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SPRING/SUMMER 2022

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spring

“To the one who got away” by Sarah Marquez

I had a year to figure out
when you rise, if you shower

before you brush your teeth,
how you close doors—soft,

to ensure the closing will not echo.
In winter-without-you

I buy three coats. Two
to keep the closet warm

and one to cover the mirror,
casting the ghost of your reflection

on me. I secure your name
in my back pocket, so it will not slip

out. It is February again,
when we meet for the first time,

and you ask how tall I am
and who should pay for coffee.

I play with the gold crucifix
hanging from my neck and resist

the pull toward you,
who will not shake my hand.

Don't you want to touch?
I was made for touching,



emerged early from the womb
to feel my father's skin. He held me

once and would not put me down.
But you move around me, a stranger,

eyes protected behind thick glasses,
from the blue in me.

And I never lay down a stone
for you, a path to the affection I have,

building, building.
Today, I shout into the quiet

field you left and listen
to your dream face peeling away.

I breathe me in—
peony and blush suede perfume.





“Epitaph” by August Bennet

Apples too ripe for picking,
fettered by a layer of snow.
There is nothing profound, certainly,
in the pull towards blasphemy or the presence of sin,
but I do not ache for cleanliness or a way to repaint the winters.
My only wish is to be
 bathed as a newborn,
 baptism in gasoline.
So entrenched in that obscene darkness—
unreachable by anything but dirt,
 kissed on the forehead
 with a spot of grease.
And if this is the only way to condemn myself as I wish—
when I bury enough of myself, I can expect no light
to arrive and chariot me off.
I have never been much of a child of God.

“City in a Canoe” by Kellene O’Hara

originally published in Blood Tree Literature:

<https://www.bloodtreeliterature.com/fiction/city-in-a-canoe-kellene-ohara>

I remember floating, the current carrying us in the city confined by canoe.

I remember believing that the earth was comprised of canoe and nothing more.

I still dream of white facades. I dream of thirteen church steeples and of twelve bells echoing at noon. When I dream of the city canoe, I dream of empty evenings soaked in yellow lamp lights. I dream peacefully, hidden in the memories of yesterday.

But, sometimes, I dream that I am running through the heart of the city. I am in the center. I feel my pulse, throbbing, aching. I feel fear. The ground disappears. I am submerged, falling into the river.

Underwater, I am dying.

I wake up, wet with sweat, but I am convinced that I have drowned.

I have died a thousand times in my dreams.

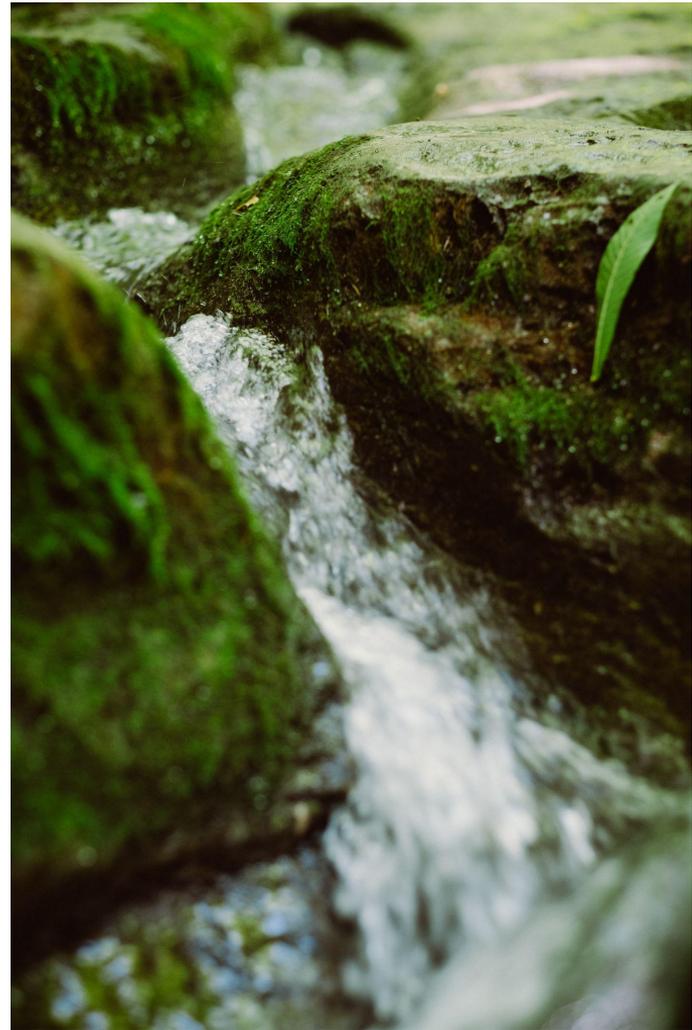
Here, on the banks of the river, I am still drowning.

I want to call out to you in the canoe. But my voice will crash, then collapse against the walls of our city. The sound will not find you in the labyrinth of streets. I try to imagine your location. I want to believe that you are home, in the place we built together. I want to believe that you are drinking tea at the kitchen table, staring out the window – watching the world reel by like a moving picture. I want to reel you in, like a fish tight on the line. I want to catch you. I want to capture you in the moment.

I close my eyes and I see it. I can’t tell if it is a real memory or if I have created it in my mind.

But there you are.

Drinking tea. I make a sound, in whatever this is, and you look up at me and smile.



I decide that it doesn't matter if it is true or not. I believe that this is a memory. And so it is.

So, I remember that smile and I hold on to it. Even as the canoe travels far away. Even as you go away.

In my mind, I travel the city. I walk down roads roamed long ago. In my imagination, I construct you as a child, the time in which my memory is soaked with sentimentality. Together, we go off exploring our canoe city. We walk past the church and school. In my mind, we are now passing the hospital. The cemetery. I tug your hand. I cannot stay.

“Run,” I say in my brain, but the words cannot be said to you because you are not here.

You are there, in the canoe city. I am here on the ground, watching you drift further away.

I think again of our city and I think of the playground. I want to place you there. You might be hiding in a tunnel. You might be waiting for me, like when we played hide and seek. You were terrible at hiding. I was an excellent seeker. Sometimes, I counted to ten in my head before finding you, just so you had a chance to think of yourself as a hidden thing.

I begin counting, but I do not finish. I stop at three because I know that I do not want to reach ten.

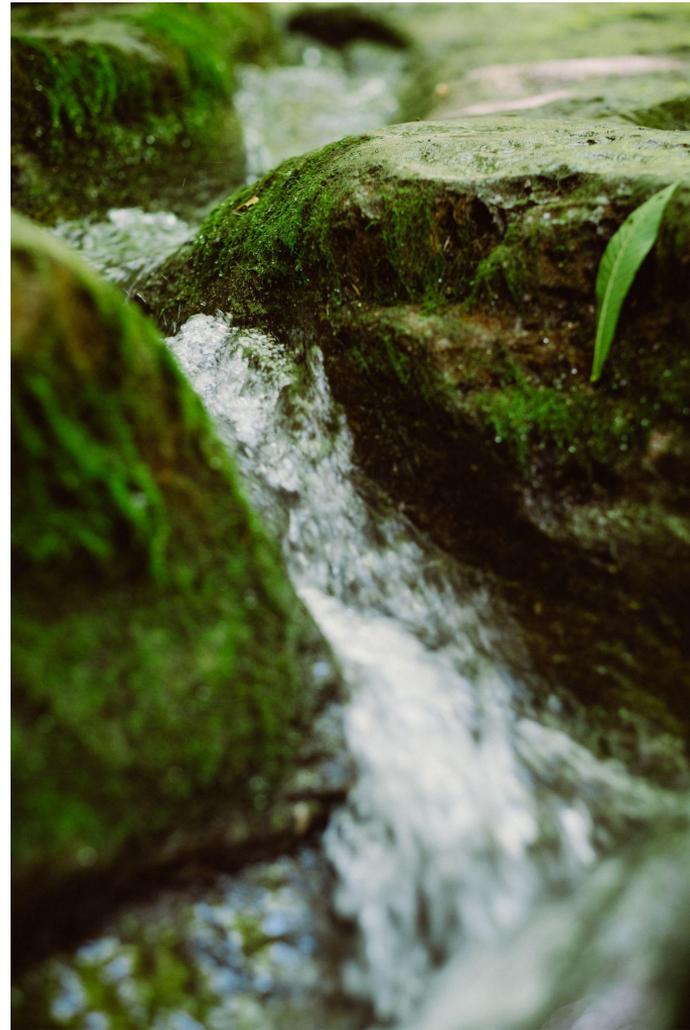
I know where you are.

You were always terrible at hiding.

I know I can find you, but I don't want to. So, I walk away.

Instead, I think of the architecture of boats. I think about how the wood is bent to create the canoe, how the water bends around wood. How solid separates the liquid beneath. How the hull, even when full of vertical structures and avenues, can glide across the surface. The city canoe is the physics of perfection. I could not create something so perfect. I cannot even try.

I think about water bending around bodies. I think that if I went into the water, it would absorb me. It would dissolve me. In the water, I would become the water. I would disappear. I am afraid. You know this. You know I am afraid of drowning.



You always told me I was safe in the canoe city as long as I was with you. But now we are gone. I am not on the canoe with you. We are no longer together in our city.

I wonder if it is still our city if one of us is absent.

Can it be our city if one of us is removed from it? Can it be our city if one of us is buried by it?

I don't know. I don't know.

Help me.

I am being crushed by the city I no longer inhabit.

A city is a heavy burden to carry.

I wish I did not carry it alone. I wish that someone else on this far away land came from the canoe city. I want to have a city in common with someone.

I wish it were you.

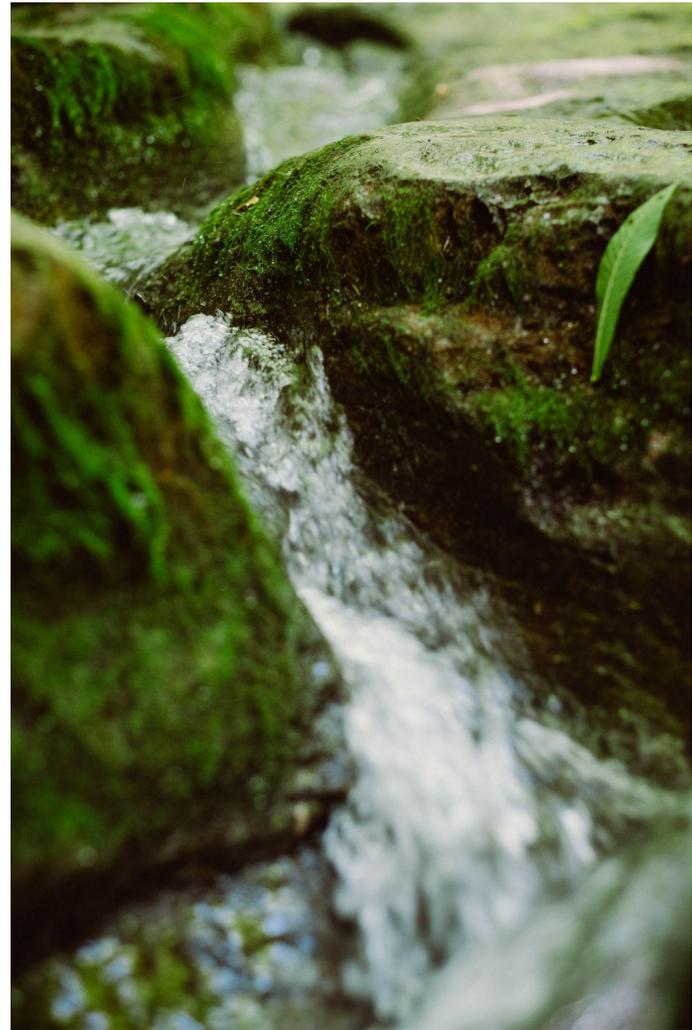
I am following the canoe along the river bank, but it is almost out of sight. The current must be strong. It is carrying the canoe so fast. I don't know if I have strength to follow.

My legs are weak.

I come temptingly close, but you are out of reach. I move my arm, the fingertips sweeping the sky, stretching beyond the atmosphere, reaching for ether. I see specks of other worlds in the dancing and dying light of evening. I see great cities built and destroyed in between breaths. My heart beats and entire civilizations exist outside of the confines of time.

I see all of this, and none of you. I know that you are gone. You have moved beyond me.

I still want to touch you though.



If I cannot follow, I must go forward. I walk along the banks of the river and I wonder what happens when the land stops. I wonder if I will be able to continue or if I will fall off of the earth. I wonder where I will fall.

You never wondered about such things. You believed in something. You held my hand and told me to believe too. The only thing I ever believed in was you. You and the canoe.

I believed that the canoe was the earth. Until my world ended.

Then I had to go. I had to go because, without you, I was drowning.

I wasn't dreaming. It was real. I was drowning.

I was afraid of drowning. That's why I left.

I was afraid of leaks. I was afraid of floods.

I was afraid of the water.

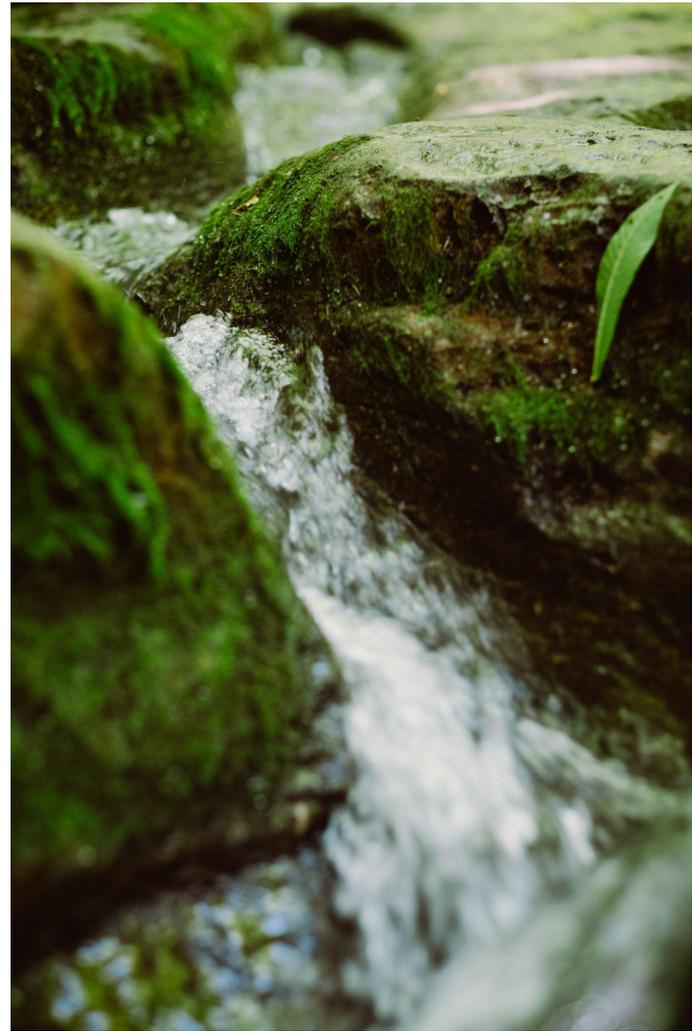
I imagined lungs filled with liquid. I imagined the weight of water.

But I am no longer afraid.

I am ready.

Sink or swim, I am coming.

I am coming.



“The Bliss Seekers” by KL Holliday

I step out
onto the back stoop,
long since grown over
and swallowed by spring.

We found a four-leaf clover
growing between bricks
on the second step once
and couldn't decide whether to pick it
or water it.
But that was long ago,
in those days of counting
years and dreams on fingertips.

In the yard, now ankle-high
with late-August crab grass
and dollar weeds,
I wait for you by the gate.
The sagging, picket gate
that used to bang shut behind us
like a starting pistol
as we raced through the streets
of our father's wheat cities,
trying to outrun junior high,

With you
always eight to my six,
twelve to my ten,
sun to my shadow.

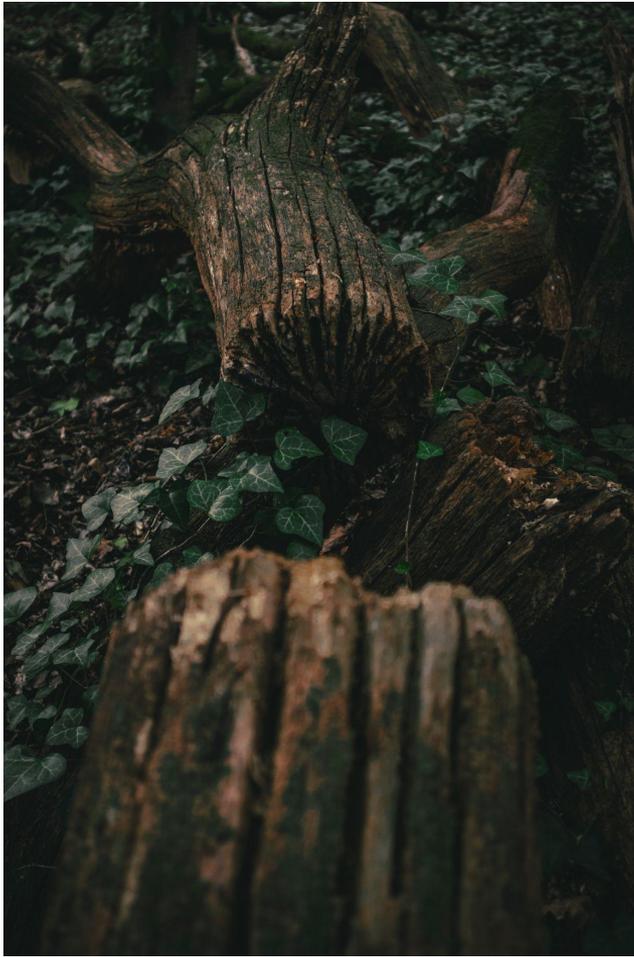


Now to come back quietly,
and watch you drive the day
across the fields
and back behind the mountains
on that old John Deere
that used to be Dad's.

We come back
to turn the soil
of our family history
and plant new crops
between old roots.

Reaching forward
with one hand
and backwards with the other,
finding home at both ends.





“moon mountain” by Kristin Lueke

i think of you beloved and think of blue feathers,
sun breeze, sighing through shade and grass, bird song
clear as stars stay burning, whether or not we see them.

do you remember the spring we drove ten hours
toward mountains to breathe? we buried stones
in earth at night and hummed ourselves to sleep.

there may have been a cigarette. i'm certain
there were lemons. in the morning, you walked
us through mud and berries and toward a tree

whose trunk had torn itself in two insisting
on its chances, leaving at its heart a wound
that grew into a nest. you said this one is you.

“The Story Of Three Beginnings” by Paul Chuks

I

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word

was God is how a holy book starts—meaning we exist first in a

language & in a story, we are gods somewhere. If I put

a mirror around me, will I know where I am? Or a door & choose to walk out, will I remain a god? A story precedes tragedy—this is why our tributes begin after our death.

II

Soul meets soul on lover's lips — Percy Bysshe Shelley

This is not a tale. Love started here for real, & guess what? two lovers whose

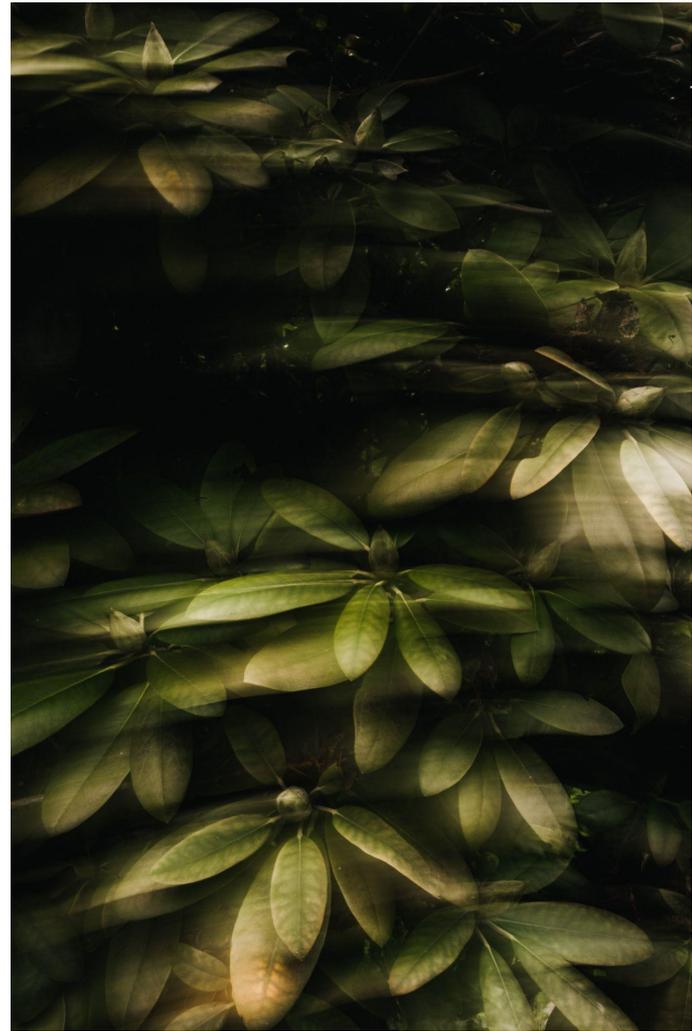
souls meet at the point of a kiss precede their story. This is superior because

the soul is the earliest man—like the prologue of his flesh. This is how it all

begins; two souls form inside their respective bodies; boy meets girl

or boy meets boy; their souls float towards each other in angelic

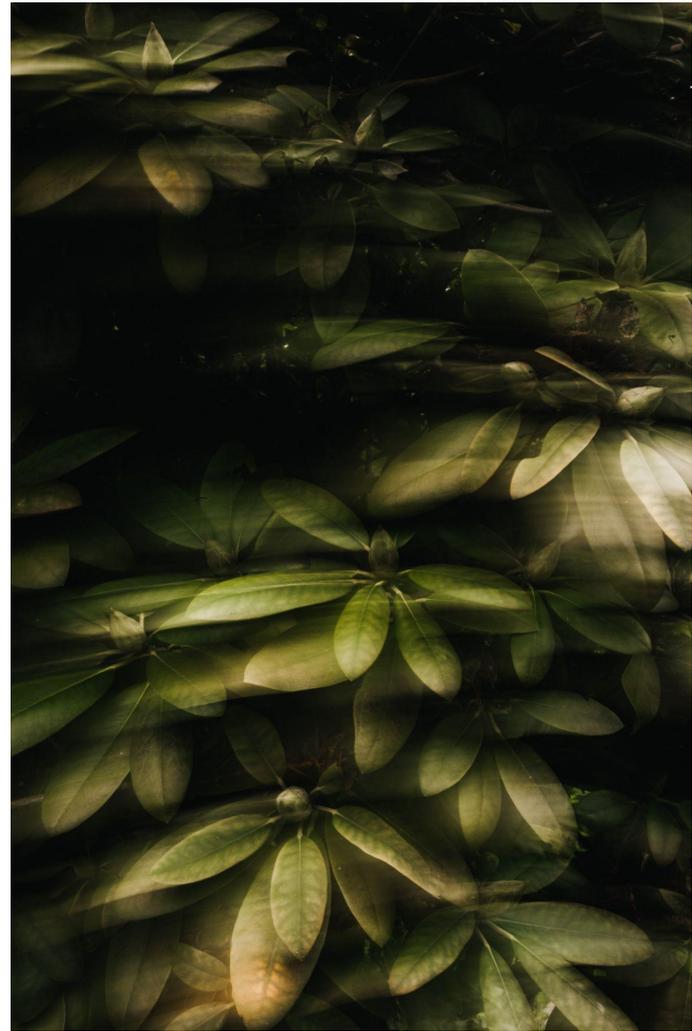
fluid; their bodies clasp, they kiss, they fuck, here lies the crux of the story.



III

All things fade and quickly turn to myth — Marcus Aurelius

A gust of wind hits from behind my skull. If I ruminate, it'll dissolve into questions I have ignored for many years. They will ask why everything has to end. Did God not say this is our earth & we should conquer it? why then do we die? our flowers, dogs, mothers, lovers, selves, why? this is when everything begins to end; the flowers are the same at sunset & sun down; the dog doesn't run around crazed, from our presence; lovers begin to kiss with open eyes; the night walks into our eyes, unquestioned & extends its grace for hours that supersede time. I have only established that life is a compass with [me or you] & an arrow, at the center of the universe, pointing to an illusionary direction that Upon a gaze, one sees the beginning or an end of a thing.



“Springtide Bright” by Sam Bartle

Spring air freshens the slowly greening land,
Gently lifts the veil of winter’s heavy gloom
Flowers arise at the warmth’s command,
As their vibrant colours burst into bloom.

By the breeze, daffodils wave a ‘hello’,
As though in praise for all that grows,
Swaying, in their grateful bands of yellow,
To the warmer Sun, for what it bestows.

Springtide Bright, the morning haze
Giving hope for better days

Hear the birdsong of the thrushes,
Along the cherry blossom-filled lanes,
Calling from within the trees and bushes,
And resounding over verdant plains.

Across the hillside, where distant lambs bleat,
Around snowdrops waiting to be viewed,
The colourful primrose’s scent is sweet,
Mother Nature’s cycle is renewed.

Springtide Bright, the year in dawn
Warmth and light for life newborn.



“- Tomorrow -” by Silk~

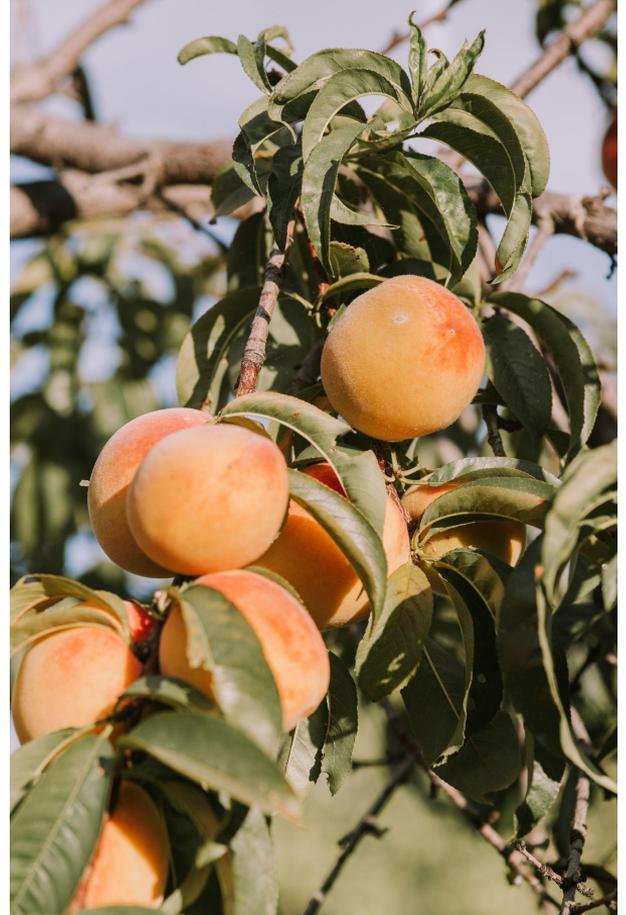
so tell me, what is it
about your tomorrow
that never comes

do you not feel
the tickling sunrise
on your furrowed brow

do you not build
your cathedral of thoughts
around canyon wren-song
tipping the dancing bough

can't you even taste
the river of lilac-scented
breeze quickly quenching
our skin's lustrous thirst

like plump ripened fruit
shouldn't you thank
the heavens for the outpouring
of tomorrows and burst?



“To Gods That Forget Why We Carved Them” by Ifeoluwa Ayandele

You left the bodies of your gods
on empty streets & you hastened
your footsteps & locked up

your faith in those gods behind
closed windows & watch what
will become of their dead bodies.

Tell me gently, gently, like you saying
a secret to a child: what did your
fathers tell you about their gods?

Did your ancestors tell you
to find a new home & shut their gods
outside, treating them as strangers

in their ancestral home? I heard you
couldn't chant in the language of the gods
but lean on the windowpane, counting

memories of how your fathers warned
you of times of the falcons falling
from the sky & of gods forgetting why

we carved them, forgetting why we
pour libation on their forehead, forgetting
they are the harbinger of our future.



"I Went to Wander" by Austin Belore

Into the wilderness I went to wander,
Hoping to find a song or sonnet,
A rhyme or reason,
God or glory.

In the tall twisted pines I found life free beyond pillowed luxury.
No molded metal or coal powered machine.
No foot prints of place long seen by the eye of time,
The hands of man,
Or the air of knowledge.

I went to escape, to vanish, to bend into the living breathing silent soup.
I went to be beyond the sculpture of perception.

I went to be.

Into the wilderness I went and wandered,
Hoping to find song or sonnet,
A rhyme or reason,
God for glory.

I found so much more.



“Dog Pass” by Terri McCord

A near-winter warm tree shadow
lays across the street from the foot
of the oak. Slingshot-
sized and shaped for the imagination,

grayed tones on asphalt
that curve up the curb, that suggest, too,
an entrance to a cave, or striations
of fur up close.

It is then in a kind light
I almost feel her

trying to materialize
shimmer into this liminal

space to lick my hand, to groan
as she settles by my kitchen chair
to stay there
if I need to catch her eye.





"i give me something soft" by Kristin Lueke

dahlia gathered me bloomstruck
by the thick of it

for once i say i need you here
(i am vining toward repair)

what i want for you is spacious
home lush and greening sweetly

i leave fuschia at your door
walk beneath whatever sky

“winter wrens” by nat raum

i met you in the summer-
time but i only remember you
in inked apparitions
dancing in sleetslush falling

to sidewalks. as of now,
our only restless spirits are american &
menthol, and we draw them
from a parrotgreen box in an alleyway.

*something about
the mints smoke burns
you into me,*

and you tell me
without shame about the things
you'd do to me. you do them.
and how.

and *how* are there still
songbirds out there singing
in this weather? how do i drain
this plastic shell i borrowed

from you of its butane so it
sparks seafoam & chartreuse
into the night and drives
you out of here?



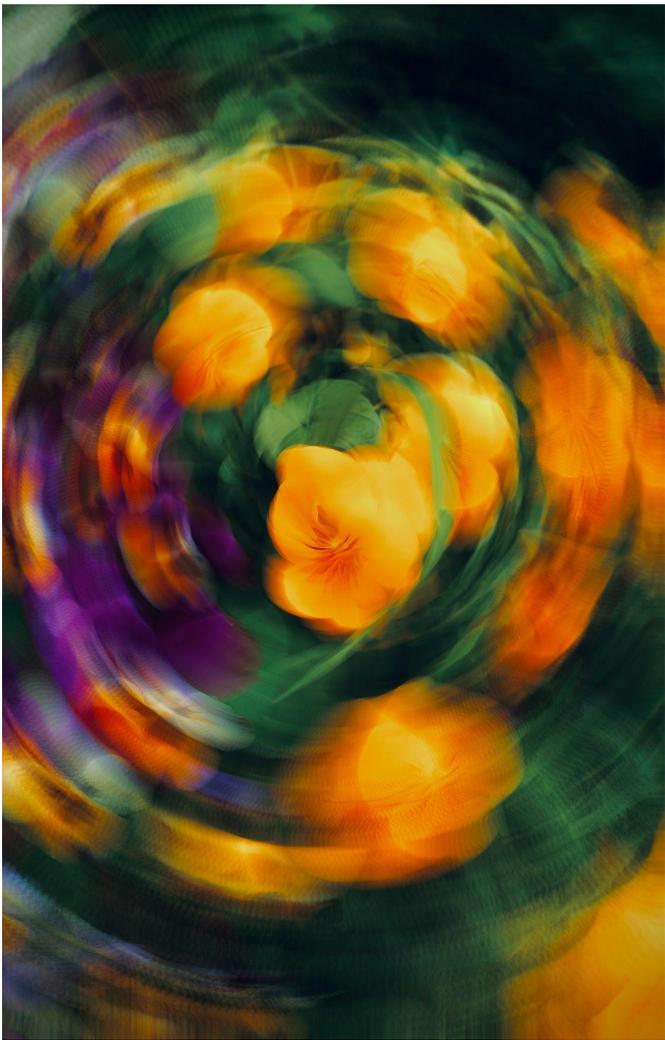
“The Good Dark” by Moshe Wolf

*We talk so much of light, please
let me speak on behalf
of the good dark.*

-Maggie Smith

There are many types of darkness. To find the blackest darkness, begin when the day ends and the sun sets. Watch the sky lower like an intermission. What will happen next? Sometimes the stars will appear and sometimes they do not. In the Namib Desert or the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho, you can see true night. There you can get caught in a web of stars. Go north of Santiago and there the night is the most Night. Observe the bright aura appear like a mousehole in the sky. This false dawn will make you see the Good Dark and you will want to hold it and kiss it feverishly like your first love. In Paris or New York City, anywhere there are city-wide blackouts, watch the sky burst with stars as the Milky Way falls into your eyes. Spend the night at Big Bend and break into night's vault like a tiptoeing thief. Climb to the stretching spine of the Alps or make your way to the Salt Flats of Bolivia. Once you search for the Good Dark, it will find you. So go, go now and look. Really look. Begin with a stay at Death Valley.

Anywhere we can feel the sky's pull drown us in its sea.
Anywhere we can hear the stars breathe behind our ears.



“It’s the End of the World as We Know It” by Lily Beck Q. Nobel

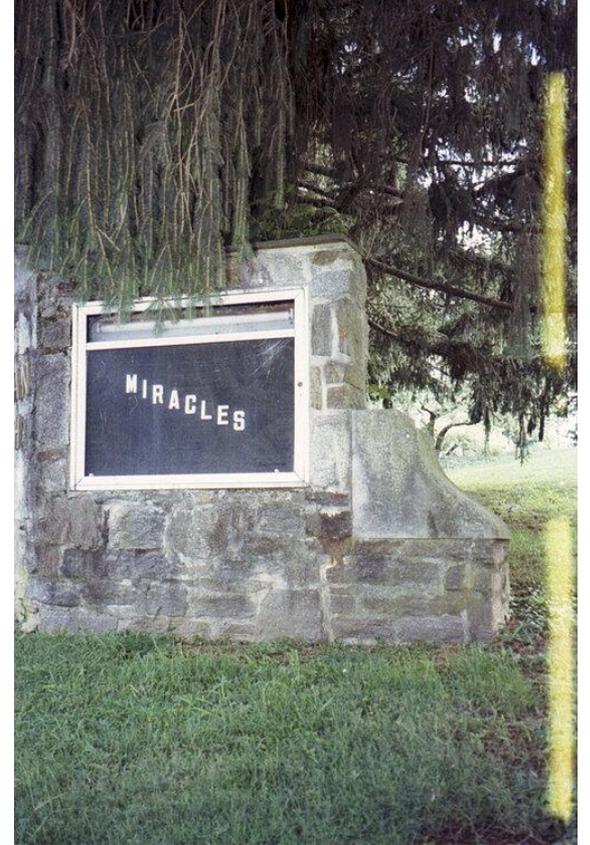
My friends and I should start keeping antidepressants in the center compartments of our cars to take like TicTacs. Everyone knows the world’s on fire, some people just don’t care. If Jeff Bezos’s employees had been working since the Pleistocene Epoch, they would be as rich as he is now. Maybe they should’ve started saving sooner. No one I know smokes cigarettes or drives drunk but we all chase around our guilts every day like only one of us can be left alive, like his town isn’t big enough for the both of us. In the Pleistocene Epoch, all of the dinosaur bones began to crumble in the earth they were already under. In 2022, we dig them up and use them to make our cars run. We leave the house and come back again. Beating my hands against my mattress I say *I’m so lonely. I’m so lonely and we’re all going to die.* Put your gun back in your holster, cowboy, no one is designed to be the final man on earth. So it’s the hottest winter on record. Then, still, spring breaks out from somewhere. Sometimes I feel my heart in my chest. I feel it like a physical thing. I say *oh God. I’m so sorry I forgot.* The sun is so close she takes up the entire sky. *Oh God. I’m sorry I forgot.*

featured artist:
nat raum



BR: What first inspired you to begin creating your art? What has kept you inspired to continue creating?

nr: I've always been pretty creative, so it's hard to say exactly how I began, honestly! As a kid, I drew and painted a lot, and as computers became more common, I also made computer art on MS Paint and this other design program called PrintMaster. I started making photographs in high school and really fell in love with it, which led to me going to an art college when I graduated. That honestly opened my process up a lot, both because I learned way more about photography and also because I was regularly working in other media alongside my photography practice. I have also always been a writer, so I naturally gravitated towards my college's very interdisciplinary book arts minor. I think having so many tools I can use to create is what has kept me inspired—there's always a new combination waiting.





BR: You are an artist who has created amazing work in multiple mediums; both your writing and photography are featured in this issue. When you are inspired by something, how do you choose which medium to work in?

nr: It's interesting, because I don't know that it's ever a conscious choice. I usually start somewhat instinctually by either drafting the words running through my head or just picking up a camera. I will say that although I do more or less plan my writing before I begin, I almost never start photographing with a clear plan in mind (at least, not anymore). Both are still exploratory processes for me in some way, but I think it's clearer in my photography, where I am truly just relying on my eyes in a particular moment. That's not to say I never create a plan for visual work, but I tend to start broad and let things evolve fairly organically.

BR: How do you respond to creative block?

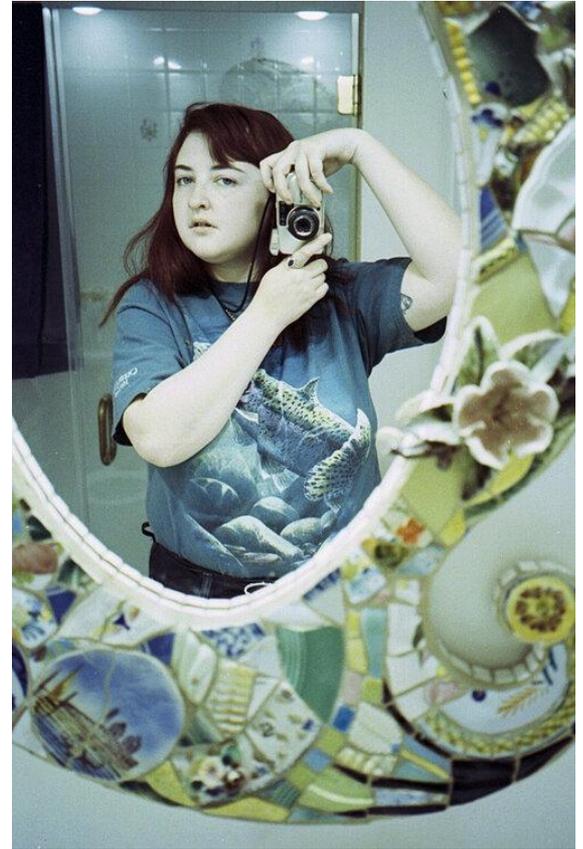
nr: I tend to just lean into it, honestly. I've never made any good work by pushing myself to make it when I didn't want to. I took a year off from making anything when I finished undergrad, and when I finally picked my camera back up again, it felt beyond right. So I don't like to hold myself to creating on a schedule—I always have faith that my art brain will come back when it's ready.

BR: How has art (your own and others) affected your life?

nr: I recently wrote an essay for one of my MFA workshop classes about a poem that had an impact on my process or life. I chose a poem that had been published in my high school literary magazine, and in the essay, I discussed the home that joining the staff had allowed me to find when I had very little else to find comfort in. In a now-edited ending to the essay, I discussed the poem's careful balance between fragility and strength, and how I sought to emulate it; "I felt it was important not only to allow other survivors the opportunity to see my experience and feel less alone, but also to allow myself the freedom that pictures and words gave me." Mirroring the Jill Bialosky memoir which prompted the assignment, I concluded that "I have to agree that 'poetry will save your life,' it saved mine more times than I can count." Art (and writing) have continued to allow me an outlet for catharsis when I need that space, and it's something I'm immensely grateful for.

BR: How has your art changed throughout your life?

nr: In some ways, a lot—most of my college classes completely opened up the way I viewed not only photography, but art in general. This led to me becoming extremely willing to experiment if an idea demands it, and in that way, my process is very different. But I also seem to always return to the same themes; I've always been especially drawn to the body as a subject, and my work tends to speak to my lived experience of misogyny, originally as a (compulsorily) cishet woman, and from a new perspective now that I've transitioned. I may change media, but I think this kind of work will remain important to me.



BR: What impact does community or peer engagement have on your art or creative process?

nr: Having a creative community is incredibly important to me. My practice is heavily centered on my past struggles, so it's partially driven from a place of creating to heal, but it's also very much about telling a story in a way that provides some level of comfort or community to a viewer or reader with similar lived experience.





BR: What piece of yours are you the most proud of? What does this piece mean to you?

nr: This is a hard question, since so much of my work is associated with personal growth milestones, but I feel like I have to say my hybrid memoir, *you stupid slut* [published May 18th, 2022 with Dream Boy Book Club]. This is a particularly important collection to me personally, but I'm also extremely proud of where it ended up visually. The book uses poetry, prose, hermit crab forms (think Wikipedia articles, Materials Safety Data Sheets, receipts, cocktail menus), photography, and collage to form an intimate and candid portrait of my early 20s. This was a transitional time in my life that I actually remember very little of—it's been interesting to see myself through that lens again.

BR: What is something you wish more people understood about your art?

nr: It's largely informed my process. I know to some extent, all artists are like that, but I heavily embrace the time periods when I'm in the thick of making something. I'm usually constantly thinking about my current endeavor, and that's how my work tends to both evolve within its current form and seep into other media outside of photography and writing. I truly can't turn my brain off sometimes, and I let myself push new ideas until they're exactly where I want them to be—or, alternatively, I'm absolutely certain they won't work for the project and then table them for later.

BR: This issue of Blue River Review will be published near (and is intended to be a sort of representation/interpretation of) the cusp of spring and summer. What does spring mean to you?

nr: I have a somewhat complicated relationship with spring, I must admit. I'm quite sensitive to the anniversaries of things, and spring hasn't always been so kind to me. But one thing I will say that I think is especially fitting, given spring's many associations with rebirth, is that spring always brings change. My therapist once told me that reaching a limit is a catalyst for change, and I've grown quite comfortable with change since then, even retroactively warming up to past changes. So I guess my final answer is that spring now always feels like (and symbolizes) a welcome change.





summer

“At last, June” by Sarah Marquez

sun in between the blinds, heat
under the wood, coming up. Pincher bug
creeping out of the canvas bag by the open door.
Inside: a refuge for small things.

What is dead? My regret. The word
regret. Every move I don't make. A container-full
of overripe strawberries and blackberries that grew
moldy in the unseen dark. I don't

realize and pack them into your lunch. *Eat well!*
We meet in the kitchen. I am standing at the stove,
heating up water for tea. You ask if I'm going out
with him. I say, no. You say, good. You repeat, *good*.

I am not crushed. The problem is I want
to argue, but you are going and again
I am left behind. The thought of being here
and not there settles, takes off in an armful of laundry,

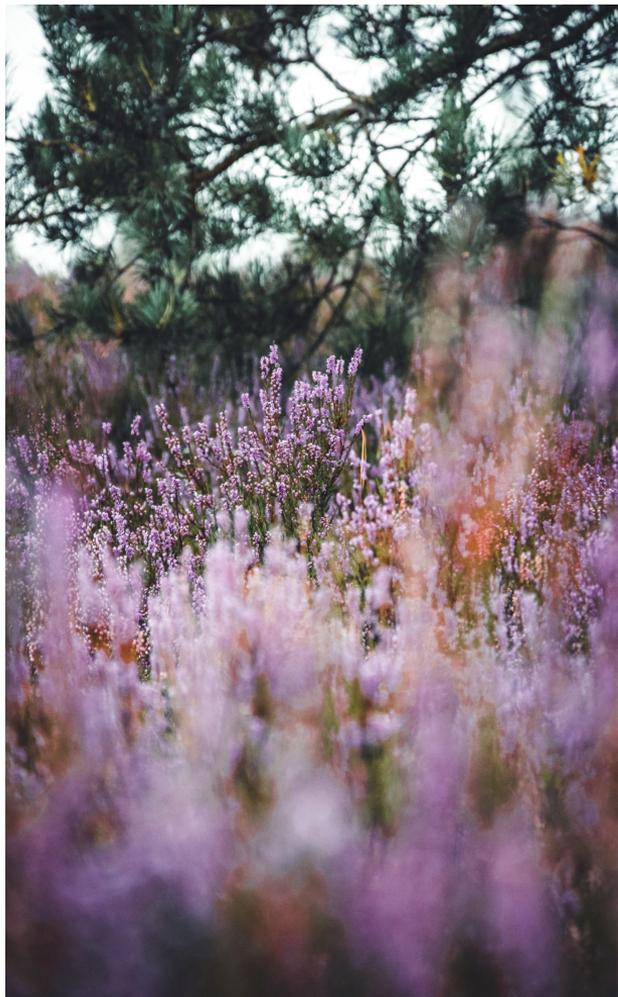
I carry downstairs. The fabrics of my life
remind me that I just had sex last night
and you weren't there to stop me,
decadent cries coming from my mouth, when

his body fit into mine and we groped each
other, not noticing clean sheets on his bed,
stained white with my yolk. When I tasted me—
free to love and let someone else love, this body,

this porcelain verse, this guilt passing away.
The day feels like a sauna. My skin catches fire
to cleanse itself. I am soft, sexual light, the kind
you cannot miss. Do you recognize it? It was your light



first, passed to me 26 years ago in the womb. Born
out of girlhood trauma, everything wild resting in you,
on the edge of something—it said you could stop
or the world. You chose the world.



“Jewels of the Prairie” by Emily Kendall

Have I done this for eight thousand nights? Awake,
then asleep? It’s astonishing to think, when lying restless in bed,
that there will be a sudden dropping off.

Well, that month there often was no drop.

Just milky night lighting my room until morning.

I felt my bedroom was a dripping cave, that above me
glowworms strung the ceiling like pearl necklaces.

Then, on a rowdy Greyhound, stuck into my window-den,
we were above the Mississippi. I mean really
above it. I was dumbed by sleep and solitude; the concept of River
had no place in that day’s vernacular. It stunned me after,
from the western side, as we trucked along a mansioned ridge—
big, stucco things, latticed with half-timbers. God.
Don’t ever again let me forget that the world exists.

I stayed at an old friend’s new apartment.

There was a cat, not hers, but we were in charge of his life
and comfort. And a calf, galloping across a pasture glade,
not yet aware of certain conditions of being:
slow alienation of oneself, horseflies.

Should we turn around, Lily said. There was no place to turn.
The road before us unfurled as if on a spool.

Sleep; Grinnell, Iowa; my lonely summer.

When periwinkle night vaults high over prairie,
it’s easy to feel that everything is connected and true.
It’s not silly, it’s the smell, you know the one. Asphalt, heat.
Darkening of sky. Blue, then bluer. And also golden: the firetower,
built low and wide, rose from the grasses like a woven basket.
And from the top we might see an elephant, I thought aloud.

Imagine, in Iowa. Crashing through the trees, just there.
Lily and I flung ourselves out on the hot wood.
I want to see that, and to hear the giant thundering feet,
I want to be shaken, want to feel autumn, beachgrass,
total disbelief.





“ate” by Sam Szanto

cooked kitchen scissors guzzled cord, handed over like in hot potato, brand-new pig snuffling, lips fixed around nipple, skin stuck, ravenous moments, phone gobbling up, tears on red head red bed, *no way keep him... agreed... ambulance?... send back... blanket... name?... blood?... think murder, call police... name what?* no name correct, sucked as if praying, outside planes, drunken shouts, baby woke, baby fed, baby slept, baby woke, baby fed, baby slept, how was anything left, stayed awake, starved, stayed awake, starved, semi-light, dolphin-grey faux-fur sleepsuit stolen from high street, extra blanket, bag for life, baby placed inside, *need to feed just once more please*, absorbing smell, breast-pull pitiful painful

bread-knife wind, *postman's always early*, slow-motion journey, number eight across this street, adults with kids

name came, *charlie* meaning free, laid on step, ran back, cries ate air, number eight cronus' mouth, untied gown, stomach puffed out

cries heated houses, boiled passing cars, roasted stars

“Woman at Belle River Landing” by Jeffrey Alfier

She stands in the kitchen
wrapped in nothing but a sweat-soiled bra
and rubs liniment into her skin.
Crawfish boil scents the air
with its seafood-on-sale funk
as the day becomes an inventory of shadows.

Her landscaper hands with their stinging cuts
wipe steam splayed over the window
and she thinks of the quantum of thorns and briars
that first arose in Eden, how they were born
of a single sin. She whistles a zydeco tune
she doubts anyone else knows.

Say on the lawn in front of the trailer
the sun-faded figure of Our Lady of Mercy,
palms uplifted like a bowsprit,
offers little to soothe the faultline in her faith.
Say unpaid cable bills means TV static bleeds
through the rooms of the house.

Now the 2 a.m. voice of a nighthawk
breathes a cryptic song through an open window,
its hunger made of darkness. Everyone swears
that bird ain't native here. Through the glass
she watches it vanish over the ground,
smoke sheeted with moonlight.



“Molasses Summers” by Emily Wheeler

Tell me once more
of the summer—
of the sunsets dotted with gnats,
heavy coated afternoons, thick
with honey soaked warmth and the music
in cicada hums.

Tell me again of the gravel
still wearing at the bottoms of your feet—
of the soft bundles of grass, fresh cut,
pillows upon your path
and the way the air was easier to breathe.

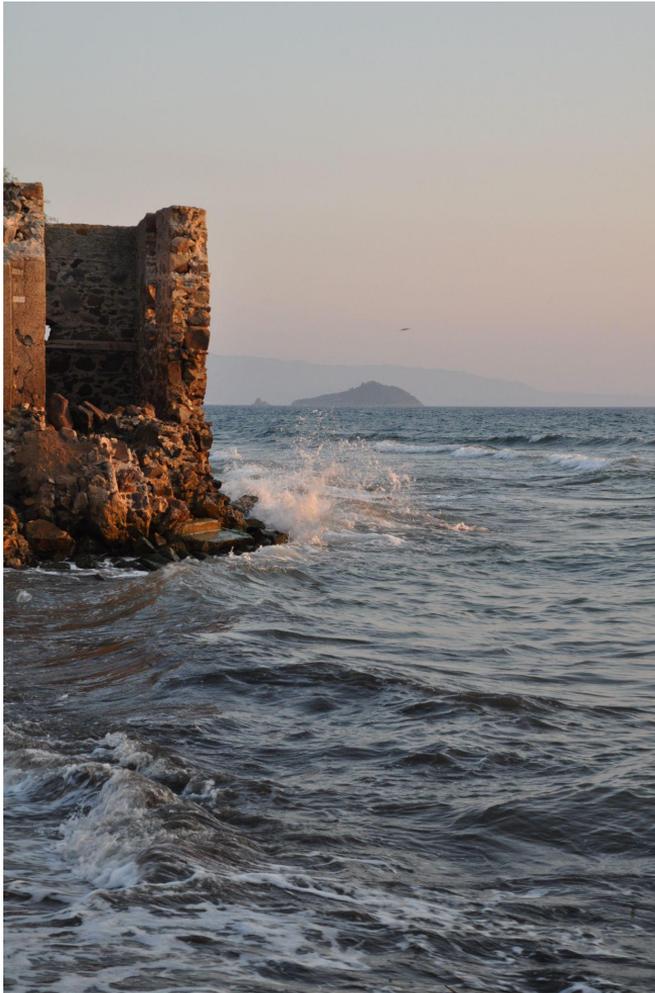
Tell me of the nights
with fireflies waltzing through the sky
and crickets playing lullabies—
Tell me the memories of your childhood
and why you love that song,
Tell me the recipes you know by heart,
of those treasured romances
and what you loved most.



Tell me again of the way
you learned to live
with your eyes, bright and bold, focused forward
and your feet planted firmly in the rich soil.
Tell me of how the sun danced low in the sky
when time had slipped away, that slow river—
flush with trout roaring swiftly
into the waterfall,
when the present met its end,
when it was time to go home—

Wrap yourself in memories once again
and tell me once more
of molasses soaked echoes
of summers now gone
and the feeling of sun, of warmth,
dripping
 upon
 your
 skin.





“At The Karavolades Stairs” by Shane Schick

Donkeys would no doubt have been a better idea but we walked, all 600-odd steps, even though your feet were already hurting and I was slugging our 10-month old son in a carrier on my back. We found the restaurant near the caldera’s edge, a place to celebrate our third anniversary with a piece of lobster so small the waiters were laughing as they went to prepare it for you. And just as the sun began to set on Santorini we looked up and saw a newlywed couple traipsing across a ledge or two above as though they’d run away from their own ceremony, or were ceremoniously sauntering into their future at the other end of Fira. I turned back to you and our baby on your lap, a backdrop of boats and the Aegean Sea in twilight, and I in no way could equal what once erupted here, but the magma within me was rising, all my vents and fissures giving way, and I knew there would be no stopping it.

“Marooned” by Jasmina Kuenzli

I saw you over the crest of a wave and dived in. And for half a moment, I caught up. My feet turned to fins, and I grew scales, and my hair was strewn with seaweed like a canopy. And I felt your hands snarling in the curls so tight, I was afraid that you would rip them out of my head.

You took me down. I grew gills to breathe. The landscape beneath me was purple, dappled with the rainbow of schools of fish and the siren call of the whales, emanating through my bones. You whispered to me.

Your cheeks were herringbone sharp and your lips were full and rich and wanting, and when I kissed you, the air of the surface poured into my lungs, and you restored me to life. You healed every sunburn and scrape and scar, and the hole in my chest filled to nothing.

I felt my heartbeat against yours, your shadow of love against the hollow of my throat. The marks you left on me weren't visible, except in the way I breathed the water, except in the iridescence that my skin had become. I didn't know when to leave.

I didn't understand what had happened to me.

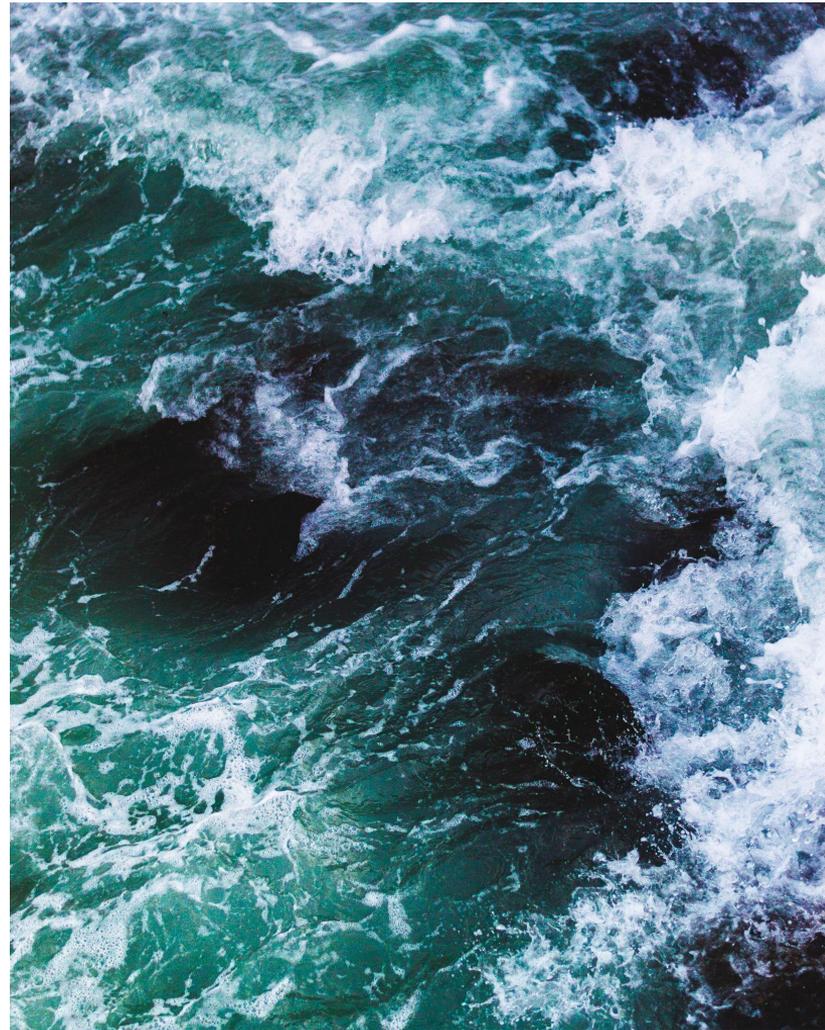
You spoke—

And I spoke—

And we both said, “Home.”

Our hands mirrored the touch of each other's cheek.

I swallowed you down with the rest of the sea.



And then the sun set.

The moonlight turned our sea into silver and shadows.

The sharks came, gleaming eyes and razor teeth, and they circled, watching. Waiting.

I didn't understand what for.

I didn't know what was happening to me

"I should have told you. Please. Stay."

They raced in for the kill. I had a pathetic little spear in my hands and my own teeth, and

I snapped and tore and struck, and blood stained the water.

Another wave, and another...

I grew weak.

I kept fighting.

And then I felt it—

The sand against my toes.

The ground solid beneath me

"Don't go."

My hands were flesh. My skin no longer iridescent.

I breathed in the stale, salt air.

I missed you.



I asked you to meet me.

I could fix us.

I would grind the sand down into your skin. I would kiss you until your lungs filled with air.

The sun would burn you, but I would heal you.

I told you.

I begged you.

You said nothing.

Days went by.

The moonlight found me retreating farther away.

You spoke—

And I spoke—

And you said, “Come back.”

But I said. “You move.”

I asked you to be next to me.

I looked at the sharks.

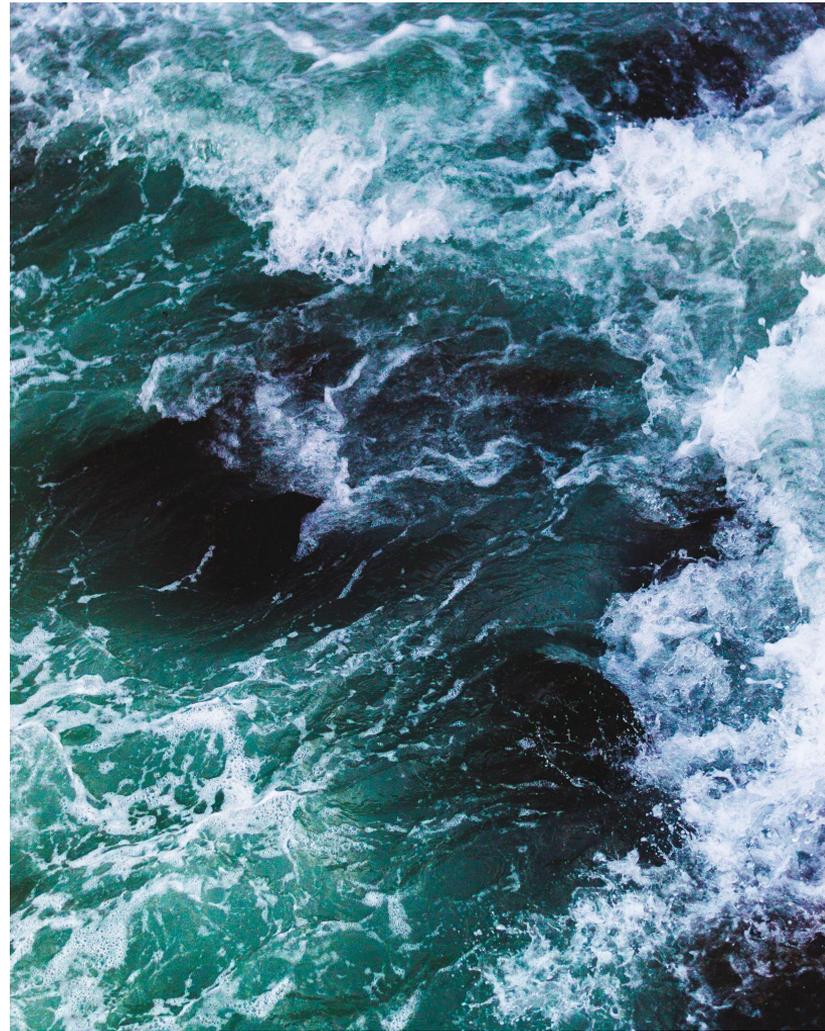
I bandaged the bite marks.

“I’ve spent too long in the ocean,” you said. “The land is too new. I’m too different.”

“I changed my skin for you. I grew gills to breathe. You drowned me, but I belonged.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

I reached out my hand, but you wouldn’t take it.



It's been a year, and my feet still trace the pattern of the tide, wandering back and forth.

Sometimes, I feel the hint of scales start to shimmer on my skin, a call like longing.

I can't turn to it.

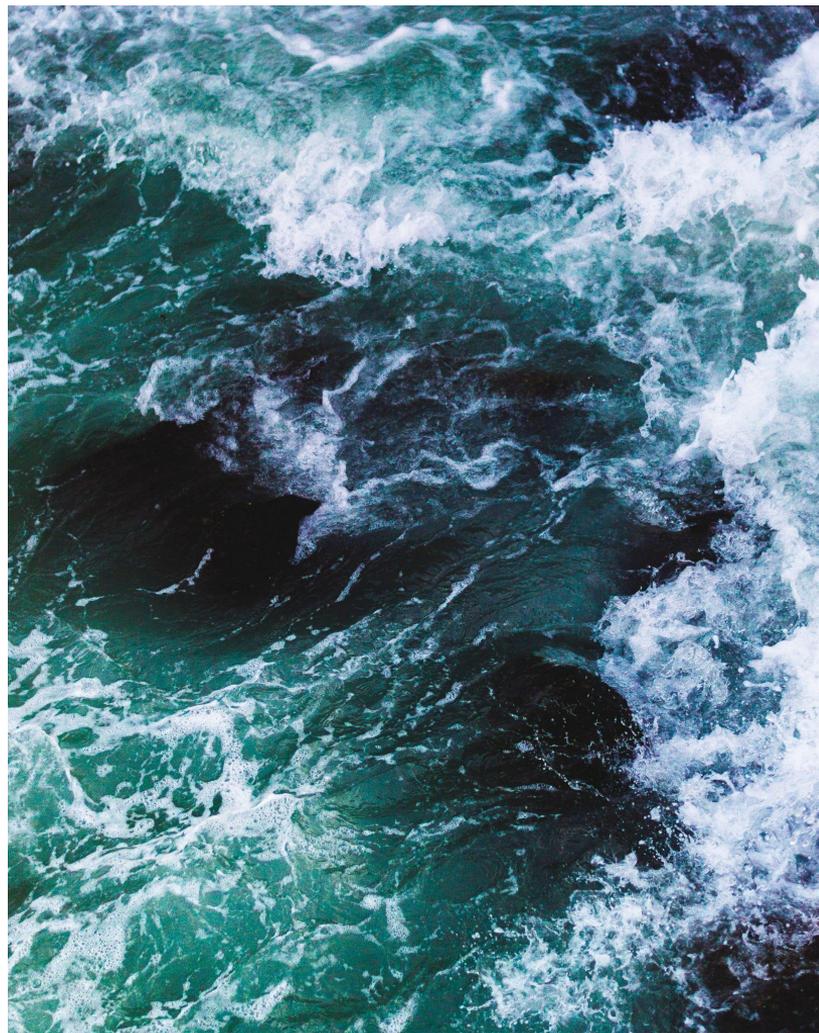
I don't let myself listen for you.

I walk away, I deny.

I self-immolate.

And still, every corner I turn on this island, every outcropping of rock that I crouch on...

I wish for you to emerge out of the water. Flecked with sea foam.





“Electric Ballad” by Amanda Roth

This is just to say
that when I am still
awake, some part of me sleeps, fumbles
in the sheets, reaching
for light. If you came inside,
you might trip
and fall
if you let yourself, though I hope you won't mind
the mess. Here are my fingers, still warm
from searching the sockets.
I was looking for lightning.
Did you notice when I made a home here?
When I finally turned on the lights?

“For The Fat Body, Always” by Belle Gearhart

Holy is it to be fat, to have a body you love
to feed with holy foods, un beholden to anyone
or anything, your body screams that you are HERE
and no one will lock you out

Holy are the rings we wear, two sizes bigger than your sister

Chubby fingers mean clunkier jewelry, means
flashier
gems and diamonds and rubies, overflowing from their
settings, this is how you announce your arrival
Have you ever heard a fat woman laugh?

Seen the dip of her chin as her face splits into
a gleaming, joyous smile?
Holy and wholly captured in the iridescence of sought after
happiness

Is there anything more holy than a fat person in love

with themselves? in bed with
themselves?

Holding themselves? to their own standards of beauty?

Holy shit, look at all the ways you can love.

around you, unable to contain you,

To be holy and fat, to have someone wrap their arms
how holy it is to exist in that containment of self,

to be the only one to hold yourself together.



“this tender revolution” by Kristin Lueke

what if i told you what i meant by that exactly?
that when i say this tender revolution i am saying
i’ve been changed, i’ve changed. i have chosen
something else. i am bigger than before i think
or big enough to hold me, having learned i think
to be me wholly and in so doing learned i hope
to see you, holy, holy, fully as you are, my loving
softly, gently, holy, whole, unwanted—what i want
to say is take my time, i’m finished counting.

all i think i need i have.



"Palm Oil" by Constance Mello

I walk into the kitchen
The counter, is covered,
Greasy, with palm oil

Eunice stirs the pot
The soup, with the shrimp
Sizzling smells like a memory



“Thelma and Louise in a Nissan” by KL Holliday

Hey, so we decide to go to Atlanta
where they assume
you want your tea sweetened.
Well, we’re from Florida
where they give you a choice.

Your car eats up road trip miles
swallowing them whole
to the tune of 80 in a 65
and random on your cd player.

Songs we couldn’t remember
well enough to sing
lying in that hotel Hampton Inn,
wide-a-frickin-wake
as the man next door,
we called him Jim,
took showers at 3am.
And another plane takes off.
What do you expect
from bargain rooms by the airport?
Tomorrow’s moments from
our hotel door and its dawn will break
over our view of 747’s and the pool.



For lunch,
we find five dollars
and a Krystals, making us
ten feet tall and bullet proof.
Holstering Georgia sweet teas,
we discover that US 75
and highway 85 are lovers
whose fingers lace together all over Atlanta.

We conquer Marta
and thirteen different Peachtree Roads
to sip Ciocoloccinos and hot
Bohemian lattes at
The Intermezzo,
high from lack of sleep
and immortality.

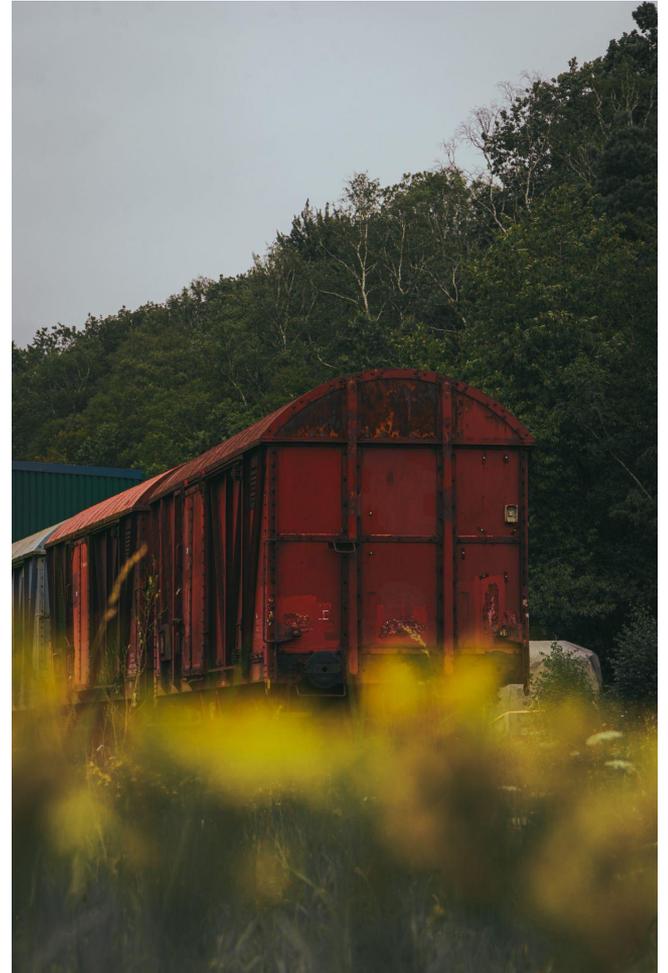


“The Great Redbird Trains of New York City” by Moshe Wolf

“More than 1,000 trains were shipped to coastal areas in Delaware, New Jersey, and Georgia and dropped on the ocean floor as part of an artificial reef program.”—Elissaveta Brandon in Fast Company

The Redbird trains know the hypnotic cry of wind and the private touch of rain. The Redbird trains feel the carrying comfort of rails. They loop the city like a lasso. They cradle people on their black seats. One day the people say we need you there, under water, not here where sky blankets. The people take 50 cars to the Cape May Reef. The Redbirds stay steady until 50 more fall in the dangerous Deepwater Reef. They continue the course. 50 more sink in the Shark River Reef. They all drown, one by one. When the wheels and undercarriage are removed for scrap, the Redbird trains plead. The Redbird trains drip steel tears. No more caressing wind. No more reassuring rails. Two big yellow cranes move the nine-ton subway cars around like toys. The Redbird trains slip into the hungry sea.

In a few years the trains will deteriorate and be useless. A failed experiment. But now, twelve men move about on the observation boat. They whoop with joy and slap each other on the back. A job well done. The only female in the party falls asleep dreaming about a blue playroom. She dreams a room filled with dozens of rhesus monkeys climbing an artificial tree. When she wakes, a string of Redbird trains litters the seafloor.



“The Summer I Cried in the Target Parking Lot” by Andrea Lawler

After taking a pregnancy test in the women’s bathroom, I cried in the Target parking lot until every car was gone except for mine.

You asked how I felt, and I said like a bee, swollen with too much nectar. Like a volcano, ready to erupt and decimate a city, scorching

everything into dirt & ash. I said like a river, breaching the banks and flooding my own home, knowing everyone is still inside.



“Hull” by Sam Moe

I.

Heaven, would you inspect this tattoo on my hand, do I
still dwell inside your heart, what about our bond, and
the oyster boat, the way water curled around the hull, hadn't
slept and my eyes were glassy, the moon didn't care, I should
have brought heavier nets, core of the house stuffed in a lamp,
fish confetti, try and understand I was in a hurry towards you.

II.

And I found your love letter inside an apricot pit, I would
have followed you into deep grey water, where jealous starfish
hate your beauty, cry about your sea-urchin earrings, why did
you leave trout in my room, won't you find me for dinner, care
to imagine it's you who never stays, not me?

III.

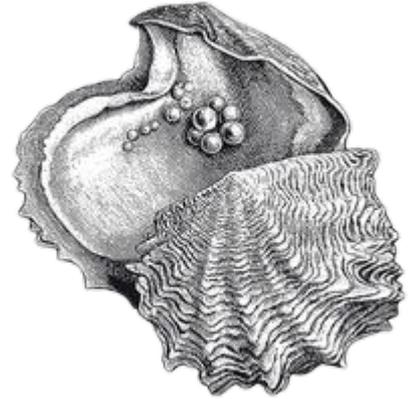
Water in my wine glass, I'm daydreaming again, of light fixtures
and thick rugs. I miss the mold and I would sleep under the desk
if you'd let me back.

IV.

And I know I know, you think longing is a trap, your sand-colored
hair shimmers when you laugh, I doubt you remember what I like
to eat for dinner, why I hate the claws on the tub, bet you've got
snares for ghosts, you're too golden to be haunted. softer this time,
you want marshmallow honey after dinner, no more crying, let's
find our ways back and if you let me return, I promise I'll surrender
my buttered lungs and too-blue pigeon hearts, about those jaws you
left in the sink—

VI.

I'm an herb now, core of my body is a pad of parsley, screw human,
share your pots with me, deep-bellied spatulas, please water the weeds,
impress the mulch with your statues, will you whistle in the storms, toss
away letters, about that apricot, I don't need you to follow me but try to
understand I'm bored without you, I am the how and the weathervane,
the good voice, water and whatever, how about we forgive the lack of
mermaids, we can resurrect sunken ships, I'll gloss my lips, I remember
you always liked folding laundry in the waves.





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Poetry and Fiction

Jeffrey Alfier's most recent book, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Journal & Press (2020). Journal credits include *Copper Nickel*, *Faultline*, *Hotel Amerika*, *New York Quarterly*, *Penn Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Vassar Review*.

Ifeoluwa Ayandele is from Tede, Nigeria. He is pursuing an MFA in Poetry at Florida State University. He is a Best of the Net nominee. His work is published or forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Noctua Review*, *McNeese Review*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *The Shoutflower*, *Shift: A Journal of Literary Oddities*, *Cider Press Review*, *Harbor Review*, *Rattle*, *Verse Daily* and elsewhere. He tweets @IAyandele. Zelle: ifeoluwadele@gmail.com

Sam Bartle was born in Hull, England, and grew up in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Like many, he began during the COVID-19 pandemic, but prefers to write on all aspects of his life experiences and observations of the world around him. His climate change poem, 'On Beautiful Sky' was featured on BBC Radio Humberside's 'No Filter' programme, and a line was selected for use in Luke Jerram's urban art exhibition 'Of Earth and Sky' (Winner: 'Best Arts Project' - Hearts For The Arts Awards 2022). Sam's work has also appeared in The High Wolds Poetry Festival Collection 2021, on BBC Radio York's Upload programme, and has received publication in *Wildfire Words* online ezine.

Lily Beck Q. Nobel is a poet, novelist, and student living in the Rocky Mountains. Often hungry and presently trapped in a stalactite cave. It's beautiful here, but please send a telegram if you have any ideas on how to get out.

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Paul Chuks is a songwriter, poet and storyteller. He is of Igbo descent and resides in Nigeria. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Brittlepaper*, *Epoch press*, *Streetcake magazine*, *Loftbooks*, *Glass poetry & elsewhere*. He's a reader at *Palette Poetry*, *Mudseasonreview & Forge literary magazine*. When he's not reading or writing, he's analysing hip-hop verses or moving his body rhythmically to the songs raving his roof.

Belle Gearhart (she/they) is an emerging writer with forthcoming work in *Bullshit Lit*, *Longleaf Review*, *Bureau of Complain*, *Capsule Stories*, and *Flash Frog Lit*. A displaced New Yorker, they live in Southern California with their partner, child, and many, many cats. They can be found shit-talking on Twitter @cosmicdrip_

KL Holliday is an English teacher, MFA student, mom of three, and word addict. Her goals are to be published, complete her PhD and finally be Doc Holliday, and live in NYC forever. PayPal: scotland_rising@yahoo.com

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Jasmina Kuenzli is an author of poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction and has been published with *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Pidgeonholes*, *The Elpis Pages* and many others. When she isn't writing, Jasmina can be found weightlifting, running, and holding impromptu dance parties in her car. Her life goals include landing a back flip, getting legally adopted by Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and being a contributor on *Drunk History*. She would like to thank Brenna and Sarah, who hear all these stories first, and Harry Styles, who is sunshine distilled in a human being. Venmo: @Jasmina-Kuenzli

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Sarah Marquez is an MLIS student at San Jose State University and based in Los Angeles. She has work published and forthcoming in various magazines and journals, including Capsule Stories, Human/Kind Press, Kissing Dynamite, Mud Season Review, Salamander, SHIFT, The Hellebore, and The New Southern Fugitives. When not writing, she can be found reading, sipping coffee, or tweeting @Sarahmarissa338. Venmo: @SarahMarissa-Marquez

Terri McCord is a 2022 Pushcart nominee and a 2022 McCray Nickens Fellowship (sponsored by the South Carolina Academy of Authors and the South Carolina Writers Association) finalist. A poem in *Fall Lines* 2021 was a finalist in the poetry competition as well. She has taught art, writing, and design. McCord is a 2001-2002 recipient of a South Carolina Arts Commission juried artist literary fellowship. She has three published volumes of poetry and is looking for a home for another. She is on Instagram @terrieemccord

Sam Moe (she/her) is a queer and neurodivergent poet focusing on food and environmental writing. She is the first-place winner of *Invisible City's Blurred Genres* contest in 2022, and the 2021 recipient of an Author Fellowship from *Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing*. Her chapbook, "Grief Birds," is forthcoming from *Bullshit Lit* in April 2023. You can find her writing in *Overheard Lit mag*, *Gone Lawn*, *The Shore*, *Yuzu Press*, and others. Her Venmo handle is @Sam-Moe-4

Constance Mello (she/her) is a Brazilian scholar, writer, and teacher. She graduated with a degree in Cultural Studies and Gender Studies from the Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany, and is currently pursuing a dual Master's Degree in English and Creative Writing. She writes about migration, identity, love, and loss, and has been published or is forthcoming in *The Ilanot Review*, *Brave Voices Magazine*, *Latinx Lit Mag*, *The Literary Canteen*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Sonora Review*, *Boats Against the Stream*, *bullshit lit*, *Eunoia*, and elsewhere. She's one of the poetry editors for *Mag* 20/20.

Kellene O'Hara has been published in *The Fourth River*, *Marathon Literary Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. Her story, "Words for a Puppet," has been published in *Intermissions*, an anthology from Grattan Street Press. She has an MFA in Fiction from The New School. Find her on Twitter @KelleneOHara and online at kelleneohara.com.

nat raum (b. 1996) is a queer disabled artist and writer from Baltimore, MD. They hold a BFA in Photography and Book Arts and are currently a first-year MFA candidate in Creative Writing & Publishing Arts. nat is also the founder and editor-in-chief of *Fifth Wheel Press*, a queer literature and art publishing space. nat's artwork has been exhibited at venues including ICA Baltimore and Blackrock Center for the Arts. Past and upcoming publishers of their writing include *Kissing Dynamite Poetry*, *Perhappened*, *Trampset*, *Cloves*, and *Delicate Friend*. In lieu of personal tips, please consider donating to *Fifth Wheel Press*: <http://fifthwheelpress.com/donate>

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Shane Schick (he/him) is the founder of a publication about customer experience design called *360 Magazine*. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Stanchion*, *ONE ART*, *Moss Puppy* and others. He lives in Whitby, Ontario. More: ShaneSchick.com/Poetry. Twitter: @ShaneSchick. PayPal: @ShaneSchickMedia

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Sam Szanto has had poems published in a number of literary journals, including the latest issue of *The North*, and won the Charroux Prize for Poetry and the First Writer Poetry Prize. Her short story collection 'If No One Speaks' is published by *Alien Buddha Press* in August 2022. Find her on Twitter at [sam_szanto](https://twitter.com/sam_szanto). PayPal: sam.szanto@gmail.com

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Special thank you to nat raum for allowing us to showcase their photography throughout the issue, including as our cover and as our featured artist.

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