

Spring 2023

HICA - Spring 2023

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HI KA

2022-2023
Established 1925

HIKA

2023 Spring Edition
Established 1925

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Love Language

i

Your body was the language of desire
I have struggled to speak.

Hands, lips, eyes, tongues, teeth:
An articulation of everything
You have ever asked of me—
 wanted from me—
emptied into you.

ii

Here I am
in exchange for you.
A transaction of physicality.

*I'm sorry;
there was nothing
much to offer you.*

This is the last time I use my body
as an apology. The last time I beg
the wildfires raging within me
to extinguish.
The last time my body blooms
in timid secrecy, and I
accept it.

It is the first time I understand
the danger in allowing a name

to become a shadow
that trails the body.
(I surrender
my name as a promise
you'll never keep.)

iii

Our bodies, a smudge
in the wet mouth of darkness, now whisper
the language of loss.

The Tree and The Grass

As the Sun sets, and
the Sky darkens, the
purple hue cloaks, the
Tree and the Grass.

The Oak sinks its
roots deep in the ground.

The Grass burrows
its roots around that of
the Oak.

The Sky, Oak, and Grass
grow and dim together.

Grow and dim.
Ignite and darken.

The setting Sun goes down
and the Tree and Grass
reach higher.

Higher, and higher still.

One day, the Sun will rise
and the Tree and Grass will fall
lower, lower, and lower still.

These are the words of the Book,
These are the words of Dreams
These are the words of prophets,
These are the words of Questions,
These are the words of the Jew
These are the words of our words;

Papa Shmuel
Does not exist,
At least not that I know of,
But Papa was emblematic
Of the ones I never knew
And I never saw
And I never loved
Because they were
Eaten by flames
And murdered in holes,
And buried alive,
And starved to death,
And tortured in public,
And trampled upon,
And spat upon,
And whipped,
And lacerated,
And brutalized,
And massacred,
All so that

Our words,
Our land,

*Our land,
Our book,
Our book,*

*Ourselves
Of our Book,*

*Our Dreams,
Our Prophets,
Our Questions
Ourselves,
Our words,*

Would be gone,
And that a Papa Shmuel
Would never sit beside me
In a glade of weeping mountains
And singing trees
And writing leaves
And waltzing trails
And smiling rivers
And where I,
 My Family,
 And my family
Can be safe to live
And be free
By a lake that is filled
With stars and celestials
And all the wonders
Of this universe,
And he tells me
To never forget

That I am a Jew.

Brother Bear

I've mostly been on good terms
with the bear. We learned each other's handwriting on
closed-eye aspen, defined overgrown
deer paths with barefoot lumbering, and drew
our personal myths in charcoal forgone
from forest fires. Cubs alike grew from
clumsy frames into a friendship, something
synonymous to dirty paws wiped on moss-stitched
welcome mats and noses perpetually damp with
muddied petrichor.

Hibernation was a quiet affair. I return to a life away from
broken cabin doors and torn open tents and
the bear finds solace in the dark of my
memory. After my first fight, we returned
to those same woods, and I saw him as he was—
a young adult with my weary eyes
and our father's forever-worn horn-rimmed glasses.

An unintentional forest fire
started when he taught me that I would never be
safe from harboring hackneyed tales of
mongrelled men.

The sound of our mother's voice
on radio airways led him across state lines,
to a life of roadside crosses and fallen billboards
and I stayed amongst the wreckage.

I hope that bear waits for me
to quit my fallacy of faking
adulthood—that the bear is rumbling
in the canyons of a smaller, uncalloused hand,
 between a
too-large sleeping bag and a still-lit fire
place, somewhere before scar-mangled knuckles
and after my first memories, but
all those woods I loved long ago.

Love and Other Social Sciences

Samson,

I wish I was the one to shave your head, simply
to have known what your closeness felt like.
In those silent moments I think of beer soaked
fingers, the sound of your shirt
hitting the floor, the smell of cigarettes as
I take your power. I wouldn't be the first, or
the last. I know why. We pray differently. I listen for
a timid voice on the airway—the voice of my
personal patron saint hides
behind a microphone with no
expectation for response.

As for you, yours look something like a half adored
abandoned on the dance floor. They
tell you the one you love is under red lights, drowned
with developing photos in the bottom of a bathtub.
That night, I saw that thick scar
down your chest, the one that separates
your torso from your neck. To see your unbuttoned shirt
is little more than a reminder of something biblical, the contents
of the stomach of that whale who swallowed that man whole.
I wonder how he survived, and rather, how we never discovered
cave paintings on those ribs. In seeing your chest from
the inside out, I saw a
few things. a wet heart in a dirtied
takeout box, uncaring figures dancing in a big city
window, a field guide dog-eared by a foreign
hand, ribs thick with drawings from a past of
harboring strangers. When I saw you next,
your head was shaved.

Tatiana “Tati” Gross

Love and Other Social Sciences

Samson, I wish I could've been
the one to hold you as you cried,
not because I even like you,
only so I could tell others
I survived the whale.

Skulls I've Known Well

The anthropology room has
257 skulls, but I only know
three by first name. *Homo Habilis*
sits beside a fragmented piece
of my first hate's cranium. He taught me that chastity
was a word belonging to Ted Bundy's intimate tapes,
that fingernail-shaped scars would later
look like taxation on winning lottery tickets,
that men are cruel landlords, and I'm only ever a hole-torn wall.

I hope they never find the rest of him—
eulogies are only meant for the dead.

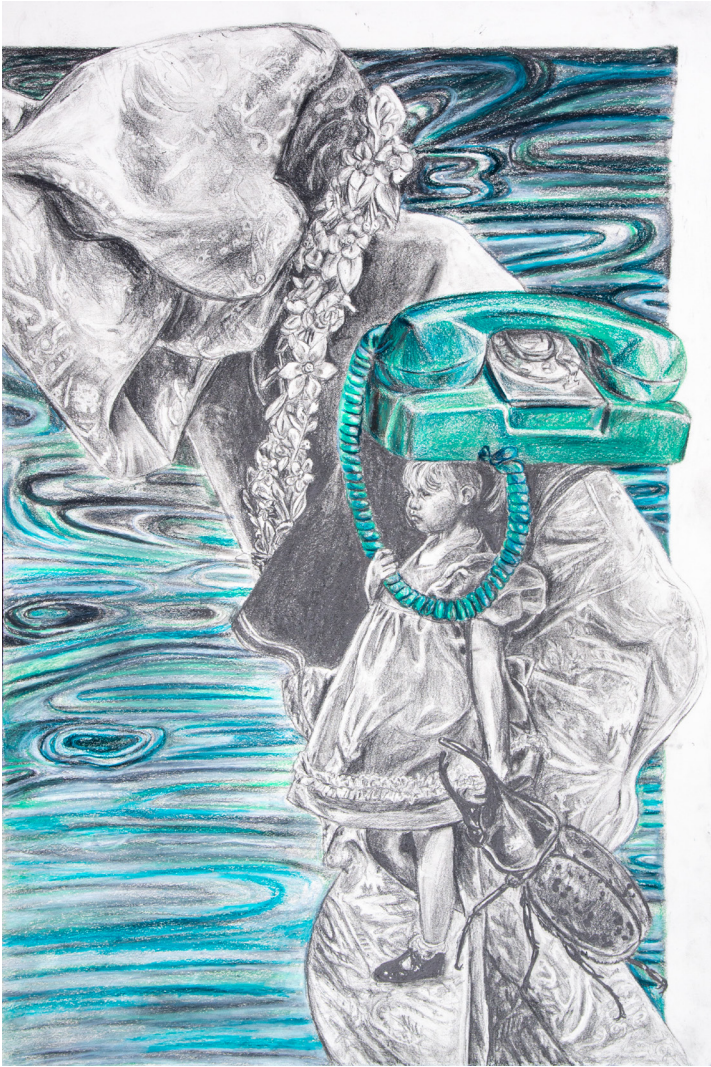
The second, sandwiched between
Australopithecus and a baboon
was a man who showed me hate
in a handful of dirt. He only knew me
as a cigarette crushed
under his high-lipped hiking boot,
the two-headed snake we saw in the
vanity museum, an abandoned
shopping cart in the New York Subway.
I wish I only knew him as a skull.

The third and final will sit on my table,
from a boy who speaks in tones that
can be heard by dogs alone.
He's marked in ink where I have
jagged lines, morbid in the way
he knows his anatomy.
He approached me the other night,
coming from the hands of
a girl, a cadaver soon
to be up on those shelves.
He said to me,
I know those skulls too,
and God, I wish I was one of them.

“Love is Blind” and other clichés

The first time I saw you faceless was
when we were sitting on the concrete,
grip bruising my hips.
Somewhere, at this mental vending machine of facial
features, the glass is shattered
and all is taken. You take the shape of
important things forgotten—a dead man’s
fake eye, a changed phone number
on a crumpled napkin, a wedding ring
dropped down the drain post-divorce.
The dread of being wrong kept me taxidermied
as nothing but a day-tripper, waiting for the next
cab—a body whose face could have
easily been yours. I listened for a voice,
but don’t believe I ever got it right. In those
moments, I heard nothing but what I
needed to—a therapist to the half loved,
my first crush’s laugh, a self-help book for
those who are self-labeled.
We first met outside of that place,
sharp features dulled by drunken laughter.
I never even learned the color of your eyes.
You commented on my jacket but never cupid’s bow,
embarrassed by your prosopagnosia.
In telling you my feelings, you say you’ve already
gone for a girl of full face. I passed
you two the other night. Your eyes are green.

Tatiana “Tati” Gross
Love and Other Social Sciences

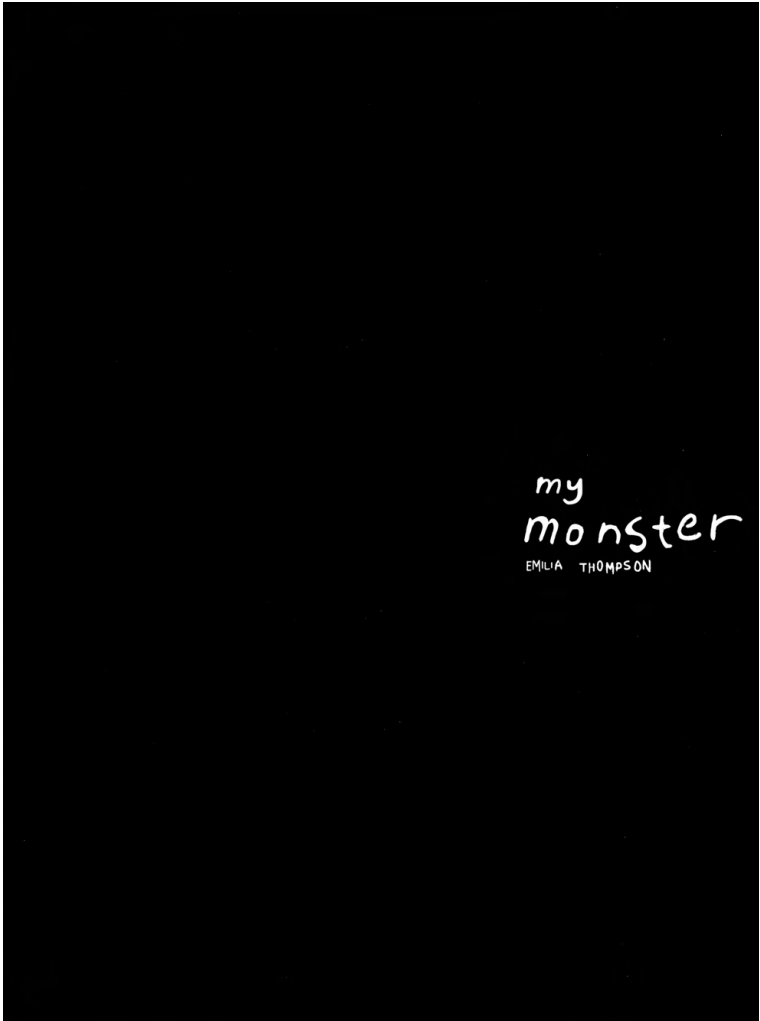


Phone a Friend

Emilia Thompson



Cows In The Meadow

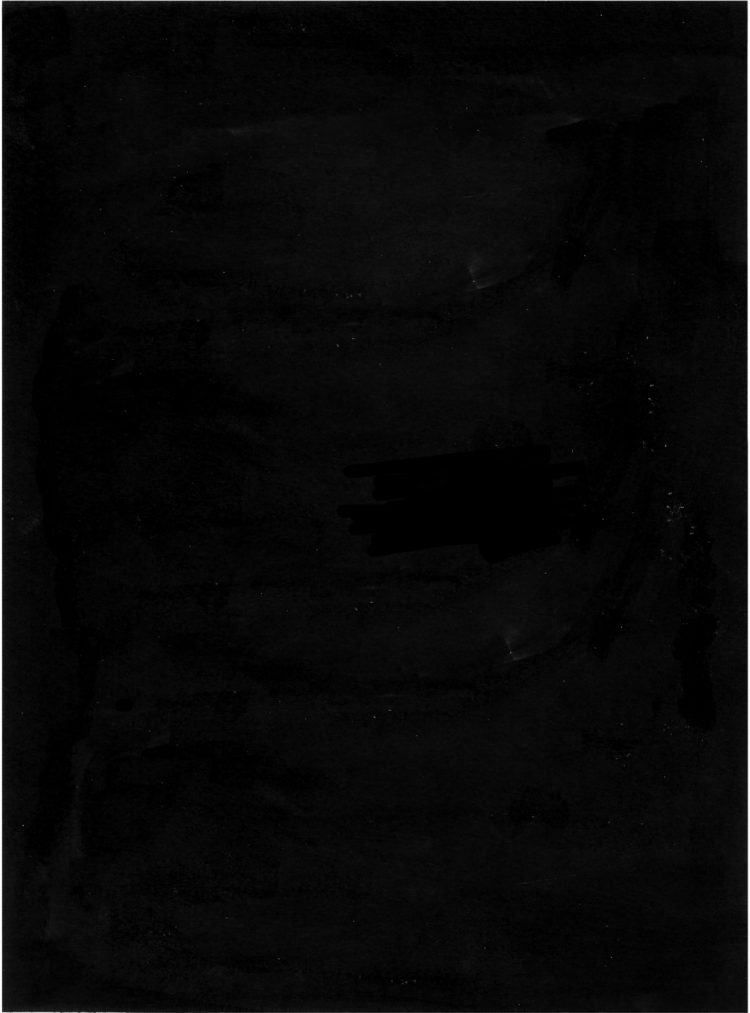


My Monster

Emilia Thompson









The New Teacher

My new teacher says I'm a great girl. Mommy doesn't like her at all, but I don't understand why. Does she not agree that I'm a great girl? I bring a red apple for my new teacher every day. She eats them with pleasure and never gets her teeth dirty. I wish I could eat like that. I wish I could have her teeth.

My new teacher says that I don't need to hand in homework anymore, that I already know a lot more than the rest of the kids. My Mommy doesn't like that at all. I thought it would cheer her up to know that she wouldn't have to spend hours helping me with the worksheets, but that hasn't been her reaction. The other children are not happy either.

My new teacher says that I have beautiful hair and that I should take care of it. From now on, I will only wear braids. Mommy doesn't like them at all. She says I'll be late for school if she tries to make them for me every day. I've asked my new teacher to do them for me, so as not to bother Mommy anymore. Today my braids look so pretty that I won't take them off for bed.

It hasn't dawned yet, but I wake up feeling a weight on the bed and a huge pressure on my chest. It's all very strange, but I think I hear voices outside. Surely, they are the people who come back from the nightclubs just when the sun is about to rise, those that Mommy hates so much. I try to get up to see what's happening, but I can't move. It's starting to get cold in here and I want to cry, but I'm a great girl, so I hold back.

When I finally get my torso up, it surprises me to see my new teacher sitting on the edge of the bed. I breathe a sigh of relief. It's reassuring to know that she is

the weight on my mattress. She greets me, but her voice sounds different. She says that she needs me to do her a favor. I can't quite understand her, I just feel how my body rises from my bed, leaving a part of me on the sheets. I can see myself still asleep.

My new teacher tells me to go downstairs and pick up a knife from the kitchen. She must be hungry, I assume. I don't have time to answer. I'm already going down the stairs without being able to drive my own body. She doesn't ask for anything to eat, only for me to come back upstairs with the knife in my right hand. I'm a great girl, I tell myself, but I know I'm starting to wet my very own bed.

My new teacher asks me to go into Mommy's room. I start to see everything like a movie as I peek into her bed with the knife in hand. I raise my arm and when I finally drop it, the tape starts. The cries for help echoing in my eardrums. Mommy's face begging with fear. The sheets stained red. The constant movement of my arm. Slashing, traversing, murdering. My bloody hand trembling with guilt. The knife on the floor witnessing what I have done and in the door frame, the devilish smile of my new teacher without her perfect teeth, only bloody gums.

Shaking with desperation, I crawl back to my room, but I no longer find anyone in my bed. The only thing left is the puddle of urine on the sheets, confirming I've left to complete my teacher's task. Help me, Mommy. I'm not a great girl, and my new teacher is not so new to me anymore. Run away, Mommy. I must be in the kitchen by now.



Feral Cats of Castelmola, Italy,
10/23/2022



Feral cats of
Castel Mola 10/23/22

Feral Cats of Castel Mola, Italy,
10/23/2022



Sketch of Via Goffredo Mameli
Signage, Trastevere, Rome



A Man On the Street Stole My Eraser
While I Was Drawing; I Finished
This Tree Anyway

The Man Who Couldn't Die

He was stabbed in the stomach in a mugging gone wrong, where he had attempted to fight back. One of the robbers, who had meant to threaten him and nothing more, accidentally stabbed him in the chaos. In that alley he laid bleeding out, watching his very life seep away from him, but it never left. He realized this when he had been there for an hour and had lost so much blood that his body became dry. His now useless eyes became dry and shriveled, and he could not move. His skin became impossibly cold, and dry flakes were scraped off as he tried helplessly to crawl out of the alley. But his mind, despite the impossibility of it all, remained intact. His heart continued to beat against the laws of nature. He was taken to a hospital, his survival considered a staggering, unbelievable miracle. His family rejoiced, and his wife declared it a gift from God. He went to church once he fully recovered, and was asked to turn water to wine. It was a joke, but one with a hint of hope, the faint belief of possibility. He'd always been spiritually inclined, but hearing his friends compare him to Jesus was disconcerting.

Members of the Seventh Day of Adventist appeared at his door, asking him if he was the return of the Son of the Lord and if the second coming would finally happen. It was a day they had known would happen, and they had prepared. Some begged for forgiveness for sins, from harmless to horrifying. A teenage girl apologized for uncouth language, and a priest confessed to turning a blind eye to another priest's unspeakable deeds.

It was all too much, but his family knew he was the same person. He still went to work, asked his children how their day was at school, watched the late night news

with his wife. But the other children at his daughter's school began to ask her if he'd met God while he was dead, and he didn't know how to explain to her that he hadn't died, and he had seen no one while unconscious. His wife began to research if immortality was possible.

He didn't want the attention and found that the gazes of his loved ones had turned from caring to reverent, so he fled. He got in a car and drove, not paying attention to the direction he was headed. When he couldn't drive anymore, he checked into a motel in the middle of nowhere.

He fell asleep and woke up in the dead of the night, completely paralyzed. A figure approached him and placed a hand upon his head, stroking his hair as if he was a newborn baby. The person took out a knife and cut open his shirt, then laid a hand over the spot where he had been stabbed. There was a scar laid horizontally across his body, and the figure stabbed him in the same spot, knowing the scar would form into the shape of a cross.

When he recovered once again, the hospital provided him with books to pass the time, as he had left with nothing but a wad of cash. He thankfully had the foresight to request anonymity within the press, so he would not be recognized outside of his hometown. He turned the texts over in his hands, unable to find meaning in them. There was a bible, but he was no Jesus. He had made no sacrifice, he had simply been attacked. He no longer knew if his assailant was a man or a myth, a creature bound by flesh or sin. He had lived an ordinary life, had never grievously harmed or helped anyone. He could

not perform miracles for others, only his own miracle of surpassing death. Over the years, he faced death again and again. He overdosed on alcohol and recovered. He jumped off a cliff and laid at the bottom of it for ages, his bones shattered into crumbs. He was shot in the head and recovered, no longer knowing his own name. He only remembered the people of his hometown reaching out for him, begging for forgiveness, begging for everything to be over. To end suffering and strike humanity from earth, to purge sinners to eternal damnation, to bring back their dead relatives. He knew only that he couldn't die, and that he could not give the people what they wanted, he never would.

He got in his car once again, used what little money he had left to get gas. He drove it off a bridge and into the ocean, where he would then drown forever. He could not die, but would never be found. He never ceased to age, and his body wrinkled and withered in ways unimaginable, but still he could not die. The world above changed and transformed until it was beyond his imagination. His bloodline ended, but still he remained apart from his family, now coddled by death. The world ended, or it was saved, or it was abandoned, and still he could not die.

The sun engulfed earth, and his body was incinerated. And still he could not die. His mind became the cosmos, the last human alive, and he could never be held or touched or heard or longed for ever again. He could only think. And so he continued to think, wondering if he thought hard enough he could communicate with God. But God would not speak to him. God only speaks to the dead.

Deer Friend

winner of the 2022 Spooky Stories Contest

Buck put out his cigarette in the ashtray of the 1973 Ford Crown Victoria he was driving. A spark leapt off of the charred paper and jumped onto his right forefinger.

“Dammit!” he exclaimed.

“Buck! Not in front of the kids!” Missy chastised.

Buck only grunted in response. Missy needn’t have worried. The kids were too busy fighting over the last granola bar to notice what Buck was saying.

“Dad, Sadie hit me!” Joe shouted from the backseat. Buck took a swig of bourbon from his hip flask but otherwise didn’t react.

“Nuh-uh!” Sadie responded.

“Hands to yourselves, kids!” Missy called back over her shoulder.

Buck continued driving. He was very nearly shrouded in darkness; the headlights only illuminated the ground twenty or so feet in front of him, as the brights were out of commission. Joe pinned Sadie’s arms behind her, desperately trying to pry the granola bar from her shirt’s pocket.

“Da-ad!” Sadie yelled into her brother’s ear.

“Shut UP! You wanna make me deaf?” Joe yelled back at her.

“KIDS!” Missy screamed at the backseat.

Buck took a sharp right, in the process accidentally brushing against the trees by the side of the dirt road. This allowed Sadie to break free from Joe’s grasp. The car careened down the path of the dusty woods, its motor drowning out the sound of the crickets chirping in the trees. Buck scratched his scruffy beard with his fingernails.

“Are we there yet?” Sadie asked.

“I need to go to the bathroom!” declared Joe.

“How long have we been on the road now?” Missy asked.

Buck didn’t respond to Missy’s question because he didn’t know the answer. He simply took another sip from his hip flask, making sure to keep one hand on the wheel.

“I hate you, Joe!”

“I hate YOU!”

The children turned away from each other, their lips sticking out in youthful poutiness. The car ride continued on in abject silence. Buck thought that the headlights seemed to be dimming slightly, but he couldn’t say for sure. It didn’t really matter, he thought to himself. Everything would be okay when they reached the campground. The campground would solve all of their problems.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

Joe had lunged at Sadie in an attempt to steal the granola bar. He was trying to pry it out of her pocket.

“GETOFFGETOFFGETOFF!!!!” she pleaded.

“Kids! Stop it!” Missy said.

Buck and Sadie continued struggling for the prize.

Missy turned to Buck. “Do something!”

Buck let out a loud sigh and continued down the road.

“Sto-op!” one of the kids said. Buck didn’t know which one.

“Do something, Buck, do something!” Missy repeated.

Buck looked out the front windshield, but couldn’t see anything. The headlights had gone out. The campground. They just needed to reach the campground.

“Do something!”

Desperately wanting Missy to shut up, Buck turned around to speak to the back seat.

KARUNK.

At that moment, the car hit something up ahead. Buck slammed on the brakes.

“Shit!” Buck exclaimed.

“Buck! Not in front of the kids,” Missy repeated.

Buck peered outside. The headlights were dim, but they had managed to turn on again. He saw the object he had collided with: a young deer whose horns had barely grown to their full size. Its proportions were off somehow, probably a result of the injuries it had just sustained. Blood and bone oozed from its stomach, contaminating the dirt road and, Buck suspected, the front of the Crown Victoria.

“Gotta move it outta the way,” he explained before exiting the car and slamming the door behind him. The rest of the travelers sat in silence as Buck began trying to move the animal out of the path to the campground. It was clearly too heavy for him. No one spoke a word until Missy broke the silence.

“Joe, go help your father,” she commanded. Joe grumbled but got up and exited the car. The two people remaining in the car watched as Joe and Buck wordlessly picked up the deer and moved it past the treeline.

Missy got a cigarette out from her pack and lit it. She leaned into the back seat and blew the smoke into Sadie’s face, causing the girl to cough. She then turned around, moved the cigarette up to her lips, and closed her eyes, making sure to inhale as much smoke as possible. She repeated this process two or three times, but soon got tired of it and put out the cigarette in the car’s ashtray. A few minutes later, Buck returned to the car.

“Any trouble moving it?” Missy asked.

“Nah,” Buck said. He put his foot on the gas and started the car again. Sadie took a bite out of the granola bar as the car whizzed by more trees. Everything would be alright, Buck thought, for they were on their way to the campground. The three would almost certainly be there in no time.

Shortcake

Grandmother named the demon Shortcake.

When they discovered her journal, after she was gone and the house was dissected into *trash* and *keep*, they debated who Shortcake was.

“A dog,” Janey said, “with a sweet-tooth for sugary fruits.”

“She would have gotten rid of a dog as big of a terror as this Shortcake is.” John corrected. “It was a squirrel, destroying her garden.”

Alice had a different idea, but she didn’t share it. To her, the journal was a record of her grandmother’s spiral into lunacy, near the end.

In truth, none of them had any idea what had been living in the house since before any thought of them existed.

The idea of their grandmother in her late forties with a liking for shortcake and taste for late-night snacks lived outside the realm of their few years.

Her early life disappeared with these midnight joys—overnight and by the milky haze of the refrigerator light.

*I suppose it must have been midnight, the journal began after years of silence left the truth burbling at her lips, needing to be shared—one way or another. I raided what was left of the strawberry shortcake. I think it was the whipped cream that did it. My hand betrayed a symbol in white wisps, unknown to me, a summons to something darker. Something I freed to emerge with a whispered word over my shoulder, **Strawberry.***

The detail puzzled them.

“How could it be a squirrel if it talks?” Janey asked.

“How could it be a dog?” John retorted.

Alice remembered Grandmother’s ramblings, near the end. *The voice, the voice. She was so sick of the voice.*

Your garden-variety demon doesn’t take much to summon. What they really want is the touch of felt, the smell of roses, the taste of strawberries. An item, a sight, a scent of interest and a symbol of the occult at midnight and they’ll burst forth into your living room.

These demons are no use in helping you take over the world, but they’ll take over yours. Once she accepted this, she began to laugh. A chuckle that convulsed into hysteria, near the end. She had been proud, you know, for the ticking by of a second or two. All those years ago she had been *proud* of her Reddi-wip artistry to top off her late night strawberry shortcake. That was before it began to glow—strawberry red.

Strawberry.

Before the whipped cream melted away in repulsion from its symbol.

Strawberry.

Before the strawberries began to twist, bulge, convulse. And disappear. Like lights blinking out.

Strawberry.

Before all that remained was a shortcake mushy with cream. And Shortcake.

Strawberry.

What do you think a demon looks like?

You are correct.

For a while she didn’t see anything. You can’t see something that doesn’t exist. And demons didn’t exist.

I can’t tell you for how long I didn’t believe it. I froze. I blinked. I convinced myself that I’d forgotten the strawberries. My

whipped cream slush was expired. The refrigerator light was playing with my eyes. I was going senile. So I went to retrieve the strawberries I had obviously forgotten and watched them flicker out of existence like fireflies yielding to the dark.

Strawberry.

I went to bed.

Going to bed did not fix things. It wasn't until after several nights of neglect and denial left the doors hanging off the kitchen cabinets, the living room carpet unpicked to threads, the stair balusters torn from their structure, that she finally saw Shortcake. The demon existed, and her mind was ready to start fashioning its image. Imagination sketched out the face that belonged to that thirsting whisper, **Strawberry.**

On her most terrified nights, Shortcake was two disembodied rows of teeth, like grains of white rice that opened and closed as they combed the air for **Strawberry.** On her most sarcastic nights, Shortcake looked like a bear-sized strawberry with a piece of shortcake for a hat. And still other times, after years of mastering the imagination of her houseguest's image, she'd attempt to menialize the image of her tormentor. To a dog. Or a squirrel. Strawberry.

Over the years, the journal was her only confidante. It bore with ease the weight of her complaints.

Strawberry.

All that remains of the strawberries I bought yesterday is the twisted skeleton of their carton, its ribs pried open to extract every last juice of the fruit.

Strawberry.

Shortcake has plucked every last strawberry out of my favorite fabric print. Now all that is left to mourn over is the hole-

ridden plaid background that unravels to threads in my hands.

Strawberry.

Every last bit of the strawberry jam is gone. The shattered fragments of its jar carved into the walls, strawberry shrapnel. I'll stick to fresh strawberries for Shortcake from now on.

Strawberry.

Alice got in a fight with Janey today for tearing every last strawberry out of her Strawberry Shortcake coloring book. It was Shortcake, I know, but how was I supposed to explain that to them? As it is, they went home telling their parents Grandmother cut the pages out for gardening.

“I told you it wasn’t me,” Janey glared at Alice.

“You remember that? That was forever ago,” John said.

“I loved Strawberry Shortcake,” Alice said.

It was surprising how normal their grandmother was, considering everything. Considering she spent the midnight hour tracking the heavy whispered word, only ever the one word, on its late-night exploits.

Strawberry.

But they didn’t know this. They didn’t know that for sixty minutes a day—midnight after midnight, year after year—Grandmother’s sole preoccupation was making sure the demon followed her carefully outlined scavenger hunts—strawberries on cabinet-tops to be fumbled for, strawberry jam to be licked off toast, crosswords solved with strawberry scented pens to be shredded through.

They knew that Grandmother cooked the cranberry sauce superb and the turkey a little dry every year. They knew that Grandmother liked to be in bed by eleven, so children and grandchildren drove home at ten. They knew that the Grandmother who used to color

outside the lines with them as kids began to get sketchy in the mind, near the end.

Strawberry.

I can't take this anymore.

“No—don't stop it there,” Janey whined when Alice snapped the book shut. “Yeah—we're near the end,” John said for the fifth time.

“It's almost midnight, and we have an early drive back home tomorrow.”

Janey's short attention span distracted her from her disappointment. “We've never slept in Grandmother's house before.”

A grin spread across John's face. “Do you think it's haunted?”

“Go on. Off to bed.” Alice shook her head and dropped the journal on the kitchen table. “I'm sure it's not haunted.”

Strawberry.

My Sister

loves to do my makeup.
when i flinch
she stabs me in the eye with black eyeliner
my tears are inky black, sticky.
i look the best i ever will,
a beautiful rotting leaking mess.
she grinds blush into my cheeks,
carves the curve of my lip with a letter opener.
telling her my secrets is a violation of my
older-ness.
she may/must/cannot know
that i am human, breathing and crying
and smoking and dying.

being older is a burden of
daughterhood, a symptom of
early onset
motherhood.
i am a tentacle of my mother in regards to my
sisters,
Hand to the Queen.
i feed, bathe, soothe, discipline, cry, rage, wither and
blossom;
all in the eclipse of my sisters' childhood.
i love you and i am hurting you, i whisper to the
mirror
their small faces appearing in my own.

panem et circenses

my father says, "let them
draw blood."

i hold a bow and point the arrow at myself.
as the arrow flies,
my face morphs into hers
her chest molding around the fletchings.
one day, i'll pull my father's arrow from
my/her/our chest.
one day, she will

 forgive
 pull the plug
 outgrow me and my arrows

my sister straightens my hair, burning and caramelizing.
i braid hers, twisting and ripping and soothing.
i cry when she leaves for school.
i orbit her and i hope she will escape
me.

Jazz

Jumping back and forth,
Brass dances with ivory teeth,
Of mine or of a piano?
The artist lost in clouds of immortal reveries
sinks further into their corner.

And all the while the saxophone sings on
Through glittering Janus-faced buttons and tired
brown fingers
And everyone seems to think—
What a beautiful melody!

Biting & hissing & humming,
The world melts on with a rhythm of jazz,
Ba-dum, ba-dum, sha-boom, sha-boom
Waiting to be seduced by the next twinkled-eyed
ingénue
To caress & twist & snap in its grasp.
It is methodical even in its improvisations.

A different ingénue of canvas and prussian blues
one art district over,
With the dying echoes of a Harlem piano
Floating through a gallery,
They await their fate—

Patience is their enduring struggle.
To paint by a hand any other color but white
Is to be locked outside marble gates and Corinthian
pillars—
A sinner not sure of their faults.

These carved white palaces are funny in this way.

*Let us hold and preserve and exhibit a tamed
fiber expression.*

Frozen perpetually in time.

Only when the buzzing vibrations of the big bass
and trembling, woeful notes of the trombone reverberate
Out of the canvas through empty (stolen) galleries,
Is when the artist's painting
Is trapped behind a frame.

A decorated gag.

A false celebration forbidding sound and color.

The revenant quiet seems so foreign to my world of jazz.

So I leave the altar of metaphor and history,
Willing to blur back into syncopated missteps
Where I can hide from the searing light of truth
Til dawn.

That First Summer

after Joe Brainard

I remember being shocked to learn, after three years of knowing every terribly true & therefore ruinous thing about each other, that your eyes were not brown—but green.

I remember dozing on the grass, sprawled out six feet apart but still choked with tight summer air. Wearing the shirt I almost gave to you but, at the last minute, decided to keep for myself.

I remember finding out you'd left town two weeks after you'd returned. When you came back, things had gone downhill with your brother & you'd purchased a new baseball cap that wasn't your style at all & we barely spoke anymore.

I remember (hurt) when I called you from Michigan: two hours spent holding my breath. Riding my bike back & forth & back across a 1-mile stretch of moonlit asphalt while the family was asleep. Pedaling furiously, like I had somewhere to go.

I remember (angry) a summer spent avoiding eye contact. Despite my steady, painstaking efforts to collapse the space between us, we ended up sitting farther apart than before.

I remember being the only friend your cat wouldn't hiss at.

I remember August: sitting on the swingset behind your house, swollen with feeling. The edges of the canvas seats were fraying & faded. The durability of the green metal monkey-bars was dubious at best. Quicksand at our feet in the form of rain-drenched wood chips. I remember being surrounded by clovers on all sides—all of them three-leaved, none of them lucky.

Potomac

kyle and i go down to the waterfront, searching for anything still alive & moving in this heat. his feet are swallowed by quicksand muck within seconds, the river licking at his ankles, teasing him. it's fluid and formless and strong—we're just as much a part of it as anything else.

some days i feel more Current than man.

this is a boy who was born and bred in the river,
baptized
in mud.

back on solid ground, kyle gasps at a snake half-hidden in tall grass, tiptoeing into its habitat as if to introduce himself. don't all creatures deserve kindness, even the venomous ones?

these woods exist without walls, but his laughter
echoes until it's all i hear—joy,

and its abundance.

Brooklyn Bound

Jewel figured she might as well be dead.

This was the thought floating through her head as she stood on the platform waiting for the next train. The N train came whirring in a blur of metal. A short and stout mother reminiscent of a tea kettle jabbed her elbows into Jewel as she boarded, thrusting her bloated body into Jewel's rib cage and shoving her squeaky stroller through the doors. The thing was massive, swallowing the child whole, revealing nothing but a small pasty face sticking out from the depths of its maw. She couldn't look at the child. So she let her gaze fall on the woman. She looked too old to be the mother of such a small thing, with wrinkles around her eyelids and gray hair spilling out from under a headscarf. The dough-faced baby started squealing as they boarded the train. Its crying made her think of Shauna. Her little girl. She watched the round face turn red and felt that the universe was against her.

Her four-inch heels clicked on the metal floor as she boarded the train. Ding Dong. The doors shut and the train jolted. Atlantic Avenue was always a shitshow on Friday nights when she was coming home late from work. It was a strange crowd—overworked corporate zombies, young people, drunks. And her. Jewel realized she was becoming a real New Yorker. And the thought made her break out into a small, toothy smile. The Memphis in her was slowly fading. A real New Yorker. She almost laughed to herself, right there in the herd of passengers—but she didn't. Though it wouldn't have been the strangest thing to ever happen on the N train. Pole dancers, proselytizers, shitty musicians, the smell of urine—there were much

stranger things going on than anything Jewel could do. In fact, she thought, if she were to break down into a hysterical laughing fit right now, with tears and snorts and everything, a real New Yorker wouldn't even bat an eye. She wondered if they could still tell she was an outsider. Six years in New York and she still couldn't stand without holding the metal bar. She pushed past the woman and found a seat in between a man in a pinstripe suit wearing way too much Dior and a man wearing dark ripped jeans that fell inches off his waistline and reeking of piss.

Jewel ran her fingers through her purse and dug out her book. She always used to judge people who read on the train. Isn't your brain numb by the end of the day? You must not be in my line of work. You must have little responsibility and a lot of money. Can't you just sit with your own thoughts? That was, until Eddie started giving her books to borrow. Back when they first fell in love, or, when they first slept together. He was a Brooklyn native and young addition to the Sixty Eighth Precinct. Being a cop wasn't so much his job but a way for him to make money legally while still running the streets. He still sold dope on the side. He played both sides and that was what Jewel loved about him. He had power.

The first time they had slept together, she went into it like she would with anyone else. Smoke penetrated the walls of his apartment, turning white paint yellow and exuding an inescapable smell. His bed smelled of cigarettes too, so much so that she suggested they make use of the foot of the bed to avoid suffocating from the stench of his pillows. She felt a warmth in between her legs like a heart-beat as he undressed her and gave his body over to her.

As she pulled on her tight jeans, Jewel noticed the book

on his bedside table.

“Sober Living, huh?” she had said.

“Huh?” he looked up from looping in his belt, “Oh, that. Just somethin’ I’ve picked up.”

She raised her eyebrows, “Just picked up?”

He nodded.

She shook her head slowly, “Doesn’t seem like the type of thing you just pick up.”

He looked over at her apprehensively, “What you know about being sober?”

“I never claimed to know nothin’.”

“Figured.”

“What you know about it?” she returned.

“Not as much as I should.”

The next time she slept with Eddie it was not a job. And the next time, he gave her the book.

The train flew along and passengers came and went. Jewel stared at the words on the page. They floated around in front of her in a jumble with the sounds of the train. Step one, honesty. Whoosh. Step two, faith. Ding Dong. This stop, 59th Street. Step three, surrender. A higher power... Surrender your everything...

The words reminded her of those postcards she got from the Church, the ones with cherubs and daisies and those little biblical sayings on them. What were they called? Palms. No, psalms. When she was a kid she used to think the words psalm and song were the same. They should be, she thought, what’s the real difference between a psalm and a song anyway?

Sometimes she would write her letters to Shauna on the psalm cards. Jewel thought Jesus was something to be shared. But of course she would have no way of knowing

if it was working. She pictured her little girl, sitting at a stranger's marble countertop, a nice home in the suburbs. She would open her postcards as her new mother cut up some carrots and celery sticks. They would be a healthy, organic family. Her small bare feet would be dangling from the chair, not yet reaching the floor. She would just now be learning to read. Her new mother would have to help her with some words, help her dissect Jewel's sloppy script. Maybe Shauna was too young to understand the psalms on the frontside of the cards, but Jewel hoped she would at least smile at the pictures of little birds and angel babies. But how was she to know? They never wrote back. Maybe Shauna thought the little birds were stupid. Maybe she tossed them right in the trash can that her new family would have hidden in the cupboard under the sink because they were classy like that. Maybe she didn't even tear open the envelope first.

"Hypotheticals aren't healthy," Eddie had told her yesterday at the dinner table between a huff of a cigarette and a sip of his King Cobra.

Her face filled with exhaustion. "I don't have any answers. My brain is like a blank TV screen. It's all empty space and it fills in with all these possibilities. Endless worst-case scenarios." She lit a cigarette.

"You gotta stop thinking like that. I'm tellin' you, it's not healthy."

"I can't. That's the point," she said, "that's why I drink."

"And I been tellin' you to quit that, too."

She looked at his beer.

"You drink all the time."

Eddie remained casual, "But I'm not in your position."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He took a huff and sighed, "I'm not addicted to the stuff," and after a large gulp he added, "I'm not workin' to get my

little girl back.”

Jewel put out her cigarette on the coffee table and stood up from her seat.

“Oh come on, don’t go on like that now,” he said, reaching his arm toward her waist.

“My head’s all messed up,” she pulled away, “I’m all messed up.”

With tears in her eyes, she grabbed her coat and moved toward the door. Eddie quickly stood up from his chair and grabbed her wrist.

“You’re gonna get her back,” he whispered, his beer breath settling on her nose, “I know it.”

Ding Dong. This stop is: Fort Hamilton Parkway. The voice of the train shook Jewel out of her memory. She rubbed her eyes with red fingernails and thought that she could feel the bags growing under them. Step four, courage. Step five, integrity...

The piss-smelling man next to her mumbled something to himself. Practicing her best New Yorker behavior, Jewel ignored him. She read on. Step six...

“I’ll be damned,” the man spoke up, “Guess we’re all the same after all.”

A blank look fell upon Jewel’s face, “You talkin’ to me, sir?”

He smiled, revealing a row of coffee-stained teeth, “You and me got the same problem hunny. We’re all the same in this world.” He snickered to himself.

She wrinkled her nose, “Sorry?”

He nodded at the book in her hands, “Sober Living, huh?” Jewel’s ears turned pink and she wished she could stop it. She shut the book swiftly.

“Sorry hun. I don’t mean to call you out. It’s nothin’ like

that, I just know what it is.” He leaned back in the subway seat, clasping his hands on his hollow stomach and closing his eyes.

Jewel felt the heat rise from her cheeks to her temples. She stared down at the dark blue book cover and traced the letters with her eyes.

“You New Yorkers are real nosy,” she muttered. She didn’t know if she was talking to the man or to herself, but it didn’t matter.

He let out a low chuckle.

“Knew you wasn’t from Brooklyn.”

Jewel let herself fall into a small smile.

Ding Dong. This stop is: 18th Avenue.

“You riding this thing til the end?” he asked.

“Yeah, 86th.”

He smiled, “So I guess I should let you read your book and stop chewin’ your ear off, huh?”

“I’ve read it a million times,” she tapped her fingers on the cover and let out a sigh, “You got any advice?”

He looked at her with sunken eyes. “Step one, stop readin’ that bullshit,” he said with a smile.

“No, but for real,” he continued, “You can recite those words as much as you want, but at the end of the day, the only thing that’s really gonna get you there is some good old-fashioned faith.”

“That’s all this book is about, though. Faith.” she said with furrowed brows.

The man shook his skeleton head, “Mmm. I’m not talkin’ bout that kind of faith,” he said. “Not in Him,” he pointed to the sky and leaned in closer to her, “but in you.” He pointed a dirty fingernail at her chest.

Her heart picked up its pace and she pulled her legs in closer together on the metal seat. She felt the heat rising in her throat.

“What do you know? You’re clearly still a drunk,” she said

without thinking.

He sighed, his stale breath staining her cheeks, “Maybe I don’t know much, but I sure know more than whoever wrote that goddamned book,” he leaned back in his seat. “Life teaches you things you can’t read about. It’s all in here,” he touched a dry hand to his worn cloth jacket. “You’re looking for something, I can tell. And you’re not gonna find it on paper.”

Jewel held her breath and looked down at her heels. She thought of the book and of Eddie’s smoke-ridden nightstand. She thought of him, a broken record caught on the same line of a song. She thought of Shauna, the day she gave birth all alone and terrified, the day she gave her up. She thought of her dream of being reunited with her. She thought of holding her little girl.

“Do you believe in miracles?” she asked.

She noticed the man’s gray eyes. They were surrounded by lines and loose skin and they retreated so far into his head that he looked more dead than alive. She wondered when his face had decided to cave into his bones. She wondered if he had ever been young.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Ding Dong. This stop is: Bay Parkway.

Jewel stood up.

“Thought you were stayin’ on?” The man sunk into the hard plastic seat.

“No,” she balanced herself in front of the sliding doors, “I think I’ll get off here.”

Milk Teeth Mary Jane

In the next town over, the archaeologists dug up the body of a little girl who they'd found under three feet of concrete lying face down on a straw mat. She must've been from Victorian times, they said, from the carbon-14 that was left in her remaining flesh, and at some point in the last hundred years they'd built a shopping mall over her corpse without realizing. Her skull was caved in from a bat.

With those sciencey types you always have to work to remind yourself of your humanity, or the humanity of others. They didn't want to forget she was a person, so they gave her a name—one they'd use in press releases and cultured discussion, but not papers or grant requests, not when it looked so informal, not when they could mention the skeletal subject and tell themselves these weren't human remains. She was another archaeological artifact they'd dug up with their trowels and tools.

They called her Mary Jane because Just Jane seemed too surgical, an unknown corpse ready for autopsy, no friends, no family Jane Doe—and because the small spatters of leather on those little Victorian feet were the rotted remains of her brown button-up shoes, Mary Janes of the past, a picture of innocence. The newspapers talked about her like the lollipop-licking girl on the cover of *Lolita*, oh the poor murder victim, buried facedown. But she was a corpse with half her head melted off. She was partial decay trapped in concrete, which they'd transferred to an ice box for further study.

This is a child, said the ethicists. The bones in her clavicle have yet to fuse. From her stomach contents the researchers could piece together her last meal, and the scraps of fabric stuck to her skin would peel away

as the skeleton of a dress, and could she read? This small little girl, four feet long, mouth full of baby teeth—was she literate? Think of her in a school room, legs crossed, corset. No, don't, said the ethicists. This is a child.

She is a girl-shaped vessel for scientific discovery, identified by her milk teeth, buried facedown in an unmarked grave.

Untitled

Broadly I'd like to ask about the moon.

When I go to sleep I see her dancing above my window, rivulets of her light as splotches of paint that pirouette upon the branches of the oak in my yard. They cast pointed shadows like crowns across the slats of my floor. I fell in love with her as a little girl. That big white dime in the sky, a rip, a tear, like a hole in one of the blanket forts I used to make over the arm of the couch; I fell in love with the way she never answered my questions.

It's an abstract, imaginary sort of thing. I like to believe she's a beautiful woman. Tall and willowy, skin like spun silver. Her fingers are long and delicate and perfectly curved, a slender piano player. She could curl up in a crescent with a violin in her hands. She could lean over the edge, draped halfway, and dip those elegant fingers of hers into the water of the ocean, trailing them to make the waves and the tides and the currents that down whole boats in their murky depths, and the stream they left behind would be gray just like her. Bleeding out that light into the blue.

My grand-mère tells me she's a dragon, a grieving mother. The serpent that weeps for the seas. Her scales are the rugged cliffs of this world, her veins the soft rivers. She's the mournful Renaissance in a mortal shell.

But sometimes I see her more true to what I think she might actually be like. The moon is not very pretty. There are craters across her face, acne scars, dimples. Her nails are cracked and damaged from work. Dry lips,

dry skin, thinning hair. Nothing like the Greek statue I've seen of her in my dreams.

Broadly I'd like to ask about the moon. Because you, the desolate night, should know far better than I. And I want to understand her, in any and all of her forms. Is she as I imagine? Is she kept alive by the wandering minds of people like me? Is she a cruel Goddess, far-removed? The dying lady of crows?

I could sing to her, with my voice once beautiful broken by the passage of time. I am a finite being. My breath is a weak breeze. If I sang to her, splintered as I am, would she be moved by the struggle? Would she ask me to play her a song with my stumbling fingers? I could string a guitar with the web of a spider. I could catch for her a butterfly's wings.

Broadly I'd like to ask about the moon.

Good Morning

Jerry: "Good morning, Larry."

Larry: "Good morning, Jerry"

Jerry: "Hot day today, huh?"

Larry: "We're inside the sun, Jerry. It's always hot."

Jerry: "That's true. I just wish we could get some rainfall every once in a while."

Larry: "Well, that's not happening any time soon. With being inside the sun and all."

Jerry: "I do appreciate the nice breeze today, though."

Larry: "Really relaxing feeling that goes through my hair on the way here today."

Jerry: "Absolutely. I had the top of my convertible down all the way on the drive over."

Larry: "Well, Jerry, I hope you remembered your sunblock."

Jerry: "I don't need sunblock, I've got this great tan."

Larry: "You have been looking rather glossy recently."

Jerry: "Yes, I feel the tan really helps define my muscles."

Larry: "Your calves look exceptionally muscular."

Jerry: "I can say the same for you, Larry. The sun has really helped burn off all your fat."

Larry: "Who knew we'd lose so many calories so much faster like this."

Jerry: "Larry, we should celebrate our newfound muscular gains with a nice steak dinner."

Larry: "I'd love to, however I do not like my steak well done."

Jerry: "It truly is a shame there are no other options given the circumstances."

Longing

This is what I'm surrounded by?
This is what I move through?
By nebulous textures I grab onto time,
Having so many things to get to.

By winds and riverside, you and I walked.
At night,
Lights glowing off the cold, dark, waves.
We sat on a bench and for an hour we talked,
About the passers by,
And happenings today.

I look back at times like that and can't speak,
What I have now is perfectly describable.

As the river moved we went.
Taking comfort in the fact that its start is unknown,
And so is its end.

If I had all the power in the world,
I would spend my time with the people that I love,

But I don't.

I will always be here, and you, there,
Hopelessly.
I think about the light in your eyes,
And can't speak.

Strife

Captain! Soul!
Agency untold!
Timeless tachyon manifesting,
Acting centerfold!

Patches of identity,
Licked and sticked and sold.

Presuming all,
Knowing none.

Upon self-reflection,
Weariness sets in.

Is it a Truth?
Is it a Substance?
Or is it a Story We Tell?

No greater than Camenzind's youth in the country,
Or Marlow's old narrative spell.

Was it the magic of my heartbeat that
Was named,
Or me?

Do I dare find an answer
In everything in-between?

Synthesize beginnings
Like the cogs of a machine.

A tower of a narrative/A vain attempt to seem.

At its best, God himself will have saved you,
At its worst, the drop won't be that high.

As a tragedy ends as all tragedies end,
Is it you who presumes and resides?

Normandy

Looking down a cliffside
A drop below my feet
An attacking and retreating tide
Atop a bloodied beach.

I see them there, dead.
Every category,
My Friend.

Rusted gears and wrecked machinery
Are the mortar to the brick
Of planted faces and contorted limbs.

And for what?
I ask,
And on what do I intrude?

Between the means and the ends, which one of them's
more crude?

To my back and down the way, through the hills,
Bush, pine, mist, rain, moss, and rock,

It gets clear.

And fear comes over me by recalling it.

It's by the willow trees and gravel strips,
Marble steps and pillars ripped,
From unread eras, for inbred sets,

Of ignorant foes, who forcedly bet
On what lines up the shore,

And what I cannot speak to.

And as if I was born for any other reason,
I suppose I've been castrated for caring.

As result, a young man with a number after his name,
Goes down and reads the diaries of the dead.

Unrequited, disregarded, and by his own volition,
Listens to sea-foam rub up on dead skin.

And grows tired,
And dreams.
“Oh, but of what?”
—nothing.

The Flowers

The flowers you gave
me are wilting. The roses
nearly dry. The alstroemeria
carnation
dahlia still bright
brown creeping
up the leaves. In the
bathroom I cut two
inches off each stem dump
the petal-strewn water down
the sink
& refill.

You wanted to make sure
I was never without
color. You wanted to give
me the world you gave
me books and watercolors
made brownies and golden
milk. We sat on the floor
of your kitchen and talked last
night I dreamed you kissed
my neck in seminar I threw

you out I throw the roses
out I let
you stay.

Sanity

after yuji agematsu's zip series

red rubber band, cigarette butt, butterfly wing;
burger king barbeque, radical acceptance; rush, cool ranch,
stinks like piss, yellow stick, bent yellow stick
bubblegum cigarette butt, cinderella's slipper;
silver keychain, fingernail sliver moon,
rattail, culture clash eyelash glue,
red stick; hairball, hairtie, hunger,
butt butt bread blow;
burnt thursday, bedbug big ring
elevator ding, eleven cents; donut hole
holy water, cigarette butt on fire;
smoke, silhouette;
strange stick stuck up sidewalk crack
cross, don't mold, hand hold delay left turn
loose tooth lost tissue number on long line, bus station mustache
seventh avenue ashes, bank teller takes yellow taxi;
trash makes it home

Kahaani

staggered poet-breaths
stuffed into secret cemetery-docs
stifled soreness, palm folds cold
sudden emptiness or slow invasion
still, this is gradual decomposition

heavy head, heavy heart
heavy lead, heavy art

there: close by but blurry,
when I tried to say *chaalis*
ended up with this chalice,
forty-fingered chain around my pain
alien in my own language, stuck in lung
stick to my tongue.

packaged perishable passion
fruit of emotion,
the sun of time curls the present
wet paint, all dry
purposeless, purpleless
purring of plane, turbulent like a sapphic
pair of eyes staring, parents unsaturated
probably perhaps please?

this moment so soon a memory,
this happiness so quick a risk
this tea so soon got cold
this page easily lost
and nothing but words to make stories with.

this uneasiness easily settles:
I cried my palm into my skin
when you passed, today
your face I've forgotten.

sadness brews in laps
sour as a mother's slap
sick dog whine
stronger sigh is a sign,
sediments of it soar to blind.

prying foolishly, birthname a stupid cry
poetry flaring, layer after layer after layer
this poet a posthumous prayer.

—

kahaani: a story/narrative
chaalis: forty

What's Mine is Yours

we are sitting on the floor of my garage / my tarot deck
/ waiting / between us / i want / to give you a reading /
you want / to play poker / we play poker and / all that
was once / sacred / has now turned / sour / i try / not
to look / at your hand but / you're holding / the three of
cups / three of swords / five of wands / the empress /
and the queen of cups / this is not a reading / so i stare /
at the constellations i've created / with the freckles on your
cheeks / one for perseus / one for andromeda / one for
me / earlier tonight you said / when you stare at the stars
you see / death / this is not a reading / this has become a
gamble / you've bet my front tooth / i've bet your bobby
pin / and realize / the blood on your hands is not your own
/ this is not a reading / so i stare / at my hand / the fool /
ten of swords / seven of sword / the sun / the four of cups
/ this is not a reading / and this is not a flush / you cannot
tell my hand means / betrayal / you cannot tell that the
blood is mine / you cannot read me when i bet a second
bobby pin / now / you're eking meaning from your fold /
this is not a reading / and the blood is mine / and the stars
are dead / and i try to draw new conclusions from the old

Crocodile Tears Attract Butterflies

She storms out of the house, and
you remain on the couch. While
the game show network trudges
on.

“In this novel,
after learning, there are no grownups,
Jack says,
‘We’ll have to look after ourselves.’”

“What is
Lord of the Flies?”
“Right answer”
A waxy smile, rows

all neat and filed
like a military
cemetery mock you
from the technicolor screen.

Your dog scratches at
the front door. You
want to follow her,
but you won’t.

Do you want to strip
yourself of bliss?
Do you want to
fall asleep tonight
empty-handed?

Soliloquy of a Reflection

Four walls, lamps, a stage.
Our merry farce began
when you dictated my act
so long ago. I can't remember
when I first heard your voice.
The days grow gray
and smudged together,
all the same.

For lack of an audience,
we played to the walls,
our own private box.
If I act without
an audience, to whom
do I deliver my lines?

Your gramophone voice
used to bite sharply,
cold and cutting my ears.
but then the record skipped,
and now it's soft static,
the needle dragging in wax,
pressing its grooves
into my brain.

I have no words
on my tongue to describe
my soul's color.
But I taste their ghosts.
Letters, syllables, murmurs.
It tastes like our reckoning.
It tastes like the wind.

What a room to inhabit.
The worst critic is the
dull knifen-sound reflected
off silver glass.
You are the query
and the echo.

The writing is on the wall
of old vaudeville row.
Our flyers crackle,
brittle and torn. The dry airs
of time take their toll.

Posters proclaim, in pale painted laughter
and letters red:
"Behold! Man and his Reflection!"
Postponed.
In perpetuity.

what they don't tell you in the user manual

1. swallow the match after you've snuffed it out. that way you know it can't burn anything else.
2. if you are born screaming you will spend the rest of your life learning to be quieter.
 - a. if you are born silent you will only learn to be louder
3. when you wash the day off of yourself you won't feel clean, just less dirty.
4. people can only stab you in the back if they know where you keep your knives.
5. the shadows on the cave wall exist in the daylight under pseudonyms.
6. you can be sorry for something that isn't your fault. it's a different type of sorry; you feel it in your chest instead of your stomach.
7. perception and reality are twins. you don't need to learn to tell them apart. they'll both answer to the same name.

The Home Behind Me

I remember from my Spring 2012 return to Jamaica, my parents' birth country, a moment in the cash-withdrawal lobby of a bank, where my mother and I encountered a stranger. I don't remember what the ensuing conversation was really about, but I remember my young self loudly, if nervously, asserting that I could "do a Jamaican accent"—speak Jamaican Patois—no problem, easy-peasy. Jamaicans are a proud people; I was asked to deliver the goods immediately. I balked. I was so sure that I could do it if I wanted to—I could hear it so clearly in my head—but I did not want to, perhaps for fear of being deemed a fraud.

Only when I was alone could I summon the courage to give voice to Patois—or, to give Patois my voice. But the moments when I tried and failed to translate a word into Patois that I only knew in American English were sources of great shame. And, as if they were somehow privy to these moments, the elders of my family delivered their amused yet firm verdict: as an American-born child, I could not claim Jamaican culture as my own.

Long after my family's rejection, I developed, as a coping mechanism, a racist disdain for my ancestral home and anyone from there. But still, deep down, I harbored affection for Jamaican women speaking loudly on their phones on the bus, for Jamaican men engaging in raucous conversations with one another, their Patois calling me back somewhere I knew I wanted to go. But how could I get there? On a drive, once, to pick up things I would need as I started college, I told my father that I wanted to learn about Jamaican history, my culture. "But it's not your culture," he said simply. This was the rejection

I took it for, but it was not of the nature I'd thought it was. I'd thought he was simply gatekeeping—Jamaicans are a proud people—but I had already communicated this to him myself: by matriculating at a predominantly white private secondary school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, I'd chosen a white world, its comforts, trappings, and ideologies, over that of a Black world, a world with Jamaica at its center. I'd come around a little too late, long after I had made the deal and signed my name and become one person instead of another, after I had reaped the promised rewards—"opportunities"—their true value still being calculated. Jamaicans are a proud people; I'd made my choice, and he was reminding me of that.

So what felt like a wanton rejection sent me running back whence I'd come, back to that white world, now resentful of both worlds and at home in neither. I stopped trying to speak Patois; I put to rest as best I could that longing for Jamaica. When I saw, two years later, *The Other Side of Paradise* by Staceyann Chin on a library shelf, my longing awoke again. It felt like fate, though what fate exactly was as yet unclear.

The Other Side of Paradise is a memoir of Chin's childhood in Jamaica. From the book's opening lines, I was steeped in Jamaica as a world: the dialogue was transliterated Jamaican Patois. *I know what this sounds like*, I thought—and, like that, the language returned to me.

How might we characterize the power of language to build a home? Is it the very bricks that make the walls? The concrete that hardens into a sturdy foundation? If you are a Black person, especially a child, and your peers notice that you've chosen, whether unwittingly or with full intention, a white world, the first thing they will tell you, even before (but not long before) they can articulate the significance of what you have

done, is that you “talk white.”

Yet there I was, reading and hearing Patois like it was my first language. And I think it was. I did not grow up speaking it, but I was taught how to speak by those who did; I carry that in my inflections, in my turns of phrase, in especially comfortable spaces with especially trustworthy people. From those first few pages, I felt at ease in those words.

This is how I could keep out those amused family elders, those confused, hurt Black peers, and their assumptions about me. Keep them out of what? Well, out of the little house I’ve been trying to build in the Jamaica inside of me, a house that is out of the way but decidedly there, marking an imminent return, a commitment. All I had for years was a desire to build this house. *The Other Side of Paradise* allowed me to finally draw up the schematics. The materials needed? Language, to start...

* * *

A year before I read *The Other Side of Paradise*, I picked up *This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald from a library shelf. I was on the same mission—building home—using a different map.

This Side of Paradise, Fitzgerald’s debut novel, chronicled the development of a boy named Amory, doted on by a mother obsessed with the accoutrements and lifestyle of fine culture and taste.

Amory grows up cloistered in a cultural home—that is, a world—of privilege, a world that derives its political, economic, and social training from the same source where his mother gets her art and finery: white supremacy. Both sides of this—because it is gendered—are to the same end: white supremacy. He attends prep school, then Princeton University, where, having since

chosen the writing life, he builds friendships and pre-professional connections that signify male citizenship in a white supremacist world.

In the end, Amory renounces his privilege to lead a life and career informed by socialism. This was certainly of interest to me, this rejection of that privilege—it was my main goal, in fact, and I picked up the book to see how it was done. But I was not and am not one to do it primarily in political terms; my language is images. Long after finishing the book, it is images that stick with me: Amory standing out on a street in Manhattan, feeling alienated from the well-heeled around him, from the comfort of the dusky, rainy city evenings I know so well; Amory in the bed of a pickup truck, finally putting into words what he has been acting on since college. The language of images is, of course, an American language: nothing but a hard cut stands between loneliness and the possibility of a new frontier, especially when the loneliness strikes at the moment when you thought you had arrived where you were meant to be.

I read this book during a nine-month period when I was not in school; I had left college after my mental health cratered. For months on end, I would wake up early, pack a bag with my notebook, blank paper, pens and pencils, water, and whatever book I was reading, and I would travel from my home in Long Island to Manhattan, where I would muck about in libraries and parks. This was my alienation. I had spent half my life being educated for a citizenship quite similar to Amory's; prep school would lay the world at my feet so that I could take full advantage of it, stamp my name on it.

In college I would presumably practice doing just that—but I failed to meet expectations. A book like *This Side of Paradise* was one of my first stops in trying to understand why, because it was a language that I was well

versed in, which I had been using exclusively for half my life at that point. But language, as I have suggested, builds cultural homes—wrong language, wrong home. I needed to abandon the home I had built with a language that held the hostility of white supremacy, and recover the home I had relinquished—a big task, a long task. It would take me another year to find *The Other Side of Paradise*.

* * *

It came as a shock when I was on the train one morning during the summer I read Chin's memoir. I was heading to work, reading a whole different book, and I thought—about what, I cannot tell you; but I can tell you how it sounded.

At first, it was funny. What a strange thing, I thought, to have read a book in a language I thought I had forgotten, and then to hear my thoughts in that language.

There was a moment during which I tried to wrest my thoughts out of the hands of Patois, to bring them back to the language with which I'd built a thorny home for seven years. But I couldn't do it. I was acutely aware of the speed of my thoughts, for I was hearing them whiz by as I tried to grab one and stuff it with my bare hands back into the American English mold; but my thoughts were free and beyond me.

As someone shoves by me on the platform: *'im cyan seh 'excuse me'??*

As I try to recall which exit brings me closer to my destination: *mi nuh know...*

The only thought I could think in American English was "Why is this happening?" I could only use American English to try and fail to understand Jamaican Patois's sudden control of me, unity with me, centrality to me. But it could not enter that house.

After failing to regain control of my thoughts, I found myself egging them on. When I realized that short Patois phrases came easily, I stretched my thoughts into longer ones; I said certain thoughts out loud to myself, just to make sure that the language was really there. I was surprised by how sturdy the Patois was, how assured, as if I had always spoken it. Looking back, I can sense that, secretly, I was thrilled by the whole thing, by the notion that this was something I had accidentally uncovered, meaning it was always there and never gone.

Is this what I sound like when I am free?

I relished for a few days this state where Jamaican Patois was my default, the language of my self. But it did fade. I reverted back to American English. I thought nothing of it at the time; I thought of it as a natural come-down from an unexpected, wild, surprisingly gratifying and revealing high. It was a return to my regularly scheduled life. Now, I am not so sure. Why would I revert to the language that is an interloper on my identity and development? And why does it feel like an inevitability, a failure?

The answer, I think, is as simple and cliché as this: I cannot be born again. I cannot change the past. I can't not go to prep school; I cannot unlearn American English. I have been trying to build my little house behind me, in a direction I cannot go. The more difficult question is, is this actually the failure it feels like it is? On one hand, it seems as though I am stuck forever speaking a language that cannot hold me, that alienates me from my heritage. And yet, *The Other Side of Paradise* revealed to me how my first language never left me, even if I have little practice using it. Perhaps it is a matter of practice. But if I find that Jamaican Patois feels too foreign to the life I have been living for years now, I may simply have to trust that my capacity to understand it, its musical

quality, the feeling of home it gives me, are all enough; its presence is still inside me. It has to be enough to know that the home is behind me, even if I can never return.

Walmart with the Men who Wanted You

The few things I know: You and your knowing smile,
the crow's feet that spread at the sight of me.

The bus bumbling along the back country roads,
the moon shrouded in a thin layer of steel wool.

You take my hands in yours, take off the leather driving
gloves
to blow hot air in the vacuum formed by our fingers.

I cannot look at you. I cannot seriously consider
the weight beneath your words. You make my breakfast,
do my laundry,

wipe my tears with the pads of your thumbs
then kiss me there. I am wet like a newborn calf,

certain as an apologetic meteorologist: I am certain
about myself. You reply, me already entangled in your
arms,

a laugh beginning to bubble in the base of my throat.
I know you would do anything for me. I've found myself

on a bus with your friends, the men who I bested
in a competition less of errors and more of accident,

the men who might be better for you, kinder,
the kind of people who could love and love themselves.

August

Cicada timbals clack as titas cluck,
dancing barefoot on sandy carpet.
Bill Withers is our steady heartbeat,
tunes from Camiguin before my time.

Goodbye, I say. Hot sand dune
inverted, deep orange-pink
overlaid with pale blue-yellow.
My sister takes me by the hand

into the dry island of our cul-de-sac.
I don't want to shower again,
she says, hair freshly dried, still
smelling slightly of chlorine,

so we don't lie down. I stare
at the swathes of sky, patches of color
like joints cobbled together with eczema.
I cry. I am finally happy. Thank you

for this good day, God. Thank you for this day.



Mohawk Dam, Coshocton
County, Ohio, 2023



Duncan's Arrowheads, Mt.
Vernon, Ohio, 2023

Crescent

On silent November drives
Through gentling curving roads
Branches rise in flames of red, orange, yellow

Green twists through them in bright vestiges
Of a summer now passed
Crimson embers spin through licks of sun-beat air
Landing on chipped pavement in burning flecks

In me are the things that have fallen
And those which cling
Curling and crackling
Drying and browning
And still wary of the earth beneath.
I keep waiting to hear God whisper
In a voice so quiet it slips through me
Because the quiet is the only thing small enough
Smaller even, than silence:
The only thing that I imagine
Will pierce through the knotted threads
Woven within.

Even as I shed the roped wrappings
Peel off layer after layer
And stick them like post-it-notes
Onto the curved edges of circular tables
And the body of my guitar
And the leaves that drip through the air
In slow red embers;

Even as the braids begin to unravel
Frayed strands landing like the first snow
On the curved pale eyelashes
Of the girl in the seat beside me
And the moon at the beginning of November
And the boy in the back
Bent in a forward slouch

There's something about crescent shapes
That I trust
Or maybe crave—
The potential to be cradled
To be wrapped in something
That keeps one side open to the world.

I keep waiting to hear God whisper
But the falling leaves
Resonate like wordless thoughts
In the ceaseless silence
That echoes louder than the quiet;

And the half-moon shapes
Come with sharp edges
That clip me as I stretch a careful arm
And hoist a gentle leg
Into the places I'd like to hold me.

Spilt

I dropped the jar of honey
Watched it curve through the air
And then split
As if in slow-motion
Onto the white marble counter

Like the sun sinking into the blue horizon
On a hot summer evening
An egg cracked into a bowl of flour
Or the burning embers
In the ash of a moonlit campfire
The honey spread

Slow and luxurious
Languishing in its own beauty
Shards of glass parted around it
As the jar slowly became aware
Of the weight it held

I reached my hand into the spill
And my fingers slipped
Through the soft gold
Like falling into a stupor
Or the quiet invitation of sleep
Extended by fleece blankets and plush pillows

Until shards of glass pierced my skin
And some part of me woke
To the brightness of the kitchen's overhead light
And the rumble of the dishwasher beside me

When I pulled away
The sharp pain
Of the jar's broken edges
Submerged back into
The puddle's sweet soft center
And I watched it ooze
From the counter's marble edge
Like a thick apricot sunset dripping
Into the abyssal horizon below

time's (dis)passionate hand

tide keeping time

A December fog on a Tuesday
clears the beach of footprints.

Pocketing bones
plucked neatly from a rocky seashore,

A gray expanse of the sand
smoothed by the wave's gentle kiss

Like a mother to a child's scraped knee.

I'm contemplating the paths that
I walked as I grew out of old shoes.

Small fingers tap the silver metal
of tagged sycamores.

Bedhead-ridden, sandy-eyed bodies
carried to bed from the car.

Raw, bloodied hands from
games of boys-chase-girls.

I furiously clutch, white-knuckled,
at the memories that have begun to

Slip
through my fingers.

Ocean water cupped delicately in my hands.

While the gulls call forgotten words
from hazy years

That remind me of the songs
whispered by a sullen father

I've managed to keep
pace as the sand swallows my feet.

So I suppose it's okay to let them be pulled from the shoreline

held

As if frightened of time's dispassionate hand
Stealing away the moment, the weight of your arms
Hold me tight against your chest and affix our bodies
In determined permanence.

Small and defenseless I lie feeble and exposed
In your open palm, held by the lines that
A sidewalk psychic once said pronounced
Your early death.

You said her words were cloaked in beaded frivolity
But your eyes whispered otherwise and your
Body shriveled up into frail, wrinkled shambles so
I had to water you whole again.

the emptiness of it all

Within the humming lull of quiet,
I watch the fields go by in a blurred frenzy of beige.
But mile-long, winding rural roads off a certain nowhere
Stop at a field of graying crops,
A deafening vastness within its depths.

Against the ground, grass tall and thick,
Spider webs are strung between the blades,
Carrying the weight of stiff and hollowed bodies,
Hanging empty and forgotten on delicate lines of glass
Belonging to an unseen victor.

They breathe you in
Carefully grasping the sides of your face
Firmly entwining with the hair on your head
Pushing against your flesh in subdued hunger
Lovingly caressing the bones beneath your skin.

The soft colors of early morning mourning
Blend together in glazed eyes
From a salty slew of vacancies

And you watch the world
as I, you.

small-bodied

Faded green ferns birth delicate tendrils
With small hands and small fingers black and blue
From the strain of trying to grasp
The forgotten tokens left in the earth by the years
That have passed through time's grip.

The hands are gnarled, with spiraled knuckles,
(the lines whittled with contrived love)
And veins that run through thinning skin
Like the waters that bleed up the coast,
Bending softly around the bones.

They hold me close and rock me to sleep
Gently crooning the muffled melodies
Of the forgotten songs once sung by a mother
To the fussy newborn who refused to
Close her eyes.

to be Frank

The light on the wall crackled softly Whining
in the quiet Wanting
desperately to be heard While
the kettle on the stove top whistled And
the dog called for food And
so the man pulled at his collar.
The man lived alone In
an apartment with hardwood floors That
let out a soft yelp about every third step And
tugged on his favorite woolen socks Until
they bled with loose threads.
He drank his coffee black And
did not care for the taste of it But
liked the heat, especially on colder days And
it gave him a sense of control.
The man wore scratchy sweaters And
had a scratchy beard That
startled the dog When
he turned around too quickly Who
was as gray and as old as he was becoming.
He did not feel lonesome But
sometimes wondered If
there might be something More
to life Than
an old dog and an old man.
But to him that was enough.

Kuveni Weeps

Did Kuveni leave any gold to her boy?
Falling from the cliffs into the abyss
Cursing every future generation of Lankans
To give gifts to their young

Her Curs-ed gifted me a heart
One that's soft and warm pumping blood for pigs
It would cut me inside out hemorrhaging
Bloodied whispers of weakness nothing befit a man

Her Curs-ed gifted me a brain
Sharp enough to cut Steel and Flesh alike
The edge faded soon after, wounds festering
the sword melted and puppet strings wrapped me

Her Curs-ed gave me a home on an island far from theirs
Sent me to school with the burden of a last name
Put me on the subway with their dreams in my head
The curse seeping through capillaries near my neck

I gifted myself a mirror
So I could look upon my gold and cry
Yet the tears were gifts from a distant stranger

For when Kuveni weeps
We weep together

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