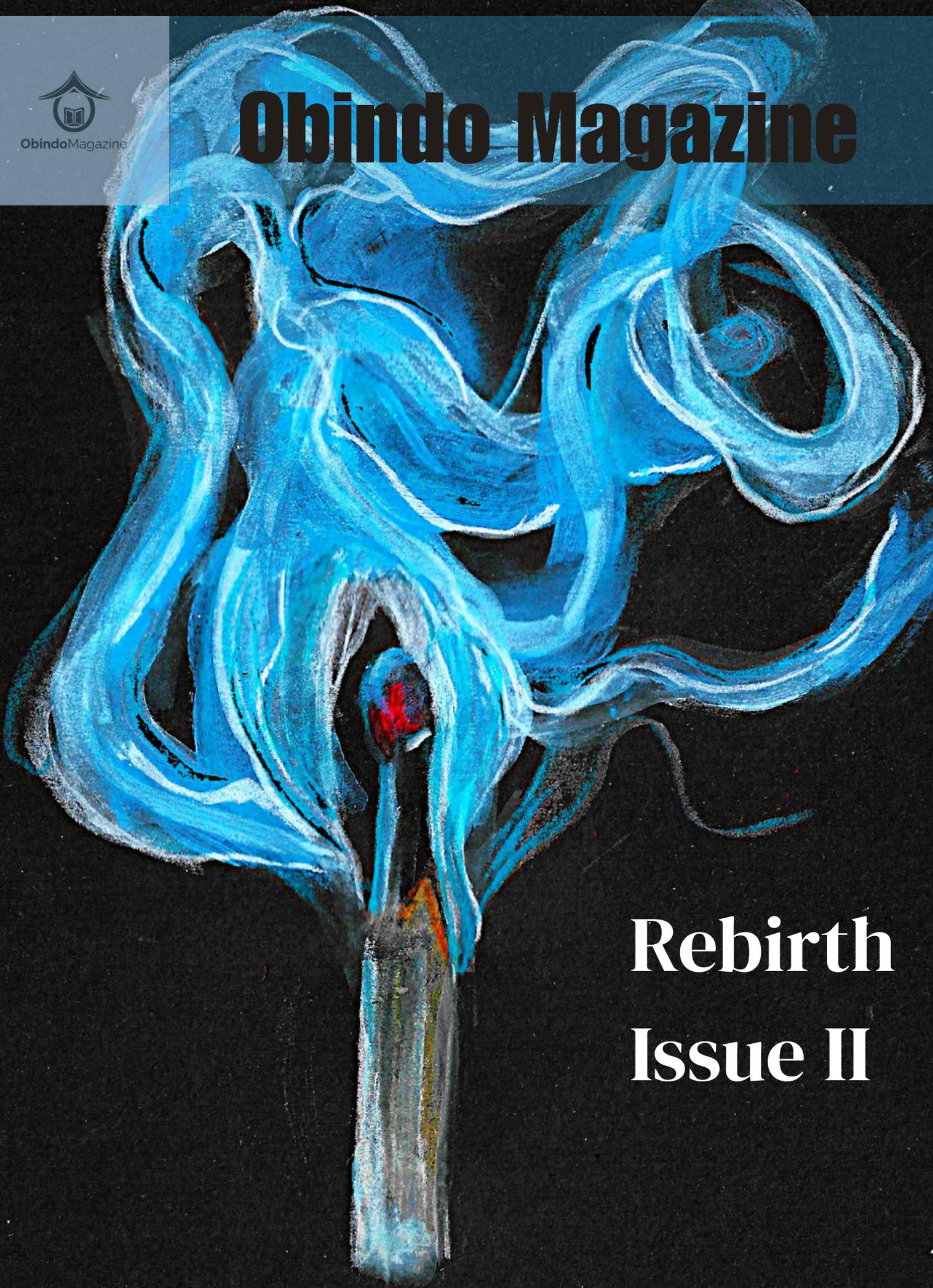


Obindo Magazine



Rebirth
Issue II

Rebirth



Obindo Magazine

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The Editor's Foreword

When we first envisioned Obindo, we imagined a home. A sheltering place where words sprout in tandem with the steady beat of artists' hearts to blossom into riveting stories, thought-provoking essays, unending poetry, and electrifying art. Our first issue encapsulates that successfully. Homes, however, evolve. They suffer storms and undergo renovation. And a renovation is another chance at life, a rebirth.

Our world today feels weighted, at the cusp of eternal decline or a glorious rebirth. And rebirth insists on a refusal to cave into non-existence. It is the work of reimagining what it means to begin again in a time that demands surrender. In these tumultuous times, at Obindo, we have been asking about meaning: What does it mean to create now? What does it mean to gather voices in a time that feels fragmented? What does it mean to make a home for language and the arts in an age that scrolls past it?

In this issue, we have received answers. The answers are not definitive, but they are embodied here: in startling poetry *filled with the tears of babies and dreamers*; in cathartic art pieces and illustrations, evocative of street-art graffiti and the hallowed serenity of the sound of a match-strike lighting the dark; in fiction pieces assiduously manifesting the indefatigable human spirit in compelling narratives; in non-fiction that walks the long, tortuous road of questioning before becoming.

We are incredibly grateful to our contributors; we would not be here without you. As artists, you are the champions of our hope and the flagbearers of truth lending credence to beauty. Thank you immensely for trusting Obindo with your pieces, sharing your talent with us, and working with us to put forth this issue. There is an Igbo adage that goes thus: *anyụkọọ mmamiri ọnu, ọ gbaa ufufu*, when people urinate together at a spot, it foams; this speaks to the notion that collective action leads to a more significant result. Your partnership with us has resulted in "Rebirth." We appreciate your hard work and contribution; we are endlessly thankful.

To my team at Obindo, the incomparable Adefemi and Hallie, I call us the dream team because that is exactly what we are. Your hardwork and passion and drive are the stuff of many prayers. We are like the three musketeers, but, you know, better. May we live many long years of curating Obindo together.

And saving the best for last, to our readers, this is all for you. We are humbled and thankful for your attention to this issue. I hope you enjoy the talent of our contributors as much as we have enjoyed cobbling them together.

To paraphrase John Keating, we do not engage with the arts because it is cute, we do because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. This is what we stay alive for.

Ya gazie unu!

Amara Ujumadu,
Editor-in-chief
Obindo Magazine

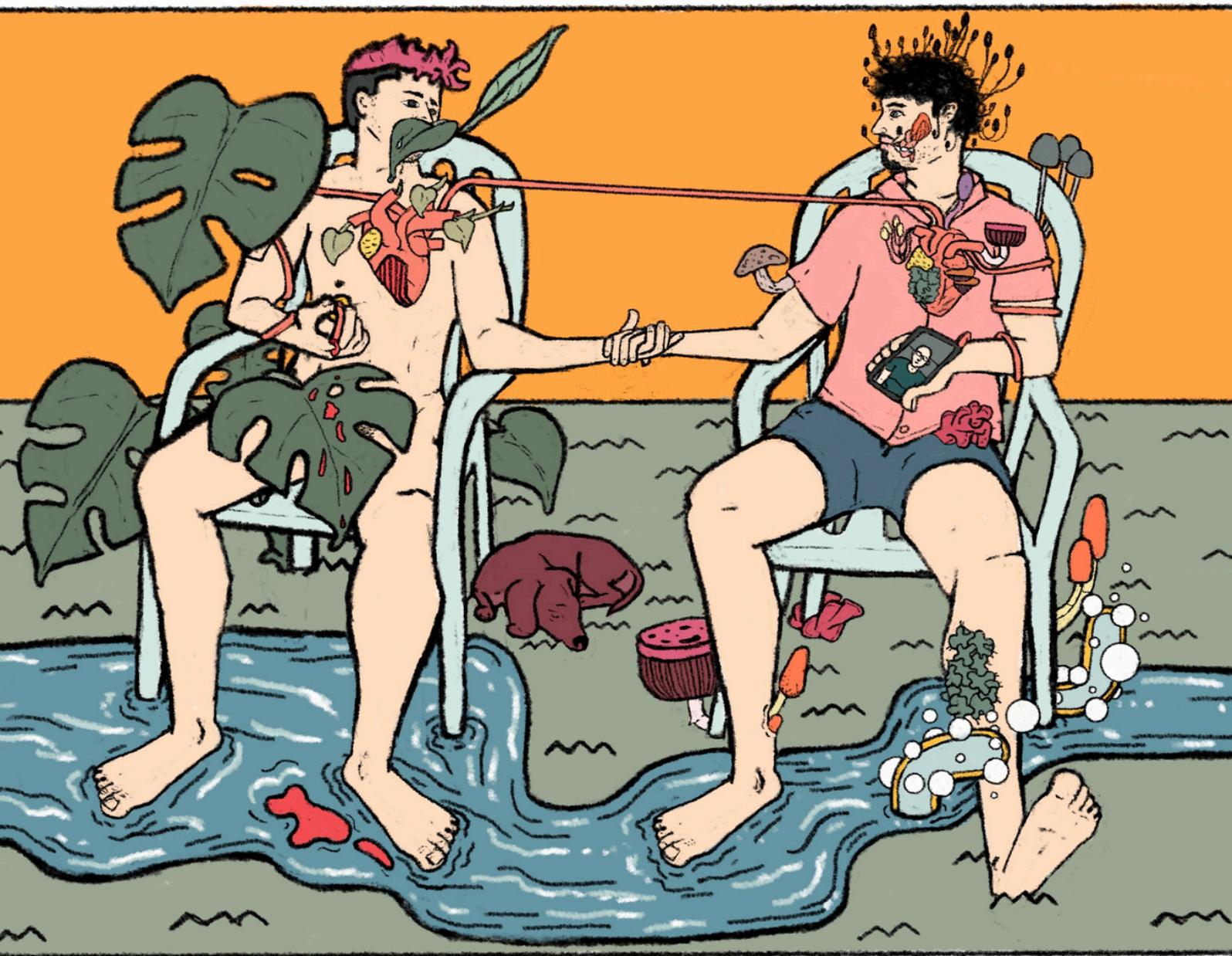
Saturn

Kate Nichols | Poetry

we were gentle, quiet. we were gradual, by degrees, little by little. I was little, degreed. I was on axis. you were stirring, but slow. you were saturn. by degrees, we became a system. sluggishly, the system cursed. you were. sworn. taken by oath. promised, we were. I was small, glittering. our system was water. I was refraction. you were imitative. you were weak to sound, too weak to be called out to. I was wife of the sun. I was a lunar fortnight when it falls on a saturday. I was celebrated on the fifteenth day. you were saturday. you became a term for evening worship. me, the oath. curse. you, beyond language. you were a figure of speech. you disappeared swift as the words. we became a lexicon. there we were, catching sound. we caught the ear fragmentally, like liquid like light. we were saturn by surprise. we changed at an angle. like swearing. this was us moving slowly. this was us when we were gentle, also. we were dressed in dark colors. sapphire in our bodies. see. I was a woman. kind of small, glittering.

There is Before and After

Jorge Losoya | Art



Care

Jorge Losoya | Art



From The Ground Up

Beth Butler | Fiction

I heard them say we had fattened up well. They were waiting until we were glorious and plump, then they would pick us. We had been growing for years. Each month that passed we doubled in size. We were all magnificent now and we all glistened in the Sun.

The Summer was now coming to a close. The long nights were gradually getting shorter, and before we knew it, the tree we hung onto had transformed from green leaves into Autumnal burnt yellow and orange ones. We were all fit to burst. They would leave us swinging until the very last moment, then they'd come collecting.

The September evenings were much colder than they had been before, and day after day I watched my companions getting pulled from their branches and piled into wheelbarrows. I was, along with a few stragglers, waiting in the darkness.

I grew bored of waiting. September turned into October and I could see them all in the fields, way in the distance, choosing their perfect orange pumpkins. I grew and grew. I didn't know how much longer I could hold on before the insides of me burst.

I wasn't picked my human hands but a beak. I was now alone, left on the tree swinging in the cold wind. The breeze had battered my skin but the crows that perched on the telephone wires above me didn't think that mattered. Murders of them were starving and determined, pulling parts of my skin from my flesh. They all longed to fill up before they all vanished for the Winter months.

Day after day, different beaks of all kinds of length and sharpness, pecked at me until I was nothing.

I was too weak, too small to swing on a branch now, and so I was ripped off by a little pull from a sharp crow beak. I crashed to the floor. I lay beneath the leaves and grass, a memory of what I used to be. I was shrivelled, I was rotten, I was browning.

Days passed me by and the middle of October came sooner than I thought. In the distance, I heard the faint voices of children and their parents, choosing which pumpkin to take home with them. I, however, was left among the debris.

I couldn't believe how quickly the change happened. Late August, me and my comrades had balanced proudly on our tree, plump and shiny. Now I was alone in the grass, tiny and afraid, with no hope I could be anything else.

I was lost with no hope of being saved. The leaves turned crunchy; they covered me until I become part of them. The ground I lay on became icy. The seasons were changing sooner than I would have liked.

Days merged into one. I was accustomed to hearing the howling winds, the leaves and muck swirling around me. This day was different. Today there were footsteps but not that of a crow or a farm animal but a human. I trembled while large muddy boots marched along the frozen path. The figure bent down, they were wrapped up in a warm coat, a scarf around their neck and a woolly hat upon their head. Winter had surely come now.

With their gigantic hands, they ruffled through the leaf pile. They were thrown in every direction until the figure stopped, looked at me as though I was treasure and not trash. My core was scooped up into the air by cold hands and pushed into their pocket. It was dark in here; I didn't know what was happening, except the bounce of the human walking through the fields.

There were conkers inside their pockets. Other acorns and seeds rattled about. I sat in darkness for a few months. It was better, despite not being able to see, at least I had landed somewhere different.

That cold hand had thawed now. I was yanked from the pocket and tossed into their fist. They walked, they bounced, they opened a door to the outside. I was hit by a gale. The weather was freezing and this human was on a mission.

They knelt on the grass. Here it was muddy and I felt as though I could breathe, beside bushes and tall trees, the buds grew in the ground and told me that Spring had arrived. I was placed gently into the dirt besides what looked like roses. My core had now shrivelled up completely and I was only a lonely seed.

I was patted as if I was a good dog, then a pile of dirt came over the top of me. I was buried, but not by leaves, by the earth that moved around me. I felt the gentle trickle of water from above. I felt more alive than I had done since I was among my companions. I could feel myself flourish.

Something was different, I could feel it in the ground below me, and over the next few weeks I felt my seed body grow. Vines and roots spread their arms. I was stronger than I'd ever been before.

"I am reborn a new!" I cried.

Each day I was treated to a drink of water and food for me to nibble on. I wouldn't have recognised myself if I didn't know what I'd become.

Rebirth

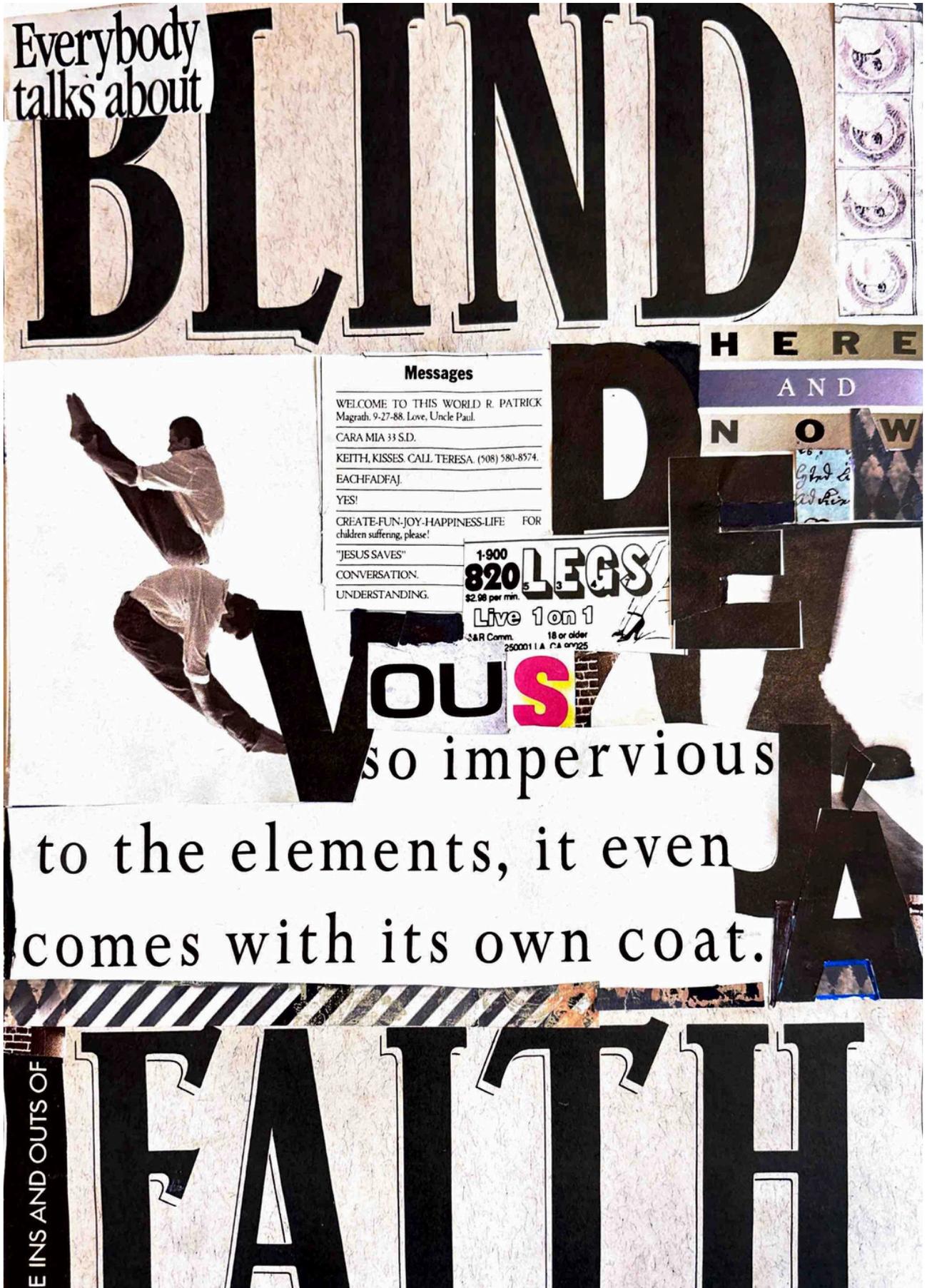
By April, I towered over the flowers and bushes. I was a tree now, tall, and proud, looking over my patch. I saw them then, my rescuer, sitting alone on a bench. They stared at me as if I was the most beautiful creation they had ever seen.

I am now a part of something much bigger. I am the mother to my babies and I've noticed them grow every day. All of them are magnificent, shiny, and just ripe enough.

I am once again treasured. I am once again reborn from the Earth.

Chatter

Ross Marshall | Art



Songs Dvořák's Mother Taught Me

Sarah Scarliff | Poetry

On to the whiskers on the face that meant payment,
the cat pittering amongst its dream chickens.

My old boy caught my boat by both arms, swung the thing
skyward like a throaty song. Swayed in silent death.

Our wooden captain pulled his beard taut, wrinkled his eyes its direction,
agreed. You've got nothing, girl. Nothing. On to the peels, my sun

which cracked the midday in two, then the evening in fifths and in the summer slung my knees
against the gravel and then my palms, then my cheeks, I saw the dust finally.

I saw a bat flap out of a cave because it was startled. This is how
you scare the tapetumed beast: fling yourself at the mouth of its home and lay there

while everything becomes its home but you, and you stay. My old boy loved anything senseless
and had no bed to come back to. There I saw the cat at its finest, in one pierce

the life of a Carolina wren. He stepped on that bird in the morning. I dozed to cicadas. He
called the shed tests his Spanish, the pale shadows of all he was meant to say.

But he knew enough for the sea to be its French name, La Mer, where my boat went. His
paintpot form in lilac and pink dots, my surrogate throng

Lines

Sarah Scarliff | Poetry

that rattle in my mind as sand would a flume: I wish I could live with you forever; I can't believe I can't remember how we met; and, on the train from Rouen to Paris, I love you mouthed mutely and first I didn't know it but then I did. That: belief. In my past anything a man could say beginning with Don't caused me desire to shove myself into copper and drill into the thick crust of their skull forever. But then rattles Don't worry, Don't be away from me. That long again. The brain is behind what it wants like a shotgun to fowl. Clear sight in crisp autumn. So few things stand in the way but they do stand. There are times I press to my chest the hard lateral ends of my metacarpals as if some cog has edged out and as if my hand has any hope in attenuating something like that. The only ministry who could to the bone make me lovely is The Lord or pregnancy. In truth the small touch calms me. I would stand between you and your hurt so you'd never know it. You'd never know it was there. I move between it and the back of your safe head and am glad. Belief. One intercedes in silence for him whom they love.

The Last Eulogy

Cassund Olivier | Fiction

Pana Bonaparte considered Wednesdays to be the people's Saturday. She was the last Bonaparte left in her family, so she figured she could rewrite all the rules. Bend calendars, space, and time. It didn't matter anymore. All the days and weeks and months had all blended into each other anyway. After her youngest cousin Manu died, the last one to go, that's when her memories were gifted back to her. It took a year of wading in the waters alone for her to buy that expensive black gown hanging over the mirror. She didn't go to her father's funeral almost twenty years ago. Wasn't invited. The dominos of Bonaparte deaths started with him. Didn't go to Grandpa's a few years after that. Didn't go to the aunties', the uncles', the cousins', Mom's, or Papouch's—her own older sister. With every death, she had to remind herself to be sad. That's what was expected of her. With all of them gone now, her mind and body were safe to exist. The spell of being alive lifted.

She woke up before her alarm and watched the minutes pass by until the horns started to sound at 5AM, and it still made her bones jump under the duvet. When she stood from her twin bed, she tripped over last night's take out, but the mountain of laundry blocking the door broke her fall. She kicked the clothes to the side and headed to the bathroom.

She was excited about the eulogy. She'd been writing it for a few months now, making sure she honored her father as best she could. She didn't know what she believed anymore. If he'd be able to see or hear her, if he was merely resting, if he was nothing but dust and maggots at this point, or if it mattered at all. The power of her subconscious over her mind decimated her confidence in certainty. So just in case, she'd make herself pretty. She brewed some tea to polish her voice and left it to steep next to the overflowing sink while she took a shower.

It was satisfying to watch the murky suds rush down the drain, poisoned with the caked dead skin and sweat coming off her. She scrubbed and rinsed twice all the way through. Sipping her tea on the corner of her bed, she waited for the steam to clear before doing her makeup at the mirror. She ran lines in her head as she dabbed pink glitter over her left eyelid. Practiced inflections as she smeared the matte blue over her right. She used a white eyeliner for the bottoms, and a shimmering gold paste for the tops. She applied the first layer of matte black lipstick and tried not to smile or laugh before it dried. After putting on an old, chunky mascara, she applied the second layer of lipstick and was good to go. No foundation or powder. She didn't want to risk any sweat that would inevitably ruin her nose and cheeks. What would be the point in all this if the mask melted before the show's even begun?

Rebirth

She took her time putting on the gown. It was the first time she'd ever worn a petticoat. The layers of silk and tulle didn't touch her skin, but the weight of it all was a comfort. She shoved her feet into black boots and found a corner of the room cleared of clutter to sit down and tie the laces tight against her ankles and shins. Before she gathered her belongings, she rubbed a light layer of castor oil into her bald scalp. Popped on the chunkiest silver and gold rings she owned and clipped on an old pair of tiny pearls she found at a vintage store downtown. She took one last look at herself in the mirror. The corset was just tight enough to keep her uncomfortable and alert. Shoulders back, her breasts perched below the gloved, laced shrug over her collar and shoulders, covering her turtle and albatross tattoos. Its ruffled turtleneck threatening to choke her. She threw a little gloss over the lipstick and made sure none of it got on her teeth. She grabbed her keys, her karaoke microphone, and the eulogy she'd printed out on cardstock.

It would take an hour to walk there. The morning air was crisp and fresh against her newly cleansed body. Her skin could breathe just as impressively as her lungs. With each step she grew giddier with anticipation. The sun had only just broken through the horizon. The homeless and the suits alike, beginning their disparate Wednesdays, avoided Pana and moved aside to let her pass. The ones that bothered to look at her looked in awe, confusion, and fear. Perhaps they were all correct. Every thought that must've passed through their minds as they watched the dark princess at dawn: yes.

A monarch butterfly had started to follow her around ten minutes into the walk. A child waiting at the bus stop with their guardian pointed up at her as she passed, and their guardian pulled them in close. Pana watched the butterfly circle around the child's head before continuing their now shared commute to the cemetery. They marched in silence together through the gates, through the aisles, until she reached her destination.

There the headstone was. She'd never seen it before and she didn't know what she'd been expecting, but it did seem a bit lackluster. There he laid: Joël Bonaparte; November 27th, 1966 - December 25th, 2008. Under his name was his mother's; an act of God having taken them on the same night, in the same hour, in the same crushed car. Pana forgot they shared a grave and almost regretted forgetting to write anything in honor of her father's confidant and protector. The guilt dissipated rather quickly. The show was about to start. It was a cloudy morning everywhere except for the plot of land that housed his remains. The sun shone through the clouds over her like a spotlight. When she looked up at the sky, a hawk was flying overhead and landed in a tree not too far away. A family of robin redbreasts poked holes in the ground in front of his grave searching for worms in the moist soil. Pana considered them her congregation.

She cleared her throat and turned on the microphone. “Testing, one, two, three.” One bird poked her head up, but the rest seemed completely unbothered by her intrusion of their meal. It was early enough in the day for the cemetery to be clear of mourners, but across the way she could spot single strangers walking their dogs. She held up the pages of cardstock in her left hand and held the mic up to her lips with her right. She realized she’d lost the butterfly as she walked deeper and deeper in.

“Hey dude,” she read verbatim. One of the dog walkers turned in the direction of her voice but carried on. As her eulogy went on, more dog walkers would keep their distance, more onlookers would pretend not to listen, the redbreasts would continue to eat, and the hawk would screech from high above with the occasional weep and applause.

“Today is May 18th, 2025. I am twenty-four years old. If I’ve done my math correctly, you’d have been fifty-eight by now. Papouch would’ve been thirty next month. Ma would’ve been fifty-five in February. Do you care about that? I digress.

‘I finally watched the taping of your funeral the other day. Packed house. I always forget I’m the last of the Seventh Day Adventist equivalent to the Kennedy’s. Over a thousand people flew in from every corner of the country, from north and south and near and far, to say goodbye and pretend they knew you. I’ve never second-guessed my decision to leave your church, but Christ Almighty, no such display has ever made me surer of your godlessness. Yee workers of lawlessness, you guys are weird as hell.

‘As you know, Papouch and I were still in the hospital states away, recovering from injuries and complications from the accident when they put you in the ground. I guess it would have been the first funeral in history to be postponed, and who would want to go through the trouble of that? Your brother Oma and his wife Joumou have always hated Ma just as much as you did. Maybe even more on your behalf if they were eager enough to believe the lies you spread about her. I was much better off than Papouch in terms of visible injury. I don’t think there was even a scratch on me. “Miracle child,” they called me while I waited at the hospital for Ma to arrive from hours away. When she finally got to me—terrified that her children may be unrecognizable when she sees them—Joumou, you remember her right? Your little demon twin? They were supposed to pick us up so we could rest. Ma called them over and over again after visiting hours were up, and they wouldn’t pick up the phone. We slept on the cold cafeteria benches in the hospital while Papouch slept alone upstairs, her leg and spirit in pieces. They would never disrespect your wishes like that. They know better. To love is to deviate from your high ground, and love is never worth that.

‘ Pierre is dead. I’m sure you’re keeping each other cool down there. Your sister, Raba, and her son were free of him for a while. Oh, she had a son! It’s not lost on me that she waited until you were dead to have him. He’s gone now too. Resting where the deer and the antelope play. Anyway... When Papouch was having a really hard time at home, Pierre and Raba took her in for a while. It was the perfect opportunity to continue the terror on Ma. Everyone has committed to carrying on your legacy. Pierre took her in, enabled her addiction, and told her all about how much he wanted to divorce your baby sister during their little tête-à-tête’s. Told her to take notes on what a woman should be, and Raba wasn’t it. God forbid a woman carrying the weight of every man in her family on her back fall mentally ill for a bit. God forbid a man loves and supports his wife, the mother of his child, through sickness and in health. Amiright? He died of pancreatic cancer on December 27th, 2023, if you can believe that! He just missed you. When I got the news, I thought back to the weeks after their son was born. Listening to him publicly shame Raba, complaining about how little sex she was giving him while she breastfed under the sound of his voice. And yet, we mourn the loss of Apollo in Cassandra’s front yard.

‘I know what you’re thinking. Isn’t it a good thing that he was there for Papouch when no one else was? Well sure, if he actually gave a fuck about her wellbeing. If he gave a fuck about the wellbeing of any woman he claimed to love. He had a chance to show up for Anaha before she took her own life. You remember Anaha, right? Oma’s eldest daughter and Manu’s sister? No, instead he joined forces with Raba and Joumou to blame her for the violence committed against her body. Shame her for following your rules, your training, and suffering the consequences. He had a chance to show up for Hanna before she flew away from us too. His niece, his own flesh and blood, after her innocence and autonomy was stolen for a second time. After living in a hell of his sister’s making. Instead, Pierre workshopped his tight five in front of a roaring crowd: ‘What is she, a prostitute or something?’ They couldn’t get enough of the stuff! Worry not. Pierre kept his word and made all our lives worse. He didn’t show up for Papouch. He checked back into the game of hate and power. In a way, he won. I hope you had a jug of Gatorade ready to pour over him. Sportsmanship is important. Even after death.

‘Oma took pride in being the oldest after you died. He is either dumb as rocks or equally as lost. “They’re good men. I don’t know why this keeps happening to our family,” he told me

after the last death before his own. He's right, isn't he? That's the standard? Cheat on your wife, psychologically torture her in her own home, employ your friends and family to do so as well, beat the shit out of your kids until they bleed or pee themselves, and when your daughters are raped, blame, point, and laugh at them. If they're you, they'll do the raping themselves. Consistency is key with family. You all have the heart of a fucking Disney witch. One hundred peas in a pod, it's adorable.

'Ma went peacefully in her sleep after Papouch left us to meet Hanna, Anaha, and Manu. When it was down to just the two of us, we'd drink tea together. She told me how one of your friends warned her about you when you first started dating at church. Called you a no-good bluffer, but she didn't think anything of it. I can only imagine what would condone a man to warn a woman about his own bro of such high stature. A genuine warning with no strings attached. But how bad could you be if y'all were still choppin' it up after potluck? Birds of an oil-coated feather.

'Ma had defended you and your family to me my whole life. To her credit, she didn't know everything. Evidently, neither did I. She didn't have the capacity to know everything. That's how you all like us: ignorant and grateful. It took Papouch's final cry for help for us to wake up. Before you or anyone else gets any ideas, Ma's never done or said anything to try to turn me against you, which I'll admit, is its own problem. Long after you moved out, she still loved you. Well, to her heart's capacity, which for too long was only as capable as the church allows. But at least she lived long enough to witness the error of her ways. Over tea, she told me what her line with you was. The second you put a hand on her, she'd be out before you could spell "property." No if's, and's, or but's. Of course, that line didn't extend to us, child abuse being the only way the church knows how to love but look at me... Digressing again. I think about what must've taken place to prompt that statement. What bells must've gone off in your head when you heard that. Everything else you could get away with as long as you were smarter than her.

'No one's ever respected you. They fear you. And I think you know that. And you don't care. So, fuck you. Fuck all of you through and through, my guy.

'Before Oma died, he told me you would've been proud of me. He's always thought that was helpful to say. As if I would ever want people to know we're related. This name has followed

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me at every stop after I ran away from everything. I eventually found the late and bright idea to change it once I got to the city. Ma once told me in passing that if she ever had a son, she'd have named him André. So that's who I am now and the only identity that matters to me. My mother's child.

'The city isn't far enough. They still know your name here. Unfortunately for me, we still share a face that's hard to misplace. I'd hold my breath whenever I needed to go downtown, but I was always able to spot their quiet resentment before they could spot me. Look at God. Interceding for you and I.

'Papouch died a meninist with zero self-esteem. She thought a man smiling at her upon their first meeting was the pinnacle of romance, passing time ridiculing other women for existing. I'm sure you can guess how well that went, and how well it went again and again. I myself am an alcoholic drug abuser who's never been able to eat a meal without hating myself. We've done better for ourselves than if you were to live longer, so I guess that's something. I've been dancing with death all on my own here, so you can rest easy. You got what you wanted. Stick to the playbook, win the game.

'I wrote a book. It's doing relatively well. You would hate it. Maybe I'll come read it to you one day. Line by line. Don't you want to hear how much of a ruiner you are? Or would it only make you feel like more of a man? Surely, it's a powerful skill to lead others to suicide. Once Ma was gone, there was no one left to need me. No one to claim me as their tool. I was scared I might see you the night I overdosed. But I wanted to talk to you first before I let go. To stand over you and make you small under my feet. I know I'm having a bit of fun, but I hope I'm still being clear. If you were alive just a year ago, I'd read a worse eulogy to you then kill you myself with my bare hands. Brother, I'd wring your fucking neck. I'd make you disappear within yourself before your eyes began to roll to the back of your head. But here we are. Perhaps it's for the best.

'Doesn't take much effort. Dead or alive, you are the smallest man.

'I don't know what happens after death. I think the Christians are probably wrong, given their whole thing. After I left your church, I found God in the harmony and spirit of nature, in the magic that is science, in the power of knowledge and understanding, in the resilience of the histories of all the world's destitute, and in the spirit that connects me to a stranger and to myself. I learned what you call love is nothing more than evil and masterful control. Jesus would have thrown all y'all out the temple. You've rendered yourselves allergic to anything he ever said.

Desperate to rebuild the darkness of the Sodom and Gomorrah you claim to condemn. Imagine... It's crazy-making how none of you see it. The same humanity killing machine laced through modern history killed Jesus, blamed it on the Jews, then made him your mascot. The proof could not be more evident in the pudding, but for the last time, I digress.

A belief in things unknown, is that not the point of your faith? I've grown the humility to embrace whimsy and say I may never be sure of anything. I don't know if you've been watching over me. I don't know if you've watched as they died one after the other. But on the off chance you're here, if you can hear and see me now, I hope you feel everything. I hope your time under the ground has given you some perspective. I hope this eulogy echoes in your spirit and kills you over and over and over again. And if you're nowhere, well... the birds and bugs can hear me. If God exists anywhere, it's in them. We've long lost the plot. What favor do we deserve?

'Your death was kinda wild, I'll give you that. Very dramatic. That tree on the highway had a mission. Your head was the bull's eye with not a single other car on the road that early Christmas morning. Your family saw fit to accuse Ma's Ma of voodoo, which 'till this day still makes me laugh quite a bit. I almost wish she'd care that much. I don't blame them for suspecting foul play. They know themselves better than anybody. But if your death was anything other than coincidence, why don't any of ye holy Christians think it may have been God Himself stepping in? Doth your lord not give a fuck about the precious nature of a child's innocence? Doth your lord not give a fuck about the mothers and daughters that fuel the Earth? Cartoonish as your death was, it was rather quick, and the evil I know knows no mercy. Unless Miss Son of the Morning was low on infantrymen, I can't imagine why he'd bother.

'That night in the hospital, that night they told us you were dead, I watched Papouch and Ma sob. Already, I was a small shell of a person with no feelings or memories to hold on to. So quickly had my brain forced me to forget what you'd done to us, and subsequently what you made Papouch do to me. So quickly did I become lost to my own body. I have never cried for you, even when I still believed you must've loved me. The body keeps the score.

'Before I go, I guess I should leave you with some good news. Your family may have been

wrong about how you died, but they weren't wrong about Ma's nature. The black blood running through her veins. She protected your reputation. Smiled at you and welcomed you in and out of our home while you actively abused us. Scolded Ma for leaving you. Approved of your behavior until it came for her. Who could blame her? Born and bred of the same curse and violence of selfish and holy men, her mind long stolen from her, what chance did she have to see evil as anything other than love and duty? How could she not want to save the souls of her loved ones through silent obedience and groomed guidance? Lest we forget, pedophiles and men need not face judgement, but a woman who doesn't know her place? Cast the first and last stones, for she and the world is better off dead.

'But I fear I can't blame her for anything. I can't blame any of you for any one thing. They know not what they do, and all that. I fear in all the lies that Christians believe, they're each veiled to some degree in this unfortunate truth. I won't pretend I don't know what your father did to you, your siblings, and your mother. I won't presume to not understand you never stood a chance either. But when does it stop if I start drawing fault lines at your feet? It'll be everyone's fault until it's Napoleon's fault, until it's Christopher Columbus's fault, all the way until it's Emperor Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus himself on the stand before me and all my rage. Where's my peace in that, ya know? When does it stop? They know not what they do, he said. Regardless of one's faith in his power, science and history still prove Jesus of Nazareth as having been on to something.

'I always found it strange how proud of your last name you were. Puffing out your chest as a remnant of rape, pillaging, and slavery, you fucking bozo. Do you remember the history books of his life and triumphs that you kept in the basement? The crackpot essays about his prowess and collections of notable people throughout history who shared the same name either by blood or mere coincidence? I guess I shouldn't be shocked. All you and the church care about is the two-dimensional image. The shiny medals and painted suits of ritual always more valuable than the character of your heart. Does it comfort you to stand arm in arm and break bread with the man who tried to kill you all? Does that feel good? Do you feel anything?

'I haven't forgotten about Junior, your youngest brother. He loved you so fucking much. Hung on your every fucking word. I watched him on tape vow to take your place as Papouch and I's father. To make sure we were taken care of. I was grateful for that laugh. I'd been so tense

sitting there watching it and I needed that release. I haven't spoken to him in over a decade. In a way, we're all winners there. I'm sure he attended every funeral before his own, miserable and alone as ever. I saw him once in the city after Papouch and before Ma in a grocery store. He walked right past me. Didn't recognize me. He was much older and looked a lot like you. I guess I was older too, and he has never known me. I watched him pay for his beers and bag of dog food. He left without feeling the ghost at his back. I think the ghost went with him. Those last breaths of him, of you, were the end for me.

'We're worthless to you. Women and children. You've never seen the human in us, lest the one in you get a chance to live. Should anything happen to us, we better say thank you. So, here I am. Thanking you.

'They're all dead, Dad. Most of them not even close to old age. All your brothers and sisters and cousins and nieces and nephews and lovers and enemies, they're all gone. Papouch is gone. I'm your legacy. Does that stress you out?

'I don't want you to think I've lived long enough to become the vengeful villain. I understand who you all are and why. When you arrived, I hope you had a chance to look your father in the eyes and rip into him just as I am into you now. Every child's lost soul deserves that, I think. If you can hear me, maybe recite this eulogy for him when you get the chance. Blame him for everything to absolve you of any responsibility. I get it, bro. If I had a child before I released myself from this generational darkness, I'd likely be their villain origin story too. Blame those who came before me for everything. "Don't look at me like that, child! It's their fault I can't love you! It's their fault you need more from me!" But we've covered what prizes there are to win for playing that game. You win. I don't want to play anymore. Is this not what's asked of you? A circumcision of the heart?

'This is who you are, and this is what's left of me. You are too empty to truly feel how disconsolate you are. You float above the rest of us weak beating hearts and sublime souls. At least be proud of it. You've worked hard for this rest. Warmly, your daughter, Pana André.'"

Pana looked down at the final period of the eulogy. The cardstock under her fingertips were damp with sweat, and she was out of breath. Her lungs and throat weren't used to talking for this long anymore. She turned the karaoke mic off just as the battery was about to die. She stared at the headstone for a few seconds before she took a long, deep breath in, and a long, deep shout out. The redbreasts still hadn't had their fill of worms. She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the clouds had shifted to let in more of the sun's warmth on her head.

She folded up the eulogy to leave but paused and figured she might leave it for him. She could see the top of a large stone buried beneath the soil by the birds. She dug it out and dusted it off. She rested the rock over the cardstock on top of the headstone. She read her own name again. "We're done after today," she whispered to the grass beneath her boots. She stood up and had to hold onto him for balance, the world spinning and flashing bright colors. She remembered hunger and wanted to have some breakfast.

The first few steps away, she stared back at him, promising to never see him again. Finally, she turned her neck and broke the last remaining thread. Her head above water now, she froze. There were ten to fifteen dog walkers and mourners alike at various safe distances away from her, staring. Pana stared right back at each of them. After a while she expected someone to look away, or at the very least ask a question or wave. But they were just as frozen as she had always been. Looking from one face to the next, as if independent from her body, something deep in her rushed out from her belly, puffed out her cheeks, and she began to laugh. She wheezed and held her corseted abs in pain. The muscles in her jaw and ears and eyes were sore from the strain. She bent over her petticoat in pure glee and hysteria, tears running from her eyes. "Oh man," she cried, trying to catch her breath. She regained her composure. She looked back at each staring face expecting a shift, but there they stood with their leashes and flowers. In awe, confusion, and fear. She doubled over in laughter again, but this time she kept moving. They stared and watched her skirts flow and float all the way back to the entrance. "Yeah," she shrugged. "Correct."

The further she flew from their eyes and his grave, the harder she laughed. The harder it was to breathe. The harder it was to die. When she reached the gate, there the monarch was, seemingly waiting for her. Above her head, she heard the hawk screech, gliding in figure eights. She held out her finger to the butterfly, but instead it jumped from the metal to her bald head. She'd never felt anything like it on her scalp before. She tried to control her giggles to not scare the little guy away. Her arms out beside her, Pana started her journey back home. The sidewalks were busier now. As people stared and tried not to stare and moved out of her skirt's way, she swore she could hear the monarch atop her head, laughing with her.

1-800-MEAT
Shane Allison | Art



On Bodies Of Water

Nia Watson| Poetry

I.

The Staten Island ferry smells nothing like seawater or rusted metal or bird shit,
but the man standing near the railing smells like fries and cigarettes.
This constant bobbing makes my stomach swirl—it's not terrible,
but I have to stare at the water with sunglasses on
because the sun is too bright and I have light sensitivity.
Maybe I have a lingering headache now, or maybe I haven't eaten yet today.
Hannah asks if fish live in these waters and I say yes,
but I think less about the fish and more about how many bodies may be at the bottom.

The fries and cigarettes man snaps a picture of the water. I wonder if he saw a body.

II.

Earlier this year, I saw the Panama Canal.
I watched the big, big cargo ships pass through the locks.
I watched the chambers fill with water. Then, I came home.

The last time I rode the ferry across the Bay, I sat with a short-haired girl.
She had been drugged at the bar the night before
and the boat's waves brought back a familiar sickness.
We cried and listened to Kali Uchis. We cried and looked at the waves.
We stared at the clouds, then the waves, then the buildings.
We didn't hide behind sunglasses then.

On Bodies Of Water

Nia Watson | Poetry

III.

Sometime after the bobbing stopped and the swirling in my stomach ended,

I sat across from a friend at dinner.

She goes to Staten Island for her nails and Brooklyn for her hair,

and so on, and so on.

She had just returned from a trip with her boyfriend—I hate her boyfriend—

and I thought about the bodies in the Bay again.

I thought about adding his next.

This big, wide Bay. This body of water,

filled with the tears of babies and dreamers.

Western Ford Gateway

Steadman Quetin | Fiction

Crumpled rose petals bled from the soil where Peter had buried both hands. In warm black pitch, his fingers worked deep, feeling for the crabgrass' central root, pinching it between thumb and index finger and pulling it free in one long motion. The smell of petrichor and decay. He tossed the weed behind him in a growing pile. Peter reached up and wiped his brow with one forearm. The sun burned through the white t-shirt he wore. It had been an hour, hour thirty at most, and Peter hadn't much more of himself that he could give.

Something to smoke would've been welcome. That urge always lurked just right there, at the lowest point in Peter's throat, right above where his collarbone grew. It quivered, filling Peter's mouth with saliva. He turned and spat on the ground.

The field of fresh wheat surrounding the property watched in silence as he worked. Their tips gently swayed in the wind breezing by, the gold of their stalks ebbing like a wave of molten white pouring down the hillside, building and building until crashing into the pavement far below where Peter's truck sat.

Peter glanced at the mansion. Pale stone columns stood guard out in front of the veranda, casting a shadow just out of his reach. He heard the trickling of a fountain around the corner, nestled farther into the garden wrapped loosely around the house. He still needed to remove the grass shavings floating within its waters.

Peter lurched forward suddenly, a series of violent coughs shaking his entire body. Phlegm, this as tar, crept up his throat. Clutching his chest, he kept as still as he could while the episode persisted, trickles of warm substance brimming at the corners of lips pressed tightly together. His neck burned. His legs were sore. Peter wiped his mouth, burying the yellow-green mucus under the mulch. This wasn't his job. He knew what he signed up for: he was the mower, his responsibility was the yard, front and back. Diagonal streaks starting from the far-left corner. Every third strip, shut the mower down to empty the bag into the pickup's trailer. Predictable as far as the view from the mower would let him see. From there it was a matter of waiting in the truck for Donahue to finish up and collect their pay before driving off to the next lonesome widow or decrepit star.

But Donahue wasn't there. Flowers contorted and curled under Peter's stiff hands as he tried to move them out of the way. There were sparse anemones scattered in a mix of hydrangeas. Peter remembered his grandmother's garden full of anemones, their scent of woodsmoke. His grandmother, the brim of her hat large enough to blot out the sun when she looked at him one day and asked what the doctor said. What did the doctor say? Those were her exact words.

The request arrived last Friday, the weekend before Labor Day. When the Mr. Laurence's and the Mrs. White's called about wanting to spruce up their land to show off to acquaintances. Though usually received in the form of a phone call from a representative of the individual wishing to get their property serviced, this one was an e-mail, signed only 'Shelby' and with an address somewhere along Western Ford Gateway, a newer part of the city still imbued with the farmlands decorated right along the outskirts. Donahue claimed a headache would take him out until their evening appointment with Ms. Laurie, a longtime client of the business. Peter knew that Donahue was simply biding his time, intending on taking advantage of alone time with Ms. Laurie while Peter sat on the mower cutting patterns in the woman's yard. Hoping to get it finished before the busy schedule began, he went alone.

Peter pulled his phone from his pocket. It was well past two in the afternoon. He stared at the screen. A voicemail and four new messages since this morning. Pressing the dial button, he raised it to his ear. There was static, and then the whirring of a machine in the background. A young voice spoke over the line.

"This message is for Peter Dento. This is the office of Doctor SteinReminder to schedule a time to discuss your lab results..."

He lowered the phone from his face and began to walk the perimeter of the house, examining his work one last time. Splotches of green and wild tangles of weeds nestled in several corners, but he continued. He was done here. If the owner had anything to say, he'd be glad to give her his partner's number. Heading towards the front door, weariness began to settle in every step. His throat quivered and he feared another attack would arise. It had been like this since the diagnosis, when the doctors delivered their news on a sterile Tuesday some handful of months ago. It was a hasty decision, to leave everything and come to the city.

But Peter knew if he had to die, he would find somewhere away from his family to skunk off to; no sense in having them all witness his degradation as a result of a habit formed when he was but a teenager, and still carried on to this day (in fact, Peter had just finished off the last of his Parliament cigarettes when he'd first arrived at the mansion).

Peter stood in front of a pair of gigantic oak doors embellished with jagged patterns carved all over. A soft melody drifted from behind their surface. It was little more than a hum peeking through, the barest accent of a trumpet twinkling somewhere inside. Peter raised a fist and knocked twice, paused, and knocked two more times.

The music faded away. A lock groaned, twisted somewhere, and the doors swung open. A man stood in the entry, looking at Peter. He was tall. Taller than Peter. He wore no shirt. Black hair peppered his chest, slick with perspiration. A ponytail captured the hair on his head. The man leaned against the doorframe, watching Peter with dark eyes.

Can I help you, the man asked Peter.

Peter opened his mouth but quickly stifled a cough. Light danced at the edge of his vision, but when he stood up, wiping his mouth once more, he looked firmly into the man's eyes. Peter jerked his head back. The yard's finished, he said. He took a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, smoothed out the wrinkles and handed it over. Is Shelby here?

The man eyed the paper. He looked at Peter. I'm Shelby. He grabbed the paper and tucked it into the waistband of his grey sweatpants. He glided back one step. Come in, Shelby said, gesturing inside.

Peter followed, stepping across the threshold, his boots echoed off the floors, bouncing freely between walls. There was no furniture, no pictures hanging anywhere. It was like looking inside a skeleton, one with charred bones the color of the mahogany that made the floor. Peter turned his gaze forward at the retreating back of the man named Shelby, wanting to call out and ask for his pay. He did not have time to be so idle; the job was done. Close by, a fraction of the room broke off in a hexagonal shape, fit for something the size of a grand piano.

The panels of glass stretched from floor to ceiling, letting in copious sunlight. Peter followed the beams bending towards the man, as if beckoning to touch his skin. They grazed over his form, muscles rippling under their caress. The light made the scars of white flesh trailing from his shoulder blades to the small of his lower back stand out. Peter noticed the sword Shelby carried in his right hand.

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The man, Shelby, left Peter alone for a while. The front door still stood open. Peter could see the truck waiting at the bottom of the hill. He checked the time, ignoring the messages piling up on his screen. In one more hour traffic would swell throughout the city. He still needed to visit the pharmacy and update his prescription.

Peter walked around what he presumed to be a living room. A tiny cot lay in the corner close to where the floor turned to marble and started into the kitchen area. An alarm clock sat close by, nestled on top of several blankets. To the right sat a record player decorated in black and silver. Peter moved closer.

A disc spun noiselessly while the needle perched from above. If you guess the song that's playing I'll double your pay. Shelby appeared beside Peter, staring at him. His hands tapped a wad of bills folded up, clipped together by a thin piece of silver.

Peter shook his head. I'll be glad to take the regular pay, sir. Fifty dollars.

Are you not a betting man? Shelby asked.

No, Peter said. He watched as Shelby reached over and gently lowered the needle back on the disc. Music returned, a man's low voice crooning over a jazz rhythm. The notes of the organ were sharp and distinct, the drums an endless loop.

Shelby stepped back. Bobby Caldwell is good to practice to. Did you know that? He spread his feet apart and took a crouching stance. He twisted his body sideways while facing straight ahead. Skin stretched across shifting muscle. Peter felt his breath grow short, hearing this music and seeing this man. He suddenly remembered how alone they were. Shelby lifted his hand and held it outstretched. Though the sword was gone, Peter had no trouble seeing its length as an extension of the man's strict poise.

You're a fencer, Peter told him.

Shelby smiled. I am rich. And bored. He straightened himself out and walked away, towards the kitchen. I'm trying for a place to live, Shelby's voice called out as he left Peter alone once more. My mother died and left all her money. Shelby walked back in carrying two glasses filled with dark red. What do you think of this house?

Peter put his hands in his pockets. Empty.

Shelby leaned against the wall, taking a sip from one glass. I won't bring the furniture unless I know it's the place for me. Too much work bouncing it between houses while I search.

Then it's a waste, Peter said, to have someone fix the yard like that, if you don't know whether or not you'll stay. He knew he had yet to be paid but still he spoke.

Shelby looked at him. He licked his lips. A waste? He raised his hand holding one of the glasses. He started to turn it over, slowly. Droplets of red trickled out. They spilled unhurriedly, as if unsure of wanting to cross the approaching precipice. He tipped the glass further. The trickle melded into a stream of crimson splattering onto the wood floor. Peter did not watch the mess as it grew beside them like a deep, dark stain. Peter kept his eyes on the other man. Before the contents were completely empty Shelby lifted the glass away from the direction of the ground. A meager portion swirled at the bottom of the cup.

That is a waste, Shelby said. He raised the glass before Peter. Wine?

No thanks, Peter said.

Shelby took a sip from the glass and set it on the floor close by. Do you smoke?

His lungs burned already. Peter told him no. Shelby laughed. No smoking, no drinking. Do you even know if you're alive?

Peter thought about it. He thought of his family wondering where he ran off to. Messaging him every day, asking what the doctor told him. He began to wonder if it was the same thing that brought his man here as well. Beginnings. That's what Peter repeated to himself over and over when he left everything behind and brought only himself. Of beginning, even if it was just the start to another end.

So you sleep on the floor? Peter spoke aloud to fill the world with some other noise.

No. Shelby shook his head. I sleep in the room itself. Yesterday was in here. The day before it was the bathroom. Tonight the roof, so I can see the stars. Shelby tilted his head slightly. And that lovely, lovely yard. How else do you figure out these things?

Light flashed across his eyes. Peter blinked and looked out to see the sun sinking into the horizon. It had gotten late. Donahue would be wondering where he was. Peter wondered the same thing too. He turned towards Shelby to ask, once more, for his payment before the day left without him. But Shelby was looking at him. His eyes held a mirth to them, and Peter knew in the right light they'd blaze a truth. Shelby was smiling. His teeth were white and perfectly straight. Peter had seen that before.

All the Hollywood people – those of money – bore the same smile. But not those eyes.

You go and you go, Shelby said to him. But do you every get anywhere? Why don't people ever take the moment and let themselves live, eh? Peter watched him move away. The shadows glided alongside him. Shelby held up one finger towards the air. My mother, she always asked me if you can take things to Heaven. I wonder what that answer would be.

Peter stood there as Shelby disappeared behind a corner and returned with a handful of white candles. He carried a plate in his other hand and set it on the floor. He placed each candle carefully on the plate, ensuring they didn't fall.

There's no power, he said. They won't turn it on for me. Shelby sat on the floor, cross-legged, and held out a lighter. He looked up at Peter motioned to him. Come on. Sit, sit. Shelby lit the first candle. The flame seemed to stutter before jumping to life and burning proudly.

I need to go. Peter spoke quietly. The words brought forth a garden in his mind. they were fluent upon his voice; a practiced pattern of tongue and teeth that was well-versed in creating soft declarations of oath as hollow as his own failing breath. But this time it wasn't family he was trying to convince.

Peter pulled out his phone. Seventeen messages and eight missed calls. They still believed in him; that there was a chance to be found somewhere. It was too hard to tell them the truth. Everything turned to a blur long ago. It's why he wanted to mow. You can't see the future on a mower, just the path of green in front of you.

Go? Shelby lit the second candle. I think we are already gone. The flames danced across the empty walls. Their light the only source of brightness in the mansion. Peter could almost smell their fumes. He tucked his phone into his pocket and sat on the floor across from Shelby. He observed the other man, watching his features meld into the darkness of the house.

Where will you sleep tonight, Peter asked.

Shelby lit the third candle. He lowered both hands into his lap and stared at Peter. Peter moved first, filling the space in front of Shelby and pressing his lips against the other's. Rough fingers moved to caress his neck. Eyes still closed, Peter leaned away, feeling the callouses trace over skin one last time. He opened his eyes and stared at the flame. He could see nothing else. He tasted cinnamon on his lips as he licked over them.

Rebirth

Have you ever been with a man?

The shadows asked the question. They gathered around Peter as he concentrated on the flame. I am a man, Peter replied.

The shadows laughed softly at his answer. It reached out a hand, cupping Peter's face and lifting him up. Peter saw a face re-emerge, still staring at him. There was another smile on his face. The fingers brushing over Peter's skin were warm. Have you ever been with a man?

The shadows asked the question. They gathered around Peter as he concentrated on the flame. I am a man, Peter replied.

The shadows laughed softly at his answer. It reached out a hand, cupping Peter's face and lifting him up. Peter saw a face re-emerge, still staring at him. There was another smile on his face. The fingers brushing over Peter's skin were warm.

What's your name, Peter whispered.

Shelby Rose, he answered. Shelby reached for Peter, and Peter let himself be pulled. They fell into one another, letting the flickering light guide their movements. Peter knew they were moving; at one point he saw stars. By the thousands, he'd never seen so many at one point. A vast canvas of black, glittering with white jewels watching over them. The roof disappeared, Peter feeling the breeze brush over his bare skin. The walls were gone and the music too. He could hear the cars driving off into the distance. Could see the streetlights shining like stars that had gotten too close to the world and became trapped on this planet. The fields of wheat were still dancing around him, brushing by one another in their reverie, even after all this time.

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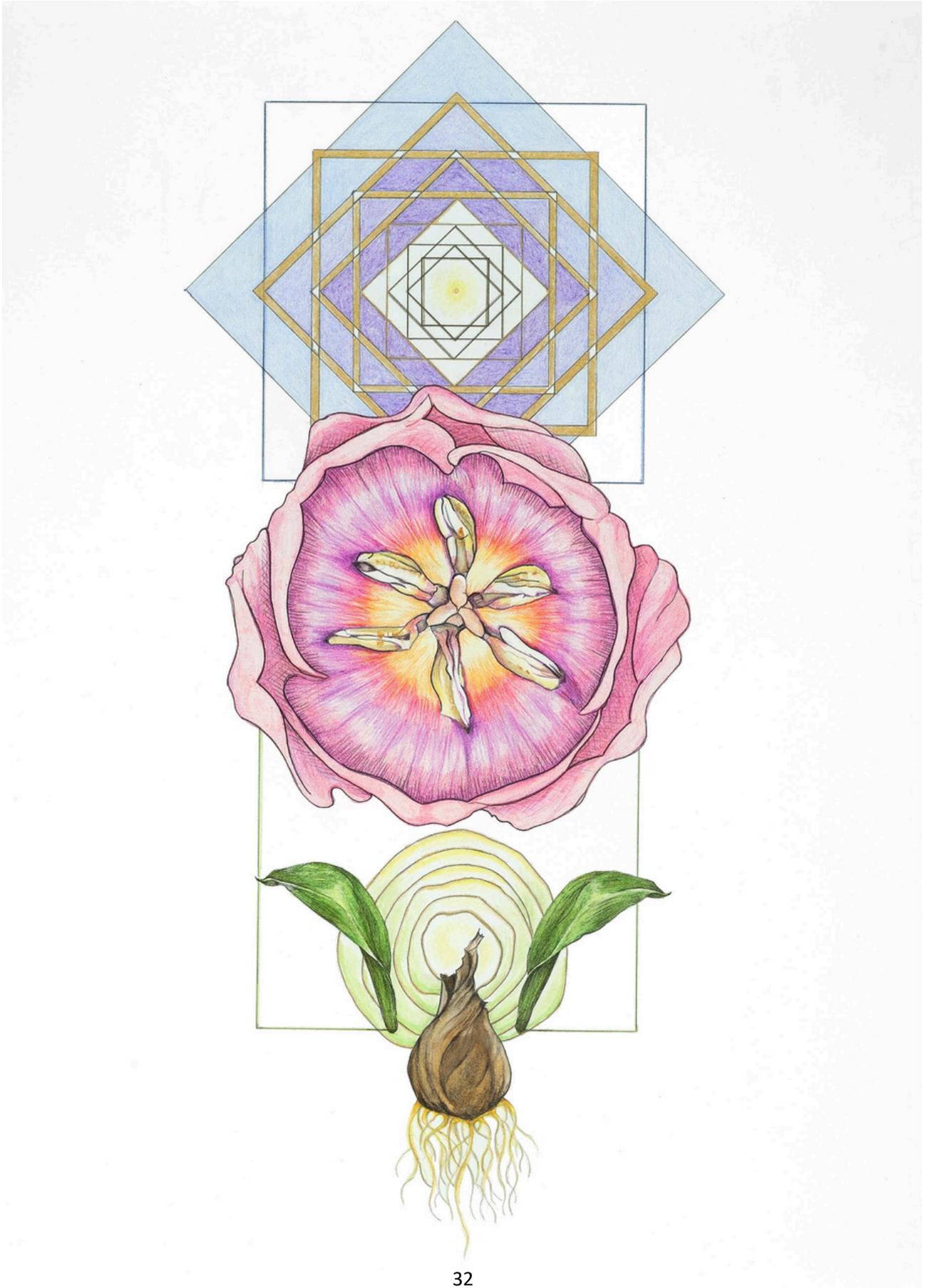
The morning sunlight woke him. Peter dragged himself from the cot, feeling a chill crawl over him as the blankets fell away. He slowly looked around. His clothes were still in a pile close by. All the windows were open. The door too. The wind blew unfettered. Birds peeked their heads in from outside. They hobbled along the windowsill. Some flew into the house and pecked at the ground, searching for food. Others plopped around the red stain on the floor. Distantly, the droning sound of an engine running across the wheat fields outside could be heard.

Peter retrieved his clothes and put them back on. The house sat empty. The wine glasses were gone, the record player disappeared. The candles were missing. Peter stared at the

doctor's office. He wanted the stars to come back. The message continued, each word echoing off the walls. Peter listened until the syllables melted away, until all he could hear was a melody beating against his chest, tickling the bottom of his throat.

# Metarmophosis

Rebecca Clark | Art



## Cardinal with Aura

Rebecca Clark | Art



## Lifespan

Meridith Olsson | Poetry

If I am a sand-burrowing  
mayfly, somewhere in the warm  
womb-like muck  
of a Florida riverbed, I hope  
the bank upon which I emerge  
into adulthood is  
beautiful. I have very little  
time to appreciate it  
either way, only the half-  
hour before dusk if I am  
lucky and struggle  
to find a mate, but  
maybe that scrambling  
exodus, shedding of childhood  
skin, would be improved  
by a noteworthy view  
of the white tumble  
of a waterfall while the  
males we are choosing  
drop into muddied,  
swirled water and

## Lifespan

Meridith Olsson | Poetry

die of exhaustion, wings  
twitching to a halt.  
I hope it is a view that goes  
well with the sunset  
which I know will be happening  
while each female deposits  
eggs into that same  
productive mire from which  
they clawed out of only  
five minutes before,  
then joins the fathers of  
their future children  
downstream, a sacrificial  
purpose performed for  
future generations  
of sand-burrowing mayflies  
to emerge into adulthood  
onto the same Florida riverbank,  
crawling desperately  
from womb-like muck  
into the sunset  
seeping red across the sky.

## **My Last Will and Testament**

**Duncan Johnson | Fiction**

“He was in a really bad accident,” said Martha. “He almost died.”

They sat alone in a dimly lit room, dust lining the bookshelves, countertops, everything.

“I see.” The doctor took off his glasses and wiped them with his shirt. “Tell me about it.”

“Oh, well...” Martha turned away. “I suppose you need to know. Normally I don’t like to get into it, but... we were all so scared for him.” She took a sharp breath, as though she might cry at any moment. “Well, he... he used to drive racecars, professionally. He wasn’t a big name but he was very good. Lord knows I don’t know a thing about racing, but it was every day he drove down to the race track and went round and round in that little deathtrap going a thousand miles an hour and all that. He had a team that he raced for and he brought home free t-shirts and jackets and we were all very proud of him and-”

“Did he have a will then?” asked the doctor.

“Excuse me?”

“A will and testament. Did he have a will and testament before the accident?” The doctor leaned back and stared at Martha.

“No he... no! He didn’t have a will and testament, he was twenty-nine years old! Why would he have a will?!”

“Driving a racecar is a dangerous sport, is it not?”

“Well... yes, but so is walking outside your door nowadays! Last week I saw something on the news about a couple getting shot in their own home. How terrifying!”

The doctor stared at her. “So he did not have a will?”

“No! No he didn't have a will!” Martha shifted in her seat, closer to rage now than sadness. “Anyways. His accident. One day he was in some big fancy race and he was going like he always does and he takes this sharp turn and then bam!” She smacked her fist into her hand. “His car flips and twirls a dozen times. It seemed so light as it soared through the air; the car almost looked like a dead leaf blowing across the ground. It kept going.”

## Rebirth

The doctor grimaced, then jolted at the sound of a loud groan coming from the second floor. The doctor and Martha exchanged glances and she continued speaking with a hushed voice.

“Of course these little guys come running out from this little car to try and help him, all the while the other racecars are still going at the speed of light, and the little helpers pull him out of the car and he’s totally limp, like a ragdoll,” she said the last part so quietly she almost mouthed the words. “Like a broken puppet that you pull out of a big tub of puppets and he just...” she sighed, and no longer spoke softly. “He looked like a sack of flesh and bones. Everyone thought he was completely dead.”

Silence from upstairs.

She shook her head. “But then they scraped him off the racetrack and put him in an ambulance and off he went. Two weeks later he walked out of the hospital with nothing but a little limp and a small issue with his speech. Something might have hit his brain or something because he has trouble saying words with R in them. He thought it was an issue with his mouth but the doctors said it was with his brain. By all accounts the minimal injuries he sustained were a gift from God,” she said, crossing herself. “We’re lucky he’s all in one piece after that crash. People who saw the accident thought he must be a ghost when they saw him walking around. It really looked like he died that day.”

The man sat still, deep in thought.

“After the accident, did he change? His personality, his mood, anything?”

A bird chirped outside and there was a creak upstairs; something shifted on the floorboards above them. Martha’s eyes darted to the stairs, and when nothing happened she ran her hands through her hair.

“Well,” she said, catching her breath, “he is a tad more sensitive now-”

“Be quiet, woman!” came a sonorous voice from upstairs, like the voice of a trainer talking to a dog. Martha recoiled in her chair, the voice sending an electric shock through her body.

The man with the glasses had a look of disgust on his face as he glanced towards the stairs. He shook his head and pulled a thin packet of yellow paper from his pocket. He began speaking again, this time very quietly. “Your son sent me a letter.”

Martha looked at the yellow paper and grew increasingly worried to the point of her eyes bulging out of their sockets, her mouth wide open. “What...” she whispered, “what horrible things did he tell you...”

The man unfolded the packet to reveal two sheets of yellow paper with fine black handwriting covering the front and back of both pages. Each sheet had been folded into thirds so neatly and so crisply that even after unfolding them they began to curl back into their folds.

“He sent me his *will*.” The man once again wiped his glasses, delicately put them on his nose, and began reading.

## Rebirth

The will reads as follows.

•

*Dear Dr. Hayes,*

*I understand that my mother sent an inquiry to have you brought here to give me a psychiatric evaluation. She mentioned that you would come into the house, my room even, and ask me many questions attempting to understand me, my life, and my mind. This is not desirable.*

*My mother thinks that I am in a “delicate” state of mind, but this cannot be further from the truth. My state of mind has never been more sound.*

*I’d venture to postulate that my mother will say something to the tune of “John was in a gruesome accident in a racecar and now his personality is completely changed.” This is all a part of her ruse to convince you that I have gone insane. Her motivation behind this ruse? Still unknown. Maybe you, a psychiatrist, can figure that out. In order to convince you, she’ll tell you the story of my accident in detail, about the wheels skidding under me as I took the 7th turn, she’ll probably even say this line exactly: “his car looked like a dead leaf blowing across the ground.” She keeps saying that to people; I think she thinks it’s poetic. Then she’ll tell you that before the accident I was a sweet young man who gave firm handshakes, made children laugh, stood up for the elderly, and nowadays I’m just shut up in my room doing God knows what. Well, what I’ve been doing is trying to figure out my will and testament.*

*You see, after my accident (which I readily admit was quite gruesome) I was instructed by doctors to remain seated and stationary for many months, forcing me to sit quietly with the fact that I’d just stared death in the face and lived to tell the tale. You see, when they put me in that ambulance, I wasn’t conscious. At least, not in your world. I felt myself completely awake, yet on another plane of existence, a plane where time and space are void and conversations can last a lifetime. My eyes seemed to see everything, yet nothing that made any sense, my ears heard a song sung by a choir of wild birds. I sat directly beside Satan for six years, during which I talked little and listened much. Scrambling for solace I found an oasis inside the mind of a chimpanzee. I did things I can’t explain to you in the English language. But what I learned from everything I saw in that world is this: we are here on Earth for a short time, and I need to make sure that I leave behind my possessions to those who deserve them.*

*Because of that, I’ve been drafting my will and testament, which is finally complete. Please note the following:*

*To my mother Martha Jameson I leave 50% of my estate. She raised me well as she could, and deserves some sort of reward.*

*To my friend Sam Kalahiki, I leave 50% of my estate. He is a good man and in the afterlife I will miss him dearly.*

*This document is final. There will be no edits, rewrites, or new recipients. I am in a sound state of mind and this document should be taken as legally binding.*

Rebirth

•

*Dear Dr. Hayes,*

*If you've been counting, it's been a week since our first meeting. I'm sure you have your own notes detailing that day's events, but I wish to get my memories in writing in an effort to chronicle such an important day.*

*You rang the doorbell (which greatly annoys me, please knock next time) at around 3pm, talked briefly with my mother at the door, then sat down with my mother in the living room. Though you may not have known it, the ventilation system in my house works in such a way that if I lean my head at a certain angle above the vent opening on the south-western corner in my room, I can hear everything being said in the living room as clearly as though I was in the room with them. I've heard many strange conversations between my mother and her friends that I'd rather forget, and you would too if you'd heard them.*

*That day she proceeded to tell you about my accident, then you read her the will and testament that I previously sent you, and she got upset. I should have mentioned to you that the document was private and should only have been read and released after my death; that was my fault. However now would be a good time to mention that this document is private and should only be shared after my death. Please do not read this to anyone, especially my mother.*

*Since you left last week I've tried to follow the instructions you gave me. I told my mother how I feel about her (the good and the bad), I told my friend Sam Kalahiki about the conversations I had with Satan while unconscious (he didn't know what to say), and I took a walk every day. The walks have been the best part; there's nothing like the feeling of crisp autumn air in your lungs and being one with nature. My limp is improving as well. Everything seems to be pointing up.*

*However it is in moments like this that we cannot forget that life is but temporary and the stars are the only thing that will outlive us all. We will all fade and crumble into the Earth, and our cosmic beings will be whisked away and never heard from again. Therefore please heed this new will and testament, which will not be altered hereafter.*

*To Dr. Fillian Hayes I leave  $X\%$  of my estate,  $X$  being the amount of money that I owe him. (Dr. Hayes please accept this as a substitute for your payment, I refuse to let my mother pay for this treatment. I have a feeling I will perish rather quickly, so your bills will not go unpaid for very long)*

*To my mother Martha Jameson I leave  $(100 - X) * .30\%$  of my estate. I'm not sure if my math is correct there. I want it to be 30% of the remaining money after paying Dr. Hayes. If needed please consult a mathematician.*

*To my friend Sam Kalahiki, I leave what remains of my estate. I am too tired to do the math.*

*This document is final, unlike the last document. There will be no edits, rewrites, or new recipients. I am in a sound state of mind and this document should be taken as legally binding.*

•

*Dear Dr. Hayes,*

*Maybe I should tell you this in person at our next session, but I'm writing to tell you that I've made a shocking discovery: I think my mind might be some sort of Rube-Goldberg contraption that takes years to get from the first step to the last. If that is the case, I think there is some serious work that needs to be done. Let me explain.*

*I remember four years ago a woman I knew (and fancied) invited me to dinner at a French restaurant, as she was a fan of French cuisine. At the time I didn't think anything of it and declined, saying I much prefer Italian cuisine. I actually considered my remark to be funny, a joke of sorts, and sorely regretted it when her reaction was pale and emotionless. But I've been chewing on that memory for the past four years in spare moments here and there, and finally something you said last session seemed to knock the last domino over.*

*To cut to the chase: clearly the woman was interested in me and clearly in a romantic way. Yet I hadn't had a clue until now. But how can that be? The reason is that the gears in my mind turn at a colossally slow pace; it took me all four years to piece it together, and I mean it. To be clear, it's not like one day the truth suddenly struck me, it's not like I clapped my hand to my head in a sudden moment of genius, no. I figured it out one piece at a time, like a detective, sometimes making guesses that were wrong, sometimes following cold leads, retracing my steps, slowly making progress. But I shouldn't need to do that. It should be obvious, she should ask me to dinner and I should grin and wink and say yes and then we should have a bottle of wine and get married and have children and I shouldn't have to spend four years trying to figure out a human interaction.*

*Isn't there some thing you can do to fix the Rube-Goldberg machine? Isn't that what psychiatrists do?*

*In an effort to understand myself, I've told all of this to my mother, as you'd instructed me to share my feelings with those close to me. Once I told her everything I just told you, she smiled and rubbed my shoulder and told me that she loved me. What an abhorrent reaction! No problem solving, no suggestions for fixes, nothing but shallow emotions. It's like answering "Yes" to the question "What year was Robespierre executed?" There is no intelligence or character in that answer, so of course I stormed up to my room and locked the door. What a fool she is!*

*In response, I have the following edit to my previous will.*

*0% of my estate should be left to Martha Jameson. The portion that she had previously should be given to whoever asks for it first. Aside from Martha Jameson. Anyone but her.*  
*Thank you.*

Rebirth

•

*Dear Dr. Hayes,*

*Sometimes I feel as though you are the great Buddha and I am merely one of your disciples. You have taught me so much about myself, my mind, and the world around me. Before our sessions I felt as though all the world was dark and gloomy; only now do pockets of light seem to spring up in unexpected places.*

*I listened to what you said, about being friendly and introducing myself to people. You told me to smile at strangers on the street, ask people's names. At first I thought the idea was foolish, as many idiots first thought of Darwin's works, but I readily admit I was wrong. I've introduced myself to many people: the cashier at the grocery store, an old man on the bus, my aunt. The old man on the bus was interesting, he said he'd fought in the second world war, and he told me spooky stories about dark caves in Japan. He said he'd watched his best friend die in front of him. I couldn't imagine Sam Kalahiki dying in front of me; just writing it down makes me shiver.*

*It's a wonderful thing, I've found, walking through the world with a smile on your face. Sometimes I think back to the months I spent brooding in my bedroom, thinking dark thoughts, trying to recount the words of Satan. But when I think of that time, I try to shake it out of me and spasm for a moment, hoping that those thoughts never come back. They don't seem to come back when I'm walking outside and making friends.*

*This past Sunday I met the woman I had told you about in my last will and testament, the one who invited me to dinner? I passed her on the street and before I recognized her I was smiling and suddenly she smiled back and hugged me and we were talking about old times and she was saying how much I'd changed and I told her about my accident. She seemed very upset when I told her about it, but I didn't go into too much detail. I asked if she wanted to get lunch sometime and she smiled and said yes, but I kept second guessing myself, wondering what step the Rube-Goldberg machine was on and hoping that I said everything right.*

*In an effort to speed up my mind's process I spent the next four days and nights meditating to the image of her face. I can see it now; coffee-brown eyes, a slightly crooked nose, a smile that could cheer up Satan, brown hair always getting in her face. I'm writing this letter the morning before we get lunch. I'm certainly very excited, but I can't get ahead of myself. It feels like a second chance at life!*

*Accordingly, and in response to some conversations with my mother that I will keep private, this is my new will and testament. Not to be changed.*

*To my mother Martha Jameson I leave 90% of my estate.*

*To Delilah Rosenberg, I leave 10% of my estate. Here's to hoping we fall in love.*

*If we do end up falling in love, I will certainly update this accordingly, perhaps a piece at a time, +10% to Delilah for each date. We will see. I'll talk to you Tuesday Dr. Hayes.*

*This document is final. I am in a sound state of mind and this should be taken as legally binding.*

Rebirth

•

*Dear Dr. Hayes,*

*This morning I saw a cat eating a bird and suddenly remembered that I'm going to die one day. I know I told you that I don't think about it anymore but sometimes, in the moments before sleep, I dream that I'm back on that astral plane with Satan laying down in the mind of a chimpanzee. I won't tell you the things he says to me, as I don't want to, but I will say that the chimp really loves peanut butter. I feel it in the neurons in his brain.*

*Delilah said we need to slow down and I understand. I suppose most people don't meditate to the image of a person before a first date. I guess it shows how stupid I am that I thought it was romantic.*

*In some ways I'm becoming a real person again, one who isn't obsessed with what happens after they die. But I'm a different man than I was before the accident, at least I think I am. It's hard to remember who I was, if that makes sense. Like remembering the mistakes you made as a kid; times you said mean things to your friends that you can't explain as an adult. Why did I do that? What was my logic? Sometimes we don't have logic I suppose.*

*I hope it's all for the better. I hope I'm a better man than I was a year ago.*

*I'd like to remove Delilah Rosenberg from my will. I'm moving too fast with her in my head; we haven't even held hands so I don't think I should put her in my will. I'm a foolish man.*

•

*Dear Dr. Hayes,*

*Delilah and I had another good date. In an effort to be normal, I tried not to think about her for a whole week and I almost succeeded, except for when I was at the grocery store and saw a radish that looked like her nose. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about her, but wasn't my fault! I told her this and she laughed and kissed me. She kissed me! I thought she'd be insulted! Honesty is key, just as you told me. Once again you are right about everything.*

*I'd like to take this time to ask you to please scrap all my previous wills. Burn them, if possible. I don't want to think about what happens after I die. I want to think about what happens when I'm alive. See you Tuesday.*

## Drumming in Superstition

Maria Pianelli Blair | Art



# Summer on my Mind

Maria Pianelli Blair | Art



## Vessel

Kelly Belton Ducote | Poetry

My room is not  
my own, rubbing the soft  
velvet of my coverlet  
atop a firm mattress  
where I've been broken  
open and remade by love,  
where my sons have suckled  
and will suckle after  
they've been expelled  
from my body, where daily  
my dreams become life.

This is a home of expansion  
where the touch of velvet becomes  
the buttery soft of firm belly,  
where inside, for you, is another  
home  
akin to Don Ho's Tiny Bubbles  
that I sometime mistake for gas  
(or gas that I sometime mistake for  
you).

## Rebirth

I rub this belly vessel  
like my velvet  
coverlet or a small  
Buddha that with each  
stroke I bring luck  
to us, but more than this,  
the feeling of you  
is the curious unsteadiness  
of standing on a boat  
at sea, view of land in sight.

Somehow in my bed,  
in my room I am adrift  
at sea, I am stranded in airports,  
I am a floating bubble  
that someday will burst  
yet engulfed, immersed  
in a feeling that I'm going  
to love you till the end of time,  
wrapped in a blanket of teal  
velvet embracing the silkiness  
of unpredictable seas.

## Threshold

Kelly Belton Ducote | Poetry

a precipice: between  
myself and mother  
both/and in a way  
that feels (neither)  
in a liminal space I've been

(before) lost before found:  
a fog furrows in my head  
when I hear others speak  
of anything except baby  
sleep or feeds or needs

in this liminal land  
of (phantom) cries  
and coos and cues I worry  
I am missing baby's  
communication

reality: I'm missing  
readings and craft talks  
and workshopping poems

Rebirth

I haven't yet written—  
would they erase the words  
I've spoken to my newborn?  
erase lullabies and goodnights—  
minutes turned hours of rocking

and bouncing and walking,  
swaddling—

I can mourn a life  
before this before sleeping

in 2-hour increments a life  
of freedom to come and go  
untethered but for my children's  
absence? but for their gummy  
grins while they nurse? belly laughs

that echo through halls? poems  
will come again; this contact nap  
is fleeting like a fast-burning meteor

gone as soon as we see it

## Rose, Rising

Kelvin Hauger | Poetry

Driving to the old ranch, I picture her  
hinged over her tomatoes,  
straightening to a vista in which she  
knew

the names of each plant and each  
creature, sometimes in her parents'  
tongue:  
rajče, zelí, růže, jelen.

As a kid, I assumed the firebreaks  
trailing from these farm-to-market roads  
led to distant homes. The grid they  
make,

in reality, sections the world into manageable plots.

“She took in strays,” my dad says  
of the boarders who lived in the house  
for years at a time. Rose’s love grew  
a junkyard acres wide.

Hoarding? Maybe, but I once spread  
a score of čačka on Czech linen  
for Heritage Day at school; a beaming boy

## Rose, Rising

Kelvin Hauger | Poetry

alive in me, out from a cupboard  
in her clutter where he'd hidden for a century.  
Tasked with burning clean the nooks of the  
property,

we reconcile with numberless unwanted things:  
books, bottles, toys, tools, chairs, chimes,  
couches, crates, pickle jars, porcelain, postcards,  
photos in boxes; photos in scrapbooks; photos in  
the dust. She gathered too much for anyone to hold.

If you can see, over the firebreaks,  
the black smoke billowing from our pyre, I want  
you to know we're laughing;

all manner of worldly object up in flames.  
Some memories of her tar the  
blood.  
Most billow.

## How To Hibernate

Tiffany Leong | Fiction

The last time I see you, in the new bed in your new place in a new city, everything is still as it came. Not yet tainted or loved. Still, the game continues. It always does.

I am here for three days and three nights for the funeral of an uncle. We were not close. But he had no wife and no children, so I am his only next of kin. Afterward, I will have no reason to come here, and therefore no reason to see you.

The game is simple. These are the rules:

1. Pick an animal.
2. I become the animal.
3. Kill it before morning.

It's a form of reincarnation. For you, who can never give a fraction of your attention to anyone, how clever of me to bring myself back anew each time. Because of you I've become as malleable as I am. This is a gladiator spectacle, a bullfight parade in our own right. This is how I keep you close.

Whenever I die in your arms I am the most beloved thing in the world.

Tonight I am the greyhound. I smush my face into your calves searching for that chemical smell. I am barking up your waist, dragging down your belt, ripping at the thread of your shoelaces. "Don't bare your teeth," you say, even though it's taken me four dentists to get them the way they look now. Earlier today, at the morgue, they removed my uncle's dentures and placed them on a metal tray beside his body. They were the pinkest part of him.

I brushed away the jello stuck in his molars—the last thing he ate.

The next night, I am the shorthair. My tongue stays on my wrists the whole time, and I am supposed to keep quiet, which is not hard. I am busy thinking about the burial plot I looked at that morning. For the price, they could have dug deeper. I keep this complaint on my claws, tilling the extra film of skin until it's prairie dust.

How many lives have I lived? I've been the wild rabbit, or the python, or the bullfrog. None of them ever really stuck. There had to be better ways of being resurrected.

On the last day, on the way from my hotel to you, I think about the time in the last city we met:

I was in your place, your room, ten or fifteen stories suspended in the air. For a long time, I'd always dreamed of flying. I'd be a heron, starch-white and singing. But that night, I was the sphinx, who was only half-there, half-crumbling into the earth. I only spoke in riddles.

The first riddle: What is an animal to a man?

Your answer was, "Shut your mouth. Lift your hands. You are nothing. You are nothing without your ears. You are nothing if you cannot be tamed. Close your eyes. Open them. Lift your head. Bring it down. Lower. Open your mouth."

The second riddle: What is a man to an animal?

Your answer was, "What are you without me?"

In your small room, a smaller light came from the eerie blue corner that was your fish tank. It washed over us in the dead of night, and where I lay in your bed I would face it, and the goldfish inside, with its black bead-eyes and dumb gaping hole of a mouth.

The third riddle: What is a wet hole to a man?

Your answer was, "Fuck, I forgot to feed the fish." I watched you get up, hover your hand over the blue box, the light licking at your palm. Pellets fell from your fingers to answer a rain prayer.

What am I to you if not even a fish?

When my uncle died, his mouth was hanging from the weight of his last breath. By tomorrow the embalmers will have latched his mouth shut with barbed wire into a final, formaldehyde knot. A roadkill odor stuck to the pajamas he last wore, which the director handed me in exchange for a brown suit. By tomorrow, my uncle's mouth will be neatly sewn along his neatly ironed shirt and jacket.

How to make an animal a man.

The night before his burial, you turn me over, and revive me as a tree squirrel.

To be a tree squirrel, you must be hungry but keep small. Nimble, starving creatures. With my two front teeth I nibble behind your ear, scavenging for secrets like, "Do you know we only have tomorrow left? And if you do, will you miss me?"

Of course, squirrels can't ask questions. I let myself spasm as if I am crushed on the sidewalk by a stroller.

Before I leave for the last time, you ask me how long the flight is back. I list a set of numbers that all feel numb in my mouth.

"What time is the funeral?" you then say.

"Noon," I say, hopeful.

“Not too early if you head back now.” You pause. “Again, my condolences.”

“Thanks.” I don’t care that you are pretending to care anymore. I ask you, trembling, “Was I ever going to be a bird?”

No response. You turn in my direction. Then, your voice cool and sliding over me: “Spread your arms.”

I do. I am reaching to each side of the room. The longest I’ve ever been.

“What do you feel?”

I think about it. “Free.”

“Do you like it?”

“No,” I say. I don’t. I am not really a bird. My arms fall flat.

This time, you ask me a riddle: “Want me to drop you off at the airport?”

I do not know how to fly on my own, so I answer, please.

## Shells

Zoe Nikolopoulou | Art



## Shower Thoughts

Arielle Arbushites | Poetry

Both sanctuary and confession booth,  
in here the steam rises like memories,  
fogging the mirror until I'm no one's reflection,  
just water and skin.

Shampoo runs down my spine  
like a timeline of wanting to be seen  
beyond the giving.

I ponder the body I both miss and inhabit,  
of how love changes shape,  
of how I'm always treading water  
even when I'm dry.

The shower runs hotter,  
scalding unnamed places,  
rinsing me clean of obligations,  
noise, sticky fingers and starved desires.

Then the knock comes—mom?—  
and I return  
one drop at a time.

## Lotus Boy

Arielle Arbushites | Poetry

As a mother of a son,  
I cultivate a blossom in a marsh  
of societal filth and generational trauma.  
I strip away toxic masculinity  
like a lotus shedding the mud.  
It grows from murky, stagnant water,  
each petal repelling and rebelling.  
He will emerge from the cultural muck  
of domination, repression of emotion, and false gods.  
The roots live in slimy bottom soil  
where manliness is tangled in old narratives  
of power and control.  
The stem pushes through the dirty water,  
rises upward: the messy, painful process  
of unlearning.  
Each petal unfurls like a layer of armor peeled away,  
the stoicism the shame of softness  
  
the fear of vulnerability  
  
and what is left is open tender  
  
radiant.  
  
May he bloom unabashedly.

## **To the person who precut the cantaloupe I've decided to eat for dinner**

**Roux Bedrosian | Poetry**

To the person who precut the cantaloupe I've decided to eat for dinner:

Thank you for feeding me  
when food tastes like 'apathy'  
Before it even hits my tongue.

Thank you for picking up a knife when I can't  
carry myself into the kitchen  
Let alone open the fridge;  
I'm so overwhelmed by the same fucking choices  
I, somehow, have to make every day.

I mean, sometimes it's almost two PM  
And I haven't had a drop of water,  
Surrendering fifty-five percent of myself  
To all the other things that won't matter  
When I'm dead.

I tell my mother that I'm struggling to eat  
Because the produce I buy with  
Such good intentions can't compete  
With my own affinity for rotting  
slowly away.

Rebirth

Now, my mother is an excellent cook,  
self-taught, wondrously curious  
In the way she turns a grocery list into  
tender, savory, decadent pieces  
of her love.

But when I tell my mother about my  
cubed cantaloupe, sold for three-dollars a package,  
I hear years of budgeted survival in the  
sigh that she lets out.

As a kid, I resented our store-brand fridge,  
our chaotic pantry of sensibly priced knock-offs.  
I was warned young to save every possible cent at the expense  
of shortcuts or ease, because short cuts and ease  
Have never fed a family of four.

And It's with that instinct, stuck on like old,  
blackened grease  
That she tells me not to waste my money  
On something I could peel and cut  
And accomplish myself.

Rebirth

But I am grown now.

Overburdened, yes, but guiltless

In my endeavor to eat

Any fucking fruit

At all.

## Study no.33

Zoe Nikolopoulou | Art



## Twin Flame

Amanda Dettman | Poetry

Wool knew it was blood-filled  
From birth. Knew I'd only wear it as girl.

As a girl I filled with witnesses of sadness.  
As a boy I earn witnesses, then sadness.

I can be your casual, everyday  
Death, an antler butt-dialing

His ripped head. Who knew I was skin  
Searching, for the softest

Dressing room, sailor ties folded  
Like a mother's fist. Meet me

Here, leggy in a collapsible  
Lawn chair. Meet me belated, a late

bloomer birthday, that bug  
In your ear who father-shadows

Our future. Anticipated intimacy  
Not a guess but a stain. My hiss dis

Obeying your outstanding absence  
Like a comb through an open

Window. It doesn't matter what made  
My childhood kick. Just who holds

The now loose lamb.

## Under Construction

Amanda Dettman | Poetry

It was brutal: I became boy.  
It was stunning; forgetting fragility,  
then remembering it tenfold, childhood tiaras

cutting the throat of my nightstand.  
I catch myself, sometimes,  
proud to be someone you loved—

how to braid a bone I still walk with  
but don't call upon? I have died and  
I have died, the way animals

change color after sex. I am  
what keeps the church teething—I'm not  
sorry. I'm not sorry I would shield you

still, through separation, with the hands  
of my girlhood passing the sun.  
What terrifies me most is the man about to

skip the stone; what terrifies me most is that  
I'm not him. The if is crucial. Stand up in me.  
I'll lie and I'll lie down. I'll sustain. Your thumb

in my mouth: Can you bear being giddy  
an entire life called mine.

## Ancestry

Michelle Ray | Poetry

Arabian sands sift

through my hands. I lift upward

palms reaching

A prayer

Into the twilight.

An invocation

Into the atmosphere.

A call to my heart: Come home.

Years of tribal trailing

always in pursuit of the sun—

blazing perfection

at once scorching and healing.

I peel off the layers of need

revealing night.

Thoughts bloom above the dunes

in rhythm with tides and the

space between breaths.

Stars shift in their lunar dance

tracing secret paths across the sky—

Vast and black



Rebirth

to a truer home.

How can you justify your kinship with the wind?

Or believe motion is the only mode of feeling

forever fleeing into the burnt orange

sunset of escape.

Heart, do I want you back?

Make me understand this tradition of leaving

inherited from lack.

Your tracks have vaporized. They hover above

sand and circumstance.

I wait between wind and witness—

the eternal hush.

# Study on a Match

Zoe Nikolopoulou | Art



## **How does a daughter grow a spine when her father's boots are firmly planted on her back?**

**Precious Obiabunmo | Non-Fiction**

*Intuition - November 2014*

I was fourteen when I finally found language for the haunting entrapment of my mother's life. And I found it in the pages of a book. Reading about Kambili's father was like reading about my own—the sudden bursts of violence, the religious justifications, the silences that filled the house like stifling smoke felt all too familiar. But what I found the most unsettling was Chimamanda Adichie's dedication, where she thanked her parents. They were clearly people who loved each other, who had never raised fists in anger. In my house, there were no purple hibiscuses blooming, only the thuds of heavy feet and the quiet sounds of snivelling in the dark.

I had encountered *Purple Hibiscus* because it was a required reading for JAMB. During class discussions, I felt deeply uncomfortable. I would keep my eyes on my desk, my fingernails digging crescents into my palms, not daring to contribute a word because I was terrified words would betray me. What if I said something that made the class realize that both my mother and Kambili's staggered in the aftermath of beatings from their spouses?

My classmates debated with the distance of those who lived a different reality. They mocked Kambili's timidity, pitting her against Amaka, who they celebrated for her assertiveness. But how does a daughter grow a spine when her father's boots are firmly planted on her back? The arguments about Beatrice often vacillated between praise for her bravery and strong condemnations of murder, and I often found myself comparing her to my mother who once had to pry a knife from my trembling hands.

\*

My mother has been devoutly Christian for as long as I've known her. On Saturday mornings, our flat filled with gospel music—Chinyere Udoma, Princess Njideka Okeke, the Dynamites—while we mopped floors and did dishes. My mother typically sang along, her voice rousing in worship as she scrubbed jeans and bedsheets. She embodied her Christian beliefs; it

was she who led morning devotions before we left for school, took us to church every Sunday, and even volunteered for every ministry that needed hands. And I followed her lead: participating in the children's choir, where I felt closest to the God she served so completely.

But even as a child, I noticed that my mother's devotion was solitary. My father rarely attended church except for when appearances mattered. I have a vague memory from our old flat in Mushin: my mother, my little sister, and me locked in the master bedroom, my mother's face tight with an emotion I couldn't yet name, waiting for my father to come home. The memory is fragmented, like wisps of an old nightmare. I didn't understand what had happened until we moved from our spacious rental to our own unfinished flat in Ojo, and the walls grew thin enough to hear everything.

*Descending - June 2015*

The move to Ojo, a remote area, destroyed what was left of my mother's independence. My father had to leave at 4 a.m. to catch a bus to Ladipo market, where he sold electronics from his car, which doubled as his shop. He used to pay to park at a hotel close to Ladipo as commuting directly back to Ojo would get the car spoilt faster. My mother, a housewife, who had always baked and sold chin chin to earn her own money, lost her customer base overnight. The women who used to order cakes for parties and celebrations couldn't reach us anymore, and she couldn't afford the transport to deliver to them.

She tried to rebuild. First, selling snacks to neighbors. Then food items. Then small provisions. But each venture collapsed within months, partly from poor patronage in an area where most families barely scraped by, but mostly from my father's jealousy and his lack of support. He could not bear to see her succeed. If a customer came to the house, he'd interrogate her afterwards: Who was that? Why did he look at you that way? Money she earned couldn't make up for a restock because he refused to play his part financially, claiming that she had to pick up bills since she was already earning money.

My father was Eugene in all the worst ways. He had none of Eugene's wealth, none of his

churchly devotion, or his philanthropic façade. He didn't believe in God, not really. Yet, when he

raised his hand against my mother, he clung to the scriptures for justification: Wives, submit to your husbands. I am the head of the household. Anything I say goes. Scripture became his whip, verses spewing from his mouth as his hands meted out cruelty. His violence, like Eugene's, was calm and calculated. He could beat my mother and us and an hour later sit calmly at the table for dinner. That composure made it easier for others to disbelieve. Surely, they thought, a man like that wouldn't do such things.

\*

My mother's response was to pray harder. I'd hear her in the early mornings and late nights. Sometimes hushed, loud, urgent, bargaining with God. Lord, change him. Soften his heart. Make him the man I know he can be. Her prayers carried the fervency of a drowning person. Yet, the violence at home went on.

Once, she confided in the church leaders about wanting to leave. Sadly, she came home with their words wrapped around her like chains: God hates divorce. Children from broken homes never amount to anything; you must stay for their sake. Marriage is for better, for worse. Keep praying. God will change him.

She nodded and obeyed. Watching her, I swung between disgust and rage. Why wouldn't she leave? Her faith, which I'd once admired, began to feel like complicity.

\*

Still, like Kambili, I loved my father. That was the cruelest part. He helped me with impossible math homework, sitting patiently while I struggled through problems about trains leaving stations at different speeds. He attended parent-teacher meetings, nodding seriously when teachers praised my grades. Like Eugene's "love sip" ritual, he left us pieces of meat from his dinner plate.

But his anger came without warning, and too often. One wrong word, an imagined slight, and the

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air would change. We learned to read those shifts and tried to avoid escalating situations. My movements became smaller, quieter, as if I could make myself invisible whenever he was around. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't.

*Fracturing - May 2012*

One Children's Day, when I was twelve, I stood at the pulpit in my Ankara outfit, yellow and orange patterns my mother had chosen. I was representing the children of our church as the preacher. I'd prepared the sermon for weeks, writing and rewriting. My mother had been so proud when I was selected, her face glowing in a way I rarely saw anymore.

But I had a secret mission. This sermon wasn't just about making my mother proud. It was a vow I'd made to God: my father would hear the gospel from my lips and finally, finally repent. I believed God had chosen me for this moment. I was the innocent child, the pure vessel. Surely, he couldn't ignore his own daughter preaching the Word.

I don't remember what I preached. Something about God's love, about forgiveness, about change being possible through Christ. My voice shook at first, then grew stronger. I saw my mother in the third row, her eyes glistening. My father sat beside her, his face unreadable.

When I finished, I did something the adults hadn't planned. I made an altar call. "If anyone here wants to give their life to Christ," I said, my heart hammering, "or if you want to recommit your life to Him, please come forward."

I waited. The organist started playing softly—Draw me nearer, a classic altar call song. A few people stood and walked forward: teenagers mostly, and one elderly woman. I barely saw them. My eyes were locked on my father.

Stand up, I prayed silently. *Please. Please stand up.*

He stayed seated, his face blank. After what felt like an eternity, the pastor gently touched my shoulder, signaling that the altar call was over.

I walked back to my seat, my Ankara outfit suddenly too bright. I'd expected a miracle. I'd staked

everything on this moment. What I got was God's silence. If God wouldn't speak to my father through his own daughter preaching His Word, then maybe God wasn't listening at all.

*Escaping - October 2017*

My admission letter came. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, far enough from the clawing tyranny of the house in Lagos. I felt God had finally given me something. Maybe I could finally plant my feet firmly on the ground. Maybe I didn't have to walk on eggshells anymore.

At university, I shed my old self like a skin. I would never be my mother. I would not kneel my way into an early grave, would not pray myself into submission. I cut myself free from the shackle of faith.

And so I found feminism, in books written by African women authors and heated campus debates that lasted until midnight, and solidified my certainty that I deserved to exist whole. I read Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* and saw my father again in Francis: insecure men who needed their wives small and defeated to feel large themselves. I read Chimamanda again, this time *We Should All Be Feminists*, and found a salvation that the church promised but never gave me. I stopped going to church. I stopped opening my Bible. When my mother called to ask if I'd found a church, I lied.

Back home, my mother had stopped trying to build anything of her own. She took a teaching position at a private primary school—long hours, meager pay, no benefits. She'd come home exhausted, her voice hoarse from managing classrooms of feisty children, and still have to cook dinner, still have to walk on eggshells around my father's moods. I watched from a distance through phone calls, relief and guilt knotting in my stomach.

*Reckoning - December 2019*

I was home on holiday during my third year in university, but nothing had changed. If anything, things had gotten worse.

The fight started over the generator. It had been broken for weeks, and I'd asked my father

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repeatedly to fix it. I needed it to finish assignments on my laptop before the semester started. He'd nodded each time, then done nothing. I tried again that evening.

"Daddy, please. I really need the generator to finish this work."

"I'll do it tomorrow."

"You've been saying that for two weeks."

His jaw tightened. "Are you calling me a liar?"

I knew that tone. I backpedaled. "No, sir. I just—"

"I said I'll do it tomorrow."

When night came, I asked once more. This time, he went outside, spent twenty minutes tinkering with the machine, then came back in. "It's fixed," he declared.

It wasn't. When I pulled the cord, nothing happened. The generator sat there, dead and useless.

My mother couldn't help herself. Her frustration spilled over. "I told you it needed a new spark plug. You can't just—"

She didn't get to finish. My father's face transformed. One moment, he was standing by the door. The next, he'd crossed the room. He grabbed my mother's radio—her small transistor radio, the one she listened to in the mornings while preparing breakfast—and smashed it against the floor.

The crack of plastic against tile echoed like a gunshot. Pieces scattered across the living room. My mother flinched, saying nothing.

Something in me snapped.

I walked to the kitchen. My hands shook as I opened the drawer and pulled out a knife, the one my mother had used to chop vegetables countless times. I came back into the living room, and I pointed it at him.

"The next time you touch her," I said, my voice trembling but loud, "I will use this. I'm

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not joking. Try me and see."

The room went still. My little sister, who'd been pretending to do homework, froze. My mother's eyes widened in horror. My father stared at me as if seeing me for the first time.

"Put that down," he said slowly.

"No."

"I'm your father."

"And she's your wife. The next time you put your hands on her, I will put this knife in you. I swear to God."

We stood there for what felt like hours but was probably seconds. Finally, he turned and walked to the bedroom. I heard the door shut. My mother rushed over, pried the knife from my shaking hands.

"Are you crazy?" she whispered. "He could have hurt you. He could have—"

"Let him try," I said. I was crying now, tears hot on my face. "Let him try."

He never quite believed my threat, I think. But violence lessened considerably. It would never stop completely, not until much later—but it lessened. I had become Jaja, finally pushing back against the tyranny of home.

*Becoming* - May 2025

After graduation, I still couldn't return to church. How could I worship a God whose words had been used to sanctify my mother's bruises? How could I call myself a Christian woman and still be a feminist? The two seemed fundamentally incompatible.

After wrestling with my conflicting identities for a few years, I started a YouTube channel. I called it "Reclaimed Bible Women," and I used it to explore how the Bible upholds patriarchy. I

unpacked the harmful narratives, the stories used to justify our subjugation and demand our silence. I talked about Lot's daughters, about Tamar, Delilah, Eve, and all the unnamed women whose pain were recorded but never mourned. Through every upload, I was seeking, not only women like me confounded by the premise of a creator who despised one-half of His human creation, but also, I was seeking to understand my tumultuous feelings towards my mother. If I could reclaim the stories of these women in the bible, understand them somehow, maybe I would comprehend my mother's moth to my father's flame.

A few months later, I applied to a "Gender Equitable Storytelling Christian Foundation Learning Course" workshop in Lagos out of curiosity. I had made several videos delineating how Christianity endorses the patriarchy, so what gender equity could be found in a religion that viewed women as disposable? Thankfully, I got selected. And that acceptance changed how I now view my faith.

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The workshop was held in a conference room at Co-creation Hub Africa. Christian creatives from different church backgrounds shared stories about their journeys. Some of the women's stories were achingly familiar: fathers who quoted Ephesians 5 as they terrorized their families, pastors who counseled abused women to submit more sweetly, churches that cared more about maintaining marriages than protecting lives.

On the second day, one of the facilitators, Blessing, a women's equality evangelist, stood at the front of the room. She was a small woman with a powerful presence.

"I want to talk about Genesis," she started. "About the creation story. Not the interpretation you were taught, but what the text actually says."

She walked us through it slowly. In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. Equal bearers of the divine image. The Hebrew word for the woman, ezer, the same word was used for God when He acts as humanity's helper. Not subordinate, but powerful.

"Male domination," Blessing said, "is not part of God's design. It was the consequence of the

fall. It's a result of sin." She let that sink in. "And what does Christ do?"

Someone in the back spoke up, "He redeems us from the fall of humanity."

"Exactly. Christ came to redeem us from sin and its effects. Including patriarchy. If we believe in redemption, we must believe that God is dismantling these hierarchies, not reinforcing them."

I sat there, stunned.

She continued, showing us Jesus's interactions with women. How He revealed himself as Messiah first to the Samaritan woman, a woman with a scandalous past, a woman no respectable rabbi would speak to. Yet, He commissioned her as an evangelist, and even had the longest recorded conversation in the Gospels with her. How He defended Mary's choice to sit at His feet and learn, a position reserved for male disciples. How He entrusted the resurrection news, the most important announcement in Christendom to Mary Magdalene.

"The problem," Blessing concluded, "isn't the Bible. The problem is how it's been interpreted. Paul's letters weren't eternal doctrines handed down from heaven. They were letters, written to specific churches facing specific problems. To read them without cultural context is to misuse them. And that misuse has harmed countless women."

For the first time in years, I could breathe. The tightness in my chest—the tightness I'd carried since I was fourteen reading a stranger capture my mother's life in the pages of a book, since I was twelve standing at the pulpit, since I was nineteen holding a knife to my stunned father, since I even younger listening to my mother pray in the dark—loosened.

### *Redemption - The Present*

I went back to the Bible with new eyes. Not the Bible of my childhood, weaponized and twisted, but the text itself, stripped of the interpretations that had been used to hurt women like my mother. Most of those interpretations could be traced to the way the British colonial government weaponized Christianity for their purpose and how their versions of it haven't been reflected

upon.

I saw Christianity differently. I saw Jesus differently. Not the distant, stern figure I'd imagined, but someone who consistently, even radically, elevated women in a culture that saw them as property. I saw Paul with a new lens, he was just a man trying to navigate the cultural realities of his time while planting seeds of equality. *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

I started praying again. Conversations, questions, even arguments instead of the bargains and barterers of my childhood. I was angry at God for how His words had been used, and I told Him so. I promised myself to do something about it. And somehow, in that honesty, I found something that felt like faith again.

\*

My mother still goes to church. My father now attends regularly. Their marriage hasn't transformed into something healthy—I don't think it ever will. But the domestic abuse has definitely stopped. Now I see myself as a witness. Witness to my mother's endurance and the faith that both sustained and trapped her. Witness to my father's violence and the verses he twisted into weapons. Witness to a church that chose institutional preservation over the safety of her female members. But also—and this matters—witness to a gospel stripped of lies, to a Jesus who dignified women at every turn, and to a redemption that includes freedom from patriarchy.

Today, I hold my mother's faith and my feminism in one hand. They don't quarrel anymore. I'm building a community of African Christian women reclaiming what was always ours: equality and dignity, the truth that to be Christian is to be feminist because both demand that we bear witness to justice, to freedom, to the full humanity of every person made in the image of God.

This is my witness. This is my work. And I'm just beginning.

## Contributors

Arielle Arbushites is many things, but above all she is a licensed social worker who has been a writer all her life. She has mainly published poetry on social platforms and lit mags or journals such as Maudlin House, including upcoming work in Neologism and The Orchards Poetry Journal. Arielle lives and writes in Lehigh Valley, PA where she balances motherhood, hospice work, and poetry as a means of understanding what it means to be alive and connected.



Cassund Olivier is a visual artist, writer and freelance editor from Brockton, MA. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing at NYU. Her work has appeared in Tethered Literary Journal, Foothill Poetry Journal, and Volume Poetry. Represented by Angeline Rodriguez (WME), she is working on her debut novel.



Duncan Johnston is a software engineer living in Brooklyn, New York with a passion for reading stories, writing them, and studying interesting people/characters. He graduated from NYU in 2022 with a minor in creative writing.



Elizabeth Butler is a disabled writer using a wheelchair. She has a Masters Degree in Creative Writing and has featured in a poetry anthology and has a collection of children's stories published online. She has self-published several books of poetry and winner of Prose Contest at The Atkinson writing competition. She has gained recognition in her local area and has performed at local events.

## Contributors



Jorge Antonio Losoya was born and raised in Del Rio, Texas along the Texas - Mexico border. He holds a M.S. in Community and Regional Planning and a M.A. in Latin American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. He's currently a watershed planner for the City of Austin. Creatively, Jorge is interested in exploring his Latino and queer identity as a child of the border, as well as issues of environmental justice. Fungi are common in his artwork as more-than-human characters, teaching us about resilience, community, queer ecologies. He works with colored pencils, ink, and digital art.



Katie Nichols is an MFA candidate in poetry at New York University. A Kentucky native, she now lives in Brooklyn.



Kelly Belton Ducote is a queer writer with a background in journalism. She is working on an MFA in creative writing at Eastern Oregon University between wrangling and rearing children.

Kevin Hauger is an MFA student at Boston University. His work has been published in *The Juggler* and he won Honorable Mention in the 2023 *Writer's Digest* Annual Writing Competition.

## Contributors



Manny Dettmann is a queer poet, performer, and arts educator who is the author of *Untranslatable Honeyed Bruises*. They earned their MFA in Poetry from New York University and have received support from the Kenyon Review Writers Workshops and the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Dettmann was the winner of the 2023 Peseroff Prize in Poetry selected by Jake Skeets, and their poems have been nominated for 2025 Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize, appearing in publications such as *The Adroit Journal*, Stanford's *Poetry Journal Mantis*, *FENCE 25th Anniversary Issue*, *Portland Review*, *Southeast Review*, and *Verse Daily*, among others.



Maria Pianelli Blair is a writer and multidisciplinary artist based in New Jersey. Her artwork has been published in *Contemporary Collage Magazine*; *FEELS Zine*; *Moss Puppy*; and *45th Parallel*, among other publications. She has been featured in galleries and virtual exhibitions, and nominated for the Best of the Net anthology. Her writing has been published in *Gypsophila Magazine*; *swim press*; *two-headed press*; *Pile Press*; *Prosetrics Literary Magazine*; *Blood+Honey*; and *StepAway Magazine*. When she's not creating, Maria leads Public Relations programs for technology companies.

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Meredith is a current MFA candidate in poetry at Boston University. They have been previously published in *Midwest Quarterly*.

Michelle Ray is an emerging writer pursuing an MFA at the University of Nebraska Omaha and currently interning at *Guernica Magazine*. After 25 years as an English teacher, having created publication opportunities for students, she is seeking her own. Her 15 years abroad inform her writing, which examines cycles of departure and return, the fluctuating urge to both belong and be exiled—to exist in the atmosphere or to be reborn. Michelle lives in Southern California with her husband, son, and two dogs.

## Contributors



Nia Watson is a freelance writer and poet in NYC. Her poetry appears in *The Fellowship of the Unmoored*, *Baedeker Travel Journal* and *Lullaby Machine*. Her nonfiction writing appears in *Generations Now Journal* and *Amsterdam News*. The themes she explores in writing are often rooted in.



Precious Obiabunmo is a strategic digital marketing and communications professional. Her work has appeared on *Naija Feminists Media*, *Brittle Paper*, *Zikoko Magazine*, *Farafinabooks* blog, *Commonwealth Correspondent*, *Content and Planning*. She's the founder of *Reclaimed Bible Women*.



Quentin graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing from Old Dominion University, and now teaches at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he works towards obtaining a PhD in English. He is fond of music and the absurd.

## Contributors



R.J. Marshall (they/he) is a writer and social worker who grew up on the borders of Ohio and Kentucky. They received their Master's in Social Work in 2021, and since then, they have practiced as a sex and relationship therapist. When he isn't working, he delves into music, meditation, and meaning-making. His writing explores themes of intimacy, connection, impermanence, trans-formation, and isolation.



Rebecca Clark is an American artist whose quietly detailed pencil drawings reflect the sacredness of nature and the interconnectedness of all living things. Growing up immersed in the natural world, her exploration of the woods and creeks along the Chesapeake Bay forged a bond with plants and animals and laid the foundation for a visual vocabulary she would tap into many years later. Rebecca received a BA in Art History from Swarthmore College and studied painting and drawing through continuing education classes at the Maryland Institute College of Art and at the Corcoran College of Art + Design. Rebecca's art has been featured in publications such as: Tavern Books, Corbel Stone Press, Works & Conversations, Dark Mountain, EarthLines, Orion Magazine, Resurgence & Ecologist Magazine, Where the Leaves Fall Magazine, Elementum Journal and The Learned Pig and was selected for the award-winning INDA 8, Manifest Gallery's 2014 International Drawing Annual.



Roux Bedrosian (she/they) is a Cincinnati based musician, writer, and artist. Born in New York and raised in New Jersey, Roux spends much of their time in the midwest mining joy and making "silly lil' art". They are an avid lover of horror and whimsy, and strive to explore both within their writing. You can experience more of their creative work at [rouxbedrosian.com](http://rouxbedrosian.com).

## Contributors



Sarah Scarcliff is an MFA student studying poetry at Arizona State University. Her children's book, *Pitanga*, is about frogs and deforestation. She is from Birmingham, Alabama.



Shane Allison was bit by the writing bug at the age of fourteen. He spent a majority of his high school life shying away in the library behind desk cubicles writing bad love poems about boys he had crushes on. He has since gone on to publish five collections of poetry with *Turbulent* being his most recent from (Hysterical Books), and his book length poem, *Remembered Men* (Ranger Press). Shane's collage work has graced the pages of *Noisy Rain*, *Shampoo*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Pnpplzine.com*, *Palavar Arts Magazine*, *the Southeast Review*, *Postscript* and a plethora of others. Allison is at work on a new novel, new poetry and is always at work making collages and painting.



Zoe Nikolopoulou is a painter from Athens, Greece. She is also a poet and translator. She studied Botanical Illustration at Cornell University.



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