



THE BIRDS WE PILED LOOSELY



The Birds We Piled Loosely
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WHAT MAKES A GOOD JOURNAL?

Issue 12 comes. Me and Nicole look around and realize this journal has been around for three years. Between moving cross country twice, between jobs picked up, dropped off, between college degrees, grace periods, and loan repayments, we've crafted this journal. Between this issue and the last, I realized I was transgender. After you do the magazine thing long enough, life starts getting measured in issues, in what happens between issues. Between frantically reading submissions, to ordering the magazine late at night over Skype, sharing beers and stories of what we've done in the last week. There are weeks we take off for family emergencies, chronic backpain, mental breakdowns, all sorts of stressors stretched around us like pincers. But the journal still gets made. With Karolina and Cailin's help, the four of us have put together another great issue of writing and art that we are proud to share with the world.

What makes a good journal? It's friendships forged between editors working together, it's writers and artists willing to trust them with their work, and it is you, the readers, who make all that work heard. This issue catalogues objects, it asks us to embrace dogs on fire, and beg our children for their forgiveness. There is fantastic work here waiting to be discovered. Thank you reader, for discovering it. For being the last piece of what makes a good journal.

Meandering with murders of crows—Jay McClintick, Nicole Letson, Karolina Zapal, & Cailin Ashbaugh

DEAR CRUMPLED PAPER,

by Ryan Bollenbach

In this story, you are God and the slaughtered angels. You are simultaneity pulsing through solitary space. If I cut my foot on your sharpest fold, could the face in my pooled blood be snared in thought. Free is the sound of your further crumpling, the many paths it travels. Free is lacking systems to imprison hawks for murder. To step outside received until the saw palms transform to netting. From meal to action to the drone note. From sunlight to clean knife to the innards of a deer wiped on overalls. Bodies and ways to feel them. I want nothing less than to read the charred skin with cut hands. An end to ends. The scream smell of pine trees burning and no reflection.

~~DON'T YOU HATE IT WHEN YOU FIND OUT~~

~~THAT YOUR POC LADIES
END UP WITH WHITE DUDES~~

by Melanie Ho

woman
who I look
in the mirror
and want to see

who indulges
in
dark chocolate
and
coffee
no cream no sugar
please

says
I am here
I am here
I am here

calls out every
scarlett tilda emma
medicalindustrialcomplex
Science is racist
The murderers of Vincent Chin
are racists
My next door neighbor
is racist

EXPERIMENTS IN BLACK MAGIC

by Stephanie Valente

Tells me
black is beautiful
brown is beautiful
she is beautiful

I'm sure the white man
beside her told
her that
she is beautiful

I'm just not quite sure why
the white man is beside her

babe,
the irony is thick
when you
trespassed
against me & the
world said
i was
an unreliable
witness
to my own body.

MY FIRST WITCH

by Wesley Cohen

I was game until Gwen told me to eat a cactus. We dared berries first—I thought they looked like candies but our counselor said they'd make us sick. Gwen kept a straight face for a minute, pretending to chew and savor, before spitting into the sink. *You owe me*, she said. During canoeing she plucked a lily leaf from the water, dripping algae, and said *open wide!* I held it in my mouth and struggled to swallow. On a hike I handed her a furry tongue of lichen. In church I bit out prayer book pages, eating the Lord's words. They felt dry behind my teeth. Gwen grimaced and grabbed a handful of cobwebs from the cabin ceiling and choked it down, bugs and all.

By now I've kissed a hundred witches. I track them to murky pools or caves in canyon walls, lean to meet their lips over cauldrons or across café tables. *How did you find me*, they ask. I've gotten famous in their circles, although I have no powers. Or maybe just the one—looking over a crowd or through library shelves to find the women who look back through dark centuries.

At camp the cactus spikes caught sunlight. They would poke through my cheeks, leave me bleeding. None of it would go down easy. *You know what happens if you turn down a dare*, she said. She didn't speak, pointed to her mouth. *You have to kiss me*. She tasted like bugs and lake water. She was my first witch.

OSTINATO: SONNET 129

by Tom McLaughlin

Night-swimming in the Caribbean, shame
shadows your every stroke while waves of lust
break over your body. I cannot blame
your parents, being what they are, for the trust
they've placed in culture, wishing for a straight
son in place of your crumpled enigma. Had
things been different, you would not need such bait
to catch a dream and make the dreamer mad,
and yet they're not. Why dream so
when nothing will change? Here we are, extreme
in our entangled dance, contorting woe
into palatable forms, while in your dream
you swim in the midday sun, alive and well,
far from your elegant, air-conditioned hell.



Vanity
AJ Dent

THE CITY

by Victoria Le

While the season changed so was I. With my elbows reaching I put a name on it. I thought the world by accident. Others I kept. The angles of my life chosen to please a god who was me. A word might be better, become a fruit. Letters poke holes in their canvas. A sentence could be a family. The crudity of my methods matched, I thought, my own illiteracy. If a city grew inside my poems that was what I wanted. And heard the sounds. A way into the poem. Its house. If I asked nicely a word appeared or didn't. When I wanted to look out I liked it. Two windows facing this one. Poke of an umbrella, a bird, smoke in winter. Something hot in cold weather, that was the poem. Another hour curled, new, calmer. From my bed I watched the numbers achieve a next century. Mine. Still, a parody, the knowing of one thing for another. What did I want the mind to be. Think of an egg cracking infinitely inward. I said so.

PIÑATA

by Stephanie Barbé Hammer

The piñata has burst. All the white girls in Manhattan are screaming and grabbing at the scattered candy, released from the maw of a collapsed giant creature they have brought down and beaten to death with sticks. This is a new kind of game. The mothers say it is from Mexico. The papier-mâché creature hangs from the ceiling at all the expensive parties for girls on the moneyed East Side — mostly Christian, but a few Jews make it into the circle. The circle of beating a pretend animal to smithereens for the right to fight for candy. The girls are pushing and shoving although they aren't supposed to; someone is saying "there's enough for everyone, young ladies" but so faintly that no one is listening and anyway everyone know that statement is a lie.

You hang back from the sticky wrappers and the more aggressive girls still wielding their sticks.

This is the early 60's and at every occasion, in the back of every party room, behind the mothers with their pearls and their perhaps nervous breakdowns, sit the white collar fathers smoking Marlboros and Parliaments, talking about wars. There is a lot to eat -- peanuts and cheddar and devilled eggs — but the atmosphere is grim. The men decry the lack of patriotism in a movie called *Dr. Strangelove*, while one mother whispers to another about a novel called *On the Beach*. "Radiation," she says as she sips her — too early but she can't resist martini. Her neighbor nods. "Your skin peels off," she says. "Like Hiroshima." Another woman says quietly "You'd have to kill the children." The women nod. The men talk in gruff tones about the invaders and the enemies. "We'll do what we have to do, the birthday girl's father says to your father. "Now who wants more scotch?"

Years later you will tell yourself this is an exaggeration. But it doesn't change what you remember. In memory, someone turns on the record player and everyone sings the national anthem, and in memory it goes like this: "O say can you see the piñata about to explode o'er the home of the privileged with its non-English pinko propaganda."

You don't sing. You fold your hands.

Now it's time to play the game.

You have navigated backwards to the rear, near the end of the line. You hate it when they put on the blindfold. But the dreaded turn comes.

Sightless, you wave your stick like a magic wand. Abracadabra. Be gone, party of warring children.

But then it happens. The transformation. Not the situation. Not the others. You. You want to win. You plant your patent leather feet. You grip the stick. Your chest tightens. You want: not just to win. You want to destroy that piggy or horsey or doggie or whatever it is. You want to crush it.

You swing.

You hit nothing but air. Woosh.

Rage. You want: not just to kill that invisible beast. You want to kill everyone in the room that stands between you and the winnings. It doesn't matter that you hate that candy. You wield that stick again.

You strike. You feel the tap of your stick against the paper body. You hear the squeak of the string as the paper thing sways — evading you, the destroyer.

You wind up and swing for the third time.

Kill or be killed.

Crack — it's a good one, but you can hear the body holds.

You raise the blindfold. The piñata rotates, dented in the middle. Still in one piece.

Til the next girl comes up and detonates the explosion.

That's the beginning isn't it? The start of pacifism is when you see your own blood lust in motion. Your animal nature. Your will to power.

This is where we came in. The scramble for candy. You stand back, but now we know why: it's shame at what has been revealed to you in that primal moment.

Sometimes a maid feels sorry for you, the unconscientious objector, and gives you a piece of that sticky hard candy. Aquí she whispers, placing it in your hand. You take it home and give it to your stuffed animals and dolls, tell them what you've learned. "don't fight," you tell them. "Don't fight."

Gracias, they say. No vamos a luchar.

You reply and you keep on repeating, *no voy a luchar ya sea.*

You will always say it, and you will always wonder how sincere that beautiful statement is.

WEARING CALIFORNIA

by Wren Tuatha

Comes the rainy season in drought times
and Tonka the Akbash is wearing California,

the red pine dirt, tempera paint, would
wash to white if you could catch him.

In spring the hose water will be warm
and Tonka will be coaxed. Thin, woken

bears will show up behind the manzanitas.
Experts will measure water levels.

Neighbors will jaw on whether
the snowcap was enough, brown yard

against green one, watered on the sly.
A shopkeeper spraying homeless off her stoop.

NorCal folks roll tremors of resentment
as water is syphoned down slope to L.A.,

hot tubs or desert farming, blame sprawl,
blame other. And Nestle trucks roll east.

I LIKED IT BEST WHEN THE OCEAN CARRIED ITSELF

by Erika Walsh

The water silver
like I dreamt it, anemones
eating themselves. Or it was the tide.
Or it was the way the light
got inside them. I liked it best
to be a child on a wave.

His arms out like this, does he know the rest. Will we lean body in
to the surf. Does he know when to hold air, how this salt
stings my gums. He does not look finned, my gills
small, not understanding.

I hold a scale on my tongue, taste this sonar, hear a bell
make vowels. Sea Urchins pluck their eyes out. I watch them
with my nose in the sand.

I'm learning breathing. This lobster
teaches me, says my claws will grow. I have to shut my eyes
so the light shines red behind me. I liked it best
when I did not have to know.

TORSI

by Tom McLaughlin

A casual atrocity's blossoming
on El Heraldo's front cover this morning:
another disembodied torso. Nameless.
A bloody stub abandoned in the dust
and trash washed up by the Magdalena's
turbid flow, reproduced in saturated
colour. What manner of unspeakable
pain has this degraded lover hacked out
on another's corpse? What secrets blindly
pour out from this human fragment, if we
could only read it's code, and wanted to?
As respite from too much reality
we stroke our mobile phone screens tenderly.

In grindr's grim ossuary too, headless
torsos and disembodied limbs jostle
for attention. This is a seascape strange
and rich with unsolicited dick pics,
where subaquatic creatures communicate.
What could lead us to such violent ends,
chopping up our bodies and laying out
their parts for close inspection? Tired eyes
linger on a chiselled torso suffused
with only an LED screen's brilliance;
possibility flares, illuminates
galaxies, shrinks to a casual fuck.
Here, we mingle the obscene with the mundane,
a fleeting pleasure with a boundless pain.



Memory1
David Rodríguez



Memory3
David Rodríguez

NOW WHAT?

by Molly Johnsen

I.

Molly recalls asking a police officer named Matthew Aaron to hold her hand. He was standing on top of a cement barrier as he was speaking with her because that was the only way he could reach her. She later learned that he had someone holding his belt to make sure he didn't fall over the side of the bridge.

She recalls Matthew Aaron telling her to breathe. At one point Matthew Aaron was going to leave to do something and she urged him to stay and he did stay.

She doesn't have a specific recollection of getting onto the stretcher. She recalls that she had gum in her mouth and she asked Matthew Aaron to remove it for her, which he did.

—Excerpts from a legal intake interview, August 11, 2015

II.

Hey Molly, this is Matthew. Listen, I don't mean to stalk, but I have been meaning to stop in to check up on you, but have been all over the place.

If you can please do me a favor and keep me posted on your recovery I'd like to hear it. I hope you are doing well. Hang in there. Dont bark too many orders lol.

—Matt

LOOK WITH ME

by Erika Walsh

III.

We met in the dark. My blood ran thick from between my legs; you wouldn't let me say I couldn't breathe. You are a stone I tried to keep in a pocket with a hole. I want to close my eyes into your forehead, connect the synapses of our brains. What happens to a life after someone else saves it? Listen, Matt, I don't chew gum anymore. I don't look at trucks or local news. The paramedics cut my clothes off after sirens screamed me away from you. I don't mean to pry, but what if you'd fallen into the reflection of the moon? You wouldn't have a Facebook, a promotion, a baby. I'm jealous of that big-eyed face that gets to have your smile; that bitty body is part of you, you stroke its back, its hair. I want your face to unfreeze. Don't disappear into my screens. I'll hold you by your belt. Stay here.

I guess I knew it would happen. Mom says there is this psychic thing about me, about the women in our family. We all have it.

Before you were gone I kept having this dream. You were throwing pebbles, skipping stones. The pebbles sat on top of the water and didn't sink. They kept piling up.

I walked into the ocean, water up past my stomach, warm and silver around me. The pebbles stuck together, vibrating, pulling close like magnets to make the shape of your face, grey and unmoving.

I am meeting you for the first time. You look down at your hands, say: I have piano playing fingers.

I should not have laughed. I should have held the curve of your thumb in my mouth, the place that might have been used to hit a key. I should have pressed your fingers into my stomach until they left prints.

But I laughed. I told you my fingers can play, too. That I have puppet show fingers. I slipped a pink cloth around each nail, made them talk to each other. Nevermind, you said.

You're quaking at the kitchen counter. Not quite shivering. There is something religious about it, controlled. I wish I can make myself asleep, so that a dream will come and tell me what will happen next.

Passion comes to you in these bursts. If I do not look I might not see. I do look. I want to see. But the feeling overwhelms you, sometimes makes your muscles stop what they are doing and not start until the next day. Sometimes it makes your body cool down too much, too quickly. When that happens I bring you into the bath with me, sweat under the water and listen to your skin crack like ice, watch beads of condensation come out of you.

Neil, I say. Are you okay.

I think you're chopping vegetables. You're hunched over something I can't see. I imagine it's a cutting board. You're chopping onions, peppers, any green thing you found underground. You don't say anything. I come over to touch you, put my hands on your shoulders. I want to say they are broad, your shoulders, but there's something so inward about you, and pointed, like glass. Unexpansive.

Sweetie, I say. You are sweet.

Your knuckles clench around a knife, almost too close to the blade. I reach over your chest with my arms, feel the skin move into me, like there are ants beneath your breastbone, a family of ants making a home inside you. I uncurl your long fingers, one by one, let the knife drop onto the counter with a ping, massage the spaces between each knuckle until the pink of your blood spills back to them.

That must feel better, I say.

You're hunched over an open log, pale and lovely. Inside are shapes you might call carvings: intricate, painstaking. Circles inside of each other, smaller and smaller, until the last one is only a dot. I imagine they are eyes that can see into me. I imagine you put them there to watch, that you are looking back.

Beautiful, I say. I love it.

You blink once, slower than usual. I imagine you're telling me something.

It's for me?

Your lips purse, open a bit. I kiss them, very soft.

Oh, I say. It's not done yet. Take your time.

I run my fingers through your hair, stroke it back, and back, and back.

I'm not entirely concerned until it is the next day, and you're still there, palm open. I imagine you've been waiting, slip my hand inside of it.

I love you but I wish you'd move, I whisper into the palm, kneeling to breathe into the spaces where your veins curve into each other. I stay on the floor and look up, watch your stillness, fear that I might get stuck, too.

You're not quaking anymore. Your skin is cold to the touch. I walk to the bathroom, run a bath, call over my shoulder: I knew what I wanted when I married you, and I did get it.

I walk to the kitchen, pace back and forth, only glance at your face in passing. There are blue fissures under your eyes, like the skin is splitting open.

You must be tired, I say. This work is so hard.

I wish a tear would come out of your eye, or one square of salt, so I'd know that you can hear me, that you're listening. But you haven't moved at all, not even to blink. I guess you must not want to talk.

The bath is ready, I say. I hook my elbows under your armpits, tug. Your body leans into mine, feet cemented to the floor. I tug again and curse, not at you. Again. Now you are moving. The floor tiles are still there, platforms glued to your feet. I drag you to the tub, crumbs of cement leaving a trail.

I leave your feet with their tiles perched over the edge of the bath to dangle in the air. I watch your body but no steam comes out of it. There is no cracking of ice.

The fissures crawl from your eyes to your neck, weave blue spider webs into your chest.

I wish I knew how to help you, Neil. Can you tell me?

But you don't. Your eyes look over my shoulders. You can at least look at me, thank me, even blink. It's like I'm not here.

I make the water hotter and hotter, as hot as it can go. The tub is overflowing. I guess we have a flood. I can't make myself care. I watch red welts swell on your body, bleed into the blue to make violet.

That's beautiful, I say. I turn the water off, pour ice inside. I do feel bad.

I can't stop thinking of the log. The last thing you made, or touched, before it happened.

I run a fingertip over the carvings, almost want a splinter, but don't get any. I say Stupid log out loud, surprise myself.

I bet you're not even for me, I whisper. I turn the log over like I'm looking for worms, instead find letters.

SRY MEL. NT COMING BACK. I DID LUV U. NIEL.

Did. You did and you don't. Stupid log, I say. I mean it. I want to make my own carvings inside, get a big knife, write something like LEARN TO SPELL ASSHOLE AND BYE, but I don't know how.

I bring the log to the bathroom, roll it down your thighs into the tub, shake your delicate shoulders again and again.

The museum people were very interested. I think you made yourself beautiful for them. Your skin was entirely blue the next day, like it knew what it was for.

I called a paramedic first, but they told me there was nothing alive about you, no heart making noise. They asked if I can be sure that you are human. I was and I'm not.

I dried you off, pressed silver glitter into your eyelids, into the indent over your lip. I can't be sure if this is what you want. But I can't be the only one who looks at you.

They tied your wrists back with ropes to the windshield of a green truck, drove in reverse down the block to the museum. I cancelled my membership, became less interested in art, in stone. I love the ocean now. The museums I go to have maps.

I thought about buying a piano, as a sort of memorial. I saw two men bring one down from a window with a pulley, all wires and precision. They were being

careful, and the piano was classic, so I watched. Crows pecked at the keys, bent their necks back, appeared to be cackling, did not make a sound.

Them crows are bad luck, said one of the men. His Adam's apple moved like a mouse in his throat. He walked away, came back with a bucket of sand, hummed to himself as he rubbed his hands over the lid. The crows folded into themselves, hid beneath black wings from the shell and the grain.

Bad luck, the man repeated, Let's leave it. The other man shrugged, lit a cigarette with both hands. The piano floated and was still.

The man with the mouse ran a hand over his throat, the other opening into air. Now look, he said. It can't hurt anyone.

DEAR CAMERA LENS

by Ryan Bollenbach

You open to match strike and swallow the twitch of flame. You, a swallowing tunnel unending, give purling tunnel dreams. The rabbit rests in a hole of light. The capture sutures memory's cracked aperture. To celebrate theft as if the flaming finger never blisters. My mother, the thief, camouflages her red hair, embroiders from air the digital peace. I sit in anticipation of gears hoping like a set bear trap. A single clap that could save me. A hawk slices into the river to pick a fish. Hunger will never be the same.



*Norwegian People (Stavanger
07-2016) por Seigar (62)
Seigar*

GUEST IN THE WOUND

by Renoir Gaither

I. Stirring the Roux

- A. His mother lies bedridden
 - 1. curled into a trembling question mark.
 - 2. eyes, rubicund caissons, sunk in a placid sea.
 - a) blank, mired with prospecting absence
 - b) golems, dancing on water
- B. The cancer shelters hoplites skirmishing beneath her almond flesh
- C. A thick, creaming broth gathers the hue of his skin
 - 1. fried, seasoned okra, stewed tomatoes, and onions
 - 2. curries the vegetables' onomatopoeic roughhousing
- D. He leans over dancing streamers of steam locking arms like playful genies
 - 1. deveins the translucent shrimp, their scent fusing with his
 - 2. spoons them into slurping roux as a long, cooing vowel
 - a) paddles past his mother's lips
 - b) dropping its oars ashore
 - 3. takes shortcuts

II. Lethe, or

- A. The bus
 - 1. hiccupping
 - 2. clipped with kitsch
- B. Rain-soaked pet posters
- C. Technicolor graffiti sketched by 21st-Century Hesiods

III. Today—or maybe, yesterday—he reads a poet's answer to another's question: "Do You Think a Photocopy of a Snowflake is More Beautiful than the Original?"

- A. He remembers his mother padding through the house on cushions of glass
 - 1. toddler-like at break-neck speed
 - 2. in metastatic migration

- 3. another Titania chasing Robin Goodfellow over river stones

- B. He exits the bus
 - 1. pads over shards of glass
 - 2. one place as good as another



IV.

- A. A jetliner slices through storm clouds in the same pattern
 - 1. pause
 - 2. play
 - 3. refresh
- B. He and his mother study ruby and pearl paint chips the clouds break off
- C. He wraps a bath towel around her
 - 1. clasps her naked body from behind
 - 2. cranes her up from the bathtub
 - 3. vertebra cracking
- D. Clouds heal. Eventually.
- E. She asks if he can hear the kora in the attic
- F. His answer impersonates drum and tusk of sunlight

V. Guest in the Wound

- A. Tumor tendrils stretch from breastplate to mid-rib
- B. The heart beats centimeters below the charring lung
- C. A guest in the wound
- D. Bedsprings in the neighbor's cottonwood tree pantomime wheezes
- E. He imagines Anna Karenina on Oprah
 - 1. before Dr. Phil struck out on his own
 - 2. before Anna confesses her sins
 - 3. before the horse race
 - 4. before her heart shattered beneath the rails

VI. An Inventory of Sorts

- A. His mother and the guest
 - 1. sit as close

- 2. as far away
- 3. as the length of a mother-in-law's tongue
- B. Their silence—
 - 1. a window cleaned with newspapers
 - 2. and vinegar
- C. He plays zydeco
 - 1. on the record player
 - 2. purloined
 - a) from a stack of his mother's albums
 - b) dusty as tavern photographs
- D. When his back is turned
 - 1. the guest in the wound hums melodies
 - a) clips a jack of diamonds to soles
 - b) swears allegiance to its corporate sponsor

VII. She repeats the fact

- A. That she wished she'd never started smoking
- B. That she'd like
 - 1. amazing grace sung at her funeral
 - 2. the piano tuned
 - 3. the guest in the wound
 - a) to die
 - (1) by milkshakes
 - (2) in blues yoked to a clear, starry night
- C. That she be saved
 - 1. by an as yet unheard
 - a) rhythm
 - b) or Jesus
 - 2. by the dreams of colored girls
- D. Or whichever
 - 1. comes first
 - 2. without
 - a) strings attached
 - b) frayed edges
 - c) or folks playing favorites

*From 17 LETTERS TO B: AN APPENDIX TO
THE BOOK OF EMERGENCIES*
by Rosemarie Dombrowski

Dear B,

I'm going to speak with a bird in my mouth
because the words will be less significant than the gestures.
You've taught me that this is often the case.

We're hiking a trail for the first time.
It's almost sunset, and the orange haze
is approaching the mountains like an embrace.
You shirk from it momentarily, like touch.

We see a family from India, and the youngest
cranes his neck to watch you ascend.
His mother redirects his gaze.
I repeatedly ask you to watch where you're going
but I realize that when you don't know
where you are in the first place, it's an impossible request.

I say the words rock and tree because I know
the value of linguistic simplicity.
I know which battles are worth the war.
I can predict the outcome of almost any scenario
because you've forced me to master the art of clairvoyance.

Once, I saw us floating down a river,
your body slackened and still,
and I knew that you were returning to the source—
Cambrian, womb, or otherwise.

I realize that resistance is futile,
that prophets are often draped in disguises,
their messages drowned in a paradigm
that never applied to us, and never will.

Dear B,

There is no way to explain the interpersonal ruins
under which you are trapped,
your leg un-tickled for weeks,
your friend disappeared into the Paleocene.

But I can assure you that continents are taking shape,
that he has been rebirthed as an ape or a whale,
maybe even a horse.
If he resides at the top of the food chain,
he is an enormous bird.

I think all of these things would please you,
but it still doesn't explain why no one has
pumped the bicycle tires or instructed you to stop at the crossing.
It doesn't explain where the banjo has gone,
or why the van has driven away.

Summer is approaching, and I will refuse
to light the oven for months.
There will be no more cake.
We will honor the moratorium,
suffering together while singing the same old songs,
slightly off key and without any harmonies.

Dear B,

It's futile to tell you this, but you need to know
that a poem consisting of one sentence is like a baby
born with as many limbs as a goddess in India,
limbs that the parents refuse to amputate for spiritual reasons,
which is the antithesis of the disorder
that leads someone to believe that one or more of their limbs
are extraneous, useless to their body, counter to their being,
like words are to you, like the pronunciation keys
that your grandmother used to dole out like candy when I was four,
workbooks filled with recycled-gray pages that spoke of rules
I wasn't supposed to learn until first or second grade,
which reminds me of little Dominic,
your pre-school classmate who used to walk
the perimeter of the fence every day,
tapping his ear and screaming gently into the distance.
This was something that you weren't supposed to learn
until many years later, or not at all.

Dear B,

Please forgive me for revealing these stories,
for inscribing them like an interviewer, an interloper,
an anthropologist in the field of our kitchen
or the exotic space of your bedroom.

I feel obligated to record these sessions.
There are people who need to understand
that we are older now, more content,
half-toilet trained and able to rinse our own dishes.

We are less physically prompted,
more intuitively able to follow the steps
required of us to take showers,
better able to navigate sidewalk and street.

Sometimes, we still cry at coffeeshops,
disappear into the dirt-filled crevice between window and table,
a place where a lame bird might go to nurse its wing.

We are surgical reconstructions of imperfection.
Little has come to us naturally,
though we have learned that the cycles of the heart
begin in the right ventricle,
sporadically emit tenderness
and return through the left atrium,
escape through the aorta into the congenital body,
the biological systems that will never know empathy,
the ones that are unable to be nurtured back to life.

Dear B,

We've hiked the trail four times now,
always on Sunday, possibly because
that's what feels familiar—
the act of worshipping something
at a designated time and place,
the transcendentalism of the desert in bloom,
the not fully knowing the power of anything
despite the science that explains
photosynthesis and geologic time.

I'm starting to think I might be a Jew,
which is difficult to explain
outside my belief in the miraculous resilience
of a long line, a floating love poem,
or waterlilies catching on fire.

Despite what everyone says,
I'm not sure how far I've come.
For instance, I'm still questioning the meaning of signs,
obsessively photographing dead birds.
The last one was lying on its belly,
its mauve neck twisted gently to the right.
Its eyes were closed, and I think there were
a few drops of blood next to its beak.
I think I was meant to see this,
to notice the details.

Still, I'm not sure what that makes me.



*Cuento de una ciudad 84
(04-2014 Londres)
Seigar*

THE SUN WRITES A LETTER
by Amanda Stovicek

Go on collecting birdcages.
I am only small when you tell
me to be. I thrush and bite.
I expand beyond one house
or two. I collapse back
when storming ceases. Try
to be blue. I can't. Try. I am
always orange and ferocious
against those shackles. Don't hold
me against you. Don't catch me.
I fuse with everything and create
light. I prism. You go on
collecting. I cannot be beaked
or feathering. I roil and blaze
and swing and dodge and garrison
comets like plastic army men.
You swoon on me. You look on me
halfway and through a different lens.
I whiteout. I am not a bird. Stop asking
me to be. I fizz and cull and break
apart. I run away at night. You seek.

THE MOON WRITES TO THE SUN
by Amanda Stovicek

I saw you at the last eclipse
party horizoning towards Pluto
on the black-lit dance floor
dressed gypsy-gold and red
Arabian princess spinning stories.
We caught eyes before you flew
through the back door into deep space.
Me in silver and shadow, half-face
masked by the nine planets
jostling parade of orbital dance,
and I couldn't catch you.
All I'm asking is for shadows
on my slopes, give me that light
that makes it dark. The subtle curve
of solar flare, fusion smacking wind
into me. I want to be awash in you,
same time and place,
at the next total eclipse.

UNTITLED POEMS

by Simon Perchik

*

Lost and you watch the sun worsen
already falling as the nights
too weak to warm your shadow

though you read only in the afternoon
crouched under this kitchen table
with nothing on it that could sag

and without a sound weigh too much
let you open the mail, return to life
the window left in this small room

—you can tell from the stamp
it's easy to fear
—so frail is its darkness

only your hands can be seen
holding your forehead, pushing it back in
to remember where you live.

*

By yourself though the sun
still needs more water —all that land
dried for just one afternoon

sent back alone and every morning now
you let the coffee try, boil
the way this table is spreading out

become the dirt for what's in store
ready made as that small mouthful
that swallows you whole

to look for thirst inside a cup
side by side this one kept full
as if it was at home.

*

And though this pillow is enough
you still come by at night
safe from sand and salt

–with both elbows on the bed
your clothes in a heap
–what you can't say

is soaking in sea grass
and her clothes too
no longer moving, piled close

for encouragement, lift your head
–on a dark bed, stroking an empty dress
Mickie, Mickie, Mickie

as far as it can reach
with her hand over your mouth
one sleeve at a time.

*

Could be this mop, shimmering
the way bottom stones are soothed
by streams smelling from volcanoes

and wood though the floor
is burning your feet with moonlight
–could just as easily be this pail

circling for hidden leaks and seashells
scented with water and the room
that has nothing more to lose

is looking for a place to dry
that is not your mouth or the air
you dead need to put out the fires

by pressing down on your lips
where there's no trace or a corner
that will close by itself, become dirt

embrace the long, wooden handle
all night side by side as if you still hear
the falling back into silence and your arms.

TIRIED

by Julia Travers

*

You no longer dig for shadows
as if this hillside depends on you
for water –what you hear

is trapped between two suns
one circling the other till nothing's left
but the afternoon and beneath

letting its pieces fall off –you dead
are always listening for the gesture
the lowering that sweeps in

those pebbles mourners leave
as words, overflowing, certain
now is the time –it's not the time

this dirt is afraid to open
become a rain again, be a sky
let it speak by throwing the Earth

and over your shoulder, eyes closed
though there is no grass
and your arms a Weber, Miller, Marie.

My fear is afraid
it stuffs my mouth with raw cotton
to keep out poisonous fumes.

My fear breaks my neck
so my head can better spin and spy
in all directions.

My anger is angry;
wherever the inhabitants of my chest
build shelters,
it lights fires.

My happiness is happy.
Small, round birds
flutter between my ribs.

My shame is ashamed,
burrowing into
the tar pits with the mammoths.

My tiredness is tired.
It picks away at my uneven skin,
wraps packages with too much tape
and doesn't know when to stop.

OUTFIT

by Julia Travers

Laughter is my hat
and anger is my coat,
discarded in the sun.

Love is my dress
and my shy stockings
have a run.

DEAR MATRYOSHKA DOLL,

by Ryan Bollenbach

You, bright lipped, manufactured red. Like bodies swallowed in form, moth fluttering into light, shadow of wing's forced smile. What is the difference between hope in hypotaxis and complacence, contingency and complicity. If I place you on the counter and the light comes and you catch. If I hold you to the light and drop you in a bowl of ice-cream, are you a burn to the sanctity of pink. If the bug light is turned off, if the smell of sugar and strawberry cut your nose and you bleed, what is the difference between my blood and syrup, my hand and ideology. When I am too afraid to write your again, how to waver labor's abuse.

FEBRUARY JOURNAL:

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2013

by Don Mager

Red throat stretched to the horizontal slant of late day light, the Robin sits on the Sycamore branch's graying silhouette. The stream glugs thaw water far below. Fluffed in her winter fur, a nearby rabbit chews small evening grass. Hawks recede from long afternoon prowls. Scolding back and forth, they decamp to their half-dead oak tree nest. Early night exhales puffs of frosty air. Perched in cavalier disregard, the red throat spills variegated streams of high-pitched glitter. Spot-lit by fading beams, his red breast's now swells full stage center.

RIP FERNANDO

by Avra Elliott

My sink is forever weeping,
the ceiling has recently joined.
The dead baby bat—or at least
he was small—disappeared from
the porch, stone steps.

Possible culprits include: Tidy Husband
Stray Cat. March Winds. Bat's Disciples.
Tidy Husband denies "cleaning" his tomb.
Why would a stray steal such old meat?
For weeks those leather wings greeted me
in rigamortis. My only constant,
reliable as a grave,
unless I missed the moment, the house
watered him with seeping tears,
re-animated, heart nose twitching,
emissary in flight, deserting this flood.

WILD

by Keith Mark Gaboury

With clouds in a bench-press,
I must pluck the rain from a cumulus
and hand you the drops.

Once a Martian radio wave
encoded an impending invasion,

Pastor Paul commanded our family
to uphold the molecular structure

of water, incinerating alien skin
into a wicked witch melting scene.

Out in the barn, Mother
feeds the chickens

as the wild donkey I call Beacon
slams her head into our locked gate.
She saw her first human last Sunday.

When the galactic foreigners
step / crawl / slither

off their light-speed ship
onto the prairie of my youth,

will we kill upfront
or tame their brains,
slapping neurological expansion

into submission. I'm watching
you load your shotgun

to execute Beacon
who broke the lock

and rammed her body
through our kitchen window.

MORNING NEWS IN THE

TWENTY-SECOND CENTURY

by Keith Mark Gaboury

Father killed a fly with the comics
before returning to his front page spread.
At our round kitchen table,

I gaped over my mug's milk swirl
pushing within black
atmospheric pressure.

They burned the riot leader's body,
Father declared, a bland fact
in the vein of the day's forecast.
Coffee coated my mouth.

*But they can't burn what she means
to the Martian slaves.* Was my tongue a whip?
Father sent out a cackle
like a 3D brushstroke
stomping across a canvas' sweep.

I've since Etch A Sketched
his domestic signal
grinding into a cluster of Mars-evolved ears
tipped to attention.

Enslaved or the enslavers?
Must I choose? I prefer a tomato garden
listening through red on red growth.

Callused hands pick globes
from the stem, innards mashed
by the teeth of domination.

ONE STELLAR ORIGIN STORY

by Amanda Stovicek

We'd like to believe in fountain
or thumbprint and ribs and mud
or even boiling sea and ash and first
footfall millions of years ago. But no,
none of that's enough, not capturing
the light inside, the mass. Some bone
imprint, some ripple within
when we look skyward tells us—
we are from clouds collapsing into dust
from T Tauri stars shedding light
into darkness and brimming with fusion.
We are from interstellar mediums, dark
matter, nebula, molecular bracelets
of hydrogen and helium and red shifting
objects, bok globules filled to the rims
with cosmic dust and carbon.
We are stellar remnants. Stars
in our mother's eyes, stars
baked in fusion and void
and gravitational collapse. We are nothing
but cocoon and carbon, pressure
and the sun's lariat collecting us here.
We are infrared, we are light and ebb
and flow and proto—we open
up the sky to a cluster of sisters.

HUBBLE TELESCOPE ON PILLARS OF CREATION

by Amanda Stovicek

i.

The lens warped at first, polished into imprecise sphere. Hubble nothing like the naked eye pressing spectrum to the sky—only the blur coming to life. Shuttle fit her with glasses. Made NASA humble.

ii.

Three fingers already gone. Light still stretching years to reflect off low-earth-orbit. Take a look:
everything is watercolor splash saturated with black arcs. X-rays reveal something cataclysmic
spreading like ink on the ridge of skin, slow and deliberate strokes spelling dark future.

iii.

Are we watching ourselves being made?

iv.

Long tusks of hydrogen dust graying against a yellow sky, to even call it sky a human thing, a human word, a color speckled with bright white freckles. Oh, all that night a sliver of mirror, our faces reflected back in sharper focus. The shape of a galaxy measured time-wise and brightly colored.
Whose creation, really?

v.

Pillars destroyed, supernova'd out of the dark in radiant fission. How many stars living and dead and budding against that loss? Everything a revolution, a mirror— mating and braiding of particle.
When all these waves arrive at Hubble, we're already late to the party.

DEAR SET OF SAUCERS,

by Ryan Bollenbach

I am compelled by the pairing of your bodies to make a third floral thinking. To the exclusion of the thumbs that have prayed in the same foxholes, I recoil. There is difference between foxhole and grave. Your dull tine after being splashed onto separate ends of the table is my whispered call to action. To reject movement from fear to violence. To embrace you as container and love your silver rim's bright emittance strangling the air. You lap water until you're pinched, frequency raising, amplitude lowering, until the man trying to find you to clean you cannot tell how smooth the sound. I rub your rims with my thumb licked. To broaden unity. To scream until the breaking of glass and give up the use of soap.



*Más Montañés (61) Cantabria 07-2016
Seigar*

DOG ON FIRE

by Kristopher Oppgaard

The dog was on fire. No doubt about it. She had been since birth, according to her dossier, which included a photograph of what looked like a lump of coal.

When Malcolm and Laura had visited the dog shelter, when they had seen her little black body aglow with orange flame, when they had felt the heat shining against their skin, they cried fire. The attendant who led them into the kennel pointed their panicked eyes toward the signs posted on the wall. The signs read DOG ON FIRE. They were clever enough to name her Sparky.

"Some kind of dog," said Laura. "Who ever heard of one being on fire?"

Malcolm warmed his hands in front of the cage. Sparky whimpered and flicked her fiery tongue between the bars.

"Yes, but she is otherwise an excellent dog," said the attendant. "Loving, loyal, everything you could want in a dog."

"A dog on fire is no dog at all," said Laura.

"And an excellent theft deterrent. Surely you could put up with a bit of fire."

Malcolm said to Laura, "Nobody gon' mess with a dog on fire."

There was a certain dark irony that, two months prior, their daughter had drowned in the river behind their house at the age of four. Technically it had been a gator that did it. Malcolm saw it breach and snap and drag and sink back into the water. He had dived in and thrashed with it a while before the animal of otherworldly strength finally slipped away upstream. Rescuers skimmed the riverbed till they found the little girl's mangled body tucked beneath a boulder. Animal control found the gator, an eight-foot bull, and put a bangstick to his brain.

Malcolm metabolized the word. He said it again and again under his breath: "Bangstick. Bangstick. Bang...stick."

Laura revisited Catholicism. She hadn't been to Mass in a decade, but the religious symbolism of a dog on fire didn't sit well with her. Neither did her dead girl, who Laura saw every week on the riverbanks, her wet curls gleaming like green ripples in the sun, and every week looking just as dead as the day God made her so. Laura sometimes thought of diving from the boat, and would have, if she weren't so sure the girl would break with the surface of the water.

Malcolm saw things differently; he kindled a fervent interest in Greek mythology. He liked the abstractness. Having studied literature, he understood symbolism perfectly. A dog on fire was a far better symbol than a drowned girl.

A drowned girl was nothing more than a drowned girl to Malcolm. But Sparky blazed with perpetual potentiality. Malcolm read every tale of fire the Greeks had to tell. He spent whole afternoons with his fireplace gloves tossing Sparky into the river. Sparky always returned, always on fire.

Laura learned early on that nothing would put out those flames. She turned the extinguisher on Sparky a few times. She'd emptied out a whole canister chasing Sparky around the house once, when she came home and found all her shoes burned. Malcolm suggested flame-retardant boots, like the firemen wear. Laura bought a fire safe.

*

Malcolm thumbed through an anthology containing works of Shelley. His hands were covered in burns like an ironworker. Like Malcolm, Shelley understood symbolism.

Sparky slept nearby upon a section of scorched stone. Her flames snored gently, deep, dark red. Periodically, Malcolm would produce a cigarette from his pocket, call to Sparky and light it off her brilliant back, then send her back to sleep. It was a neat trick he taught her.

It was Sunday, his day to smoke cigarettes. Laura was at Mass. There Malcolm sat on the patio overlooking the river. The river was about thirty feet across, lined with sloped backyards filled with pink flowers in tan pots and brick patios and floating docks on each bank. The water was murky and deep. The soil was loose and sandy. Malcolm went on smoking and reading until Sparky perked her ears, then her head, and finally her flames roared brightly, which heralded Laura's return.

Laura entered the house still aglow with the St. Elmo's fire of Divine Commune. Sparky bounded toward her dog door, which was a thick metal tube, installed to prevent the house from burning down. She opened it by pressing a false stone with her paw.

"Hot!" called Laura.

The dog halted where she was and began excitedly trotting around Laura, maintaining a considerate radius at all times. As she went round, a tablecloth, some curtains, and a derelict magazine caught flame. Although Malcolm had spent the entirety of the last year swapping all the wood in the house for metal, plastic, stone, and glass, there were still many flammables scattered throughout the house. All of these things had been stubbornly purchased by Laura. She refused to accommodate the impracticality of a dog on fire. Instead, she equipped each room with fire extinguishers. Without urgency, she took one from a small

cupboard and extinguished the upstart flames. Sparky retreated in the same manner as non-burning dogs do from vacuums.

Malcolm was not careless. Having studied his mythologies, he was informed of dichotomies. Besides the fireplace gloves, he also possessed an aluminized suit with which he wrestled Sparky. He had conditioned the "Hot" command. He installed a fireplace as her bed. He sat for hours, cauterized, staring primitively into her interminable flow of flames.

When Laura came out to the patio, she found Malcolm preparing to undock their solid cherry runabout. Sparky splashed in the narrow shallows around him. The water hissed as it met her fur. Laura ritualistically kicked off her shoes. She pulled her sanguine dress over her head, under which she wore a tan bathing suit. Her bronze skin seized the sunlight. She crossed the dock without a word to her husband and climbed aboard the white padded stern.

Malcolm cast off. Sparky dove into the river. She knew that Laura would never allow her in the vessel itself; it was a place where only Malcolm and Laura could be. Once a week they climbed into that boat together. The water boiled in Sparky's wake.

They were out of sight of their house before Malcolm said, "How's God doin' lately? I hear he's got a lot on his plate."

Laura didn't bother to look at him. "Father Vincente-Santiago is coming tonight."

Malcolm grimaced. Sparky's flames faltered.

"Bangstick," Malcolm muttered.

"What was that?"

"An' for what purpose?" said Malcolm.

Laura saw her there, sitting on the bank, kicking her mangled legs in the water. The girl smiled mortally, a smile that could make God jealous. Even alligators are the agents of God, thought Laura. She looked at the little girl with an insatiable curiosity, unable to remember a time when she wasn't dead.

"He'll arrive at 6," she said.

Malcolm leaned back tiredly in his chair, his head beside Laura's as she laid on the stern. Laura curled her arm and scratched the bristles of his dark, close-cropped head. Behind the craft, Sparky's flames grew from her wet fur like hundreds of yellow wildflowers sprouting in the water.

*

Father Vincente-Santiago looked less royal without his vestments. He wore a simple clerical shirt and collar, onto which he'd dropped a glob of mustard from

his cheeseburger, rare. Laura had put on the same flowy blood- or wine-red dress as before. Malcolm tended the grill automatically, as though he were an actual grilling machine, as his apron claimed. Father Vincente-Santiago lamented that he hadn't seen Malcolm at Mass with his wife.

"I ain't Catholic," said Malcolm.

"The Church is accepting of all kinds of people."

"There's a lot of real nice things 'bout the Church," said Malcolm. "Y'all got the cross, the saints with their coronas and shields and upside-down crosses and assorted other symbols. But they're a little clichéd by now."

"Beg pardon?" said Vincente-Santiago.

Laura sat, as she often had, across from the Father. However, it was quite unlike his office. They did not face each other. They faced the river. There were no crucifixes nor rows of books. Instead of a wide desk, they sat at a circular steel mesh table. An umbrella blossomed through the center. There was the grill's blue smoke. There was the green river. There were the white stripes of moonlight on green river. There was the white moon on purple sky. There was the little girl in her sash of bright little holes, bleeding like crushed velvet. She faced the river.

Malcolm stood nearby on a lower level of brick beside the grill's blue flame. The bricks alternated, small brick, large brick, small brick. He thought of Sparky, chained where Laura bade him chain her, on the side of the house. She lay there, smoldering.

Malcolm continued, "And y'all got the snakes and the lambs and the sheep and the flocks and the shepherds and the doves. Hell, you even got a burnin' bush, but I bet there ain't one of you ever seen a burnin' dog."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," said Vincente-Santiago.

Laura accepted the well-done burger Malcolm was handing her. He rested a big, burn-marked hand on her shoulder, ducked the umbrella, and looked at the Father. Vincente-Santiago was dabbing a damp paper towel at the spot where the mustard had fallen. It left behind little specks of white paper dust.

"Nevermind him," said Laura. "He hasn't been the same since our little girl."

Laura traced a burn on Malcolm's hand, a patch of white like jagged teeth, from thumb to forefinger. She sighted a glow coming from the side of the house like a candle hidden behind a hand.

"A sad thing, that," said Vincente-Santiago. "Actually that's why I've come."

"A bangstick," said Malcolm. "Never seen a thing like it."

"Your wife tells me she's been seeing her. Your little girl, that is," said Vincente-Santiago. "You see, sometimes the Lord shows us things. Glimpses beyond

the mortal coil."

Malcolm looked at the side of Laura's face, pale-bronze in the waxing night. Water trickled from somewhere inside him into the corners of his glassy eyes.

"Symbols," said Malcolm. "Quite a literary device."

Elsewhere Sparky's fire burned hotter. Its reds turned orange, its oranges yellow. The ground hardened beneath her. Her glowing steel collar dripped from her neck. Her light radiated outwardly into the night. Sparky rose. The flames rose.

"I've meditated for some time on this matter," said Father Vincente-Santiago. "The Lord is telling you not to despair, Laura, Malcolm. She's with Him now. He's sent her back as His message to you."

"An alligator. That's a good one," said Malcolm. "This God's a pretty clever fella. Not as good as a hawk though. Zeus -- there's a deity with a mastery of symbolism. A hawk can fly every day for an eternity."

"Laura, Malcolm, have you thought of having another child?"

A tensile spark cracked like lightning through Laura's body into Malcolm's arm.

"We got a dog," said Malcolm.

"It's not a dog at all," said Laura.

"A dog on fire," corrected Malcolm. "Pretty powerful symbol, if I do say so myself. Wouldn't believe it if you saw it."

"I just wanted a girl. I just wanted a dog," said Laura to no one. No one heard.

"Who's that by the river?" asked Vincente-Santiago. "That little girl."

"She looks familiar," said Malcolm.

"No girl. No dog," said Laura.

"And what on Earth is that!" exclaimed Vincente-Santiago.

A short distance away, a dog on fire trotted down to the riverbank where the little girl, who wasn't a girl, was standing. The oranges of the flames bloomed yellow, the yellows white. The little girl put a hand, which wasn't a hand, on the dog's burning head. She floated up onto the dog's burning back. Malcolm and Laura and Father Vincente-Santiago called after them. Sparky and the little girl waded into the river. The water sizzled in the fire. Sparky paddled. The little girl kicked her disfigured legs.

Malcolm and Laura bounded down the patio, leaving Father Vincente-Santiago where he sat, silently praying, drawing a crucifix across his body. They clambered into the runabout and set after the little girl and Sparky. Sparky and

the little girl burned still whiter. The flames flicked like ghostly tails. Laura stood, shielding her eyes, calling after them. Malcolm throttled the boat.

Then the flames, having reached a terminus, ceased being flames. The dog on fire stopped being on fire, stopped being a dog. The little girl, too, stopped being. All gone. There was only the green river. There were the white stripes of moonlight on green river. There was the white moon on purple sky.

Malcolm killed the engine. Laura sank into the seat beside him. The boat abided the river's even flow. A brittle breeze broke into the world. From somewhere came an ancient scent of smoke. They both cried, quietly. They cried for all the fires that had ever gone out and, especially, for those left still burning.

DEAR MARBLE DRAGON,

by Ryan Bollenbach

Your volume is manufactured dissonance on an empty marble shelf filled with décor. You, blamed for systemization and carrying and even eyes glossed over. Overheard like an untroubled river of oil coagulating. The ornamented picture of a corpse. The eye and your figure slither through obscured entrances to temples of worship and actual human muscle. I am the dumb witness preening in oil, the memory of sand dormant under the moat carved away. I feel warmth leaving my hand into the scales on your back. I feel your real weight. I misread the kaleidoscope as the compass assumes the openness of air.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Don Mager's recent poems tosss the nowness of this now at readers asking them to catch. Find more about him here.

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Melanie Ho [filmmaker|writer] aims to center the stories of those who are often on the margins.

You can catch her most nights thinking about fish sauce.

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Renoir Gaither writes from St. Paul, MN. The Guest in the Wound is a small homage to his mother, Millie.

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Seigar is an English philologist, a highschool teacher, & a curious photographer. His aim is to tell tales with his camera. Find his work here & here.

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Stephanie Barbé Hammer is an urbanite who lives & hikes on Whidbey Island, dreaming of sidewalk cafes. She digs dada & surrealism. Who doesn't?

Stephanie Valente lives in Brooklyn, NY. She published Hotel Ghost & has or will have work in Danse Macabre, Nano Fiction, & Black Heart. Sometimes, she feels human.

Tom McLaughlin is an Irish poet studying his MA in creative writing in London. Both poems published here were written while he lived in Colombia.

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