

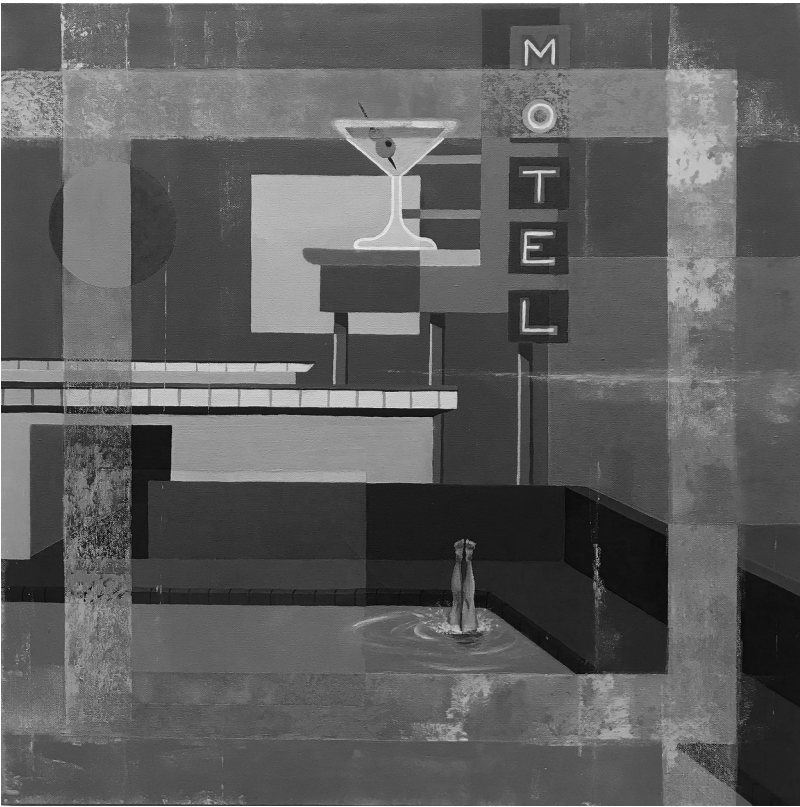


2020  
Zephyrus



# Zephyrus

2020



**A publication of the English Department  
of Western Kentucky University  
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## **Award Winners**

### **Jim Wayne and Mary Ellen Miller Poetry Award**

Sarah Olive

“When I attempt *Ardha Chandrasana* / ‘Half Moon Pose’”

### **Browning Literary Club Poetry Award**

Mara Lowhorn

“Florence”

### **Ann Travelstead Fiction Award of the Ladies Literary Club**

Mikaila Smith

“Blackfish”

### **Wanda Gatlin Essay Award**

Noah Powers

“Ruminations at the Grand Canyon”

### **Zephyrus Art Award**

Daniel Nausa

untitled

Undergraduate writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing faculty of WKU; the art award is chosen by *Zephyrus* staff.

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Morgan Butler

**Drowning 1**



Nicole Crosby

Untitled 2

## Less is More

Ella Corder

A little-known fact about those attracted to amputee erotica, apotemnophilia, is that many who find themselves in want of the stump and the knoll feel, whether they admit it or not, a certain envy of the stumped and the knolled. A person sans-limb seems, to the limbed, a person released. Lou Addenduman feels this way, here, now, in the oaky closet of his bedroom in his parents' house, vision somewhat altered from the confined oil-paint fumes in the dark closet, forehead dimpled and brain thus clasped in his tight reader's-flashlight headband, which he is pointing towards the 9x9 canvas in his hands, hands he feels are a burden to him, an Other, an appendix thrust upon him by the diseased world or by the unpitiful lackadaisical gods above. Indeed these hands weigh him down, see them droop towards the shag-carpeted floor. Lou looks down and doesn't recognize these five-membered figures below his wrists. He has known since he was a young boy that something was unmissing.

But Lou knows he must carry the burdens forever, for they are the vessel of his art. Lou uses the wretched, foreign right hand to grant the final life-breath. "Beatrice," he says aloud, and so names her. His eyes trail from her pouted lips to her peachy shoulder to her torso to her leg, for that is all she is; that is all she must be. In oil on the 9x9 canvas is a woman unhindered. The amputated woman lies naked, obliquely, on a bed of grass, with her wrist-stump on her hip, her shin-knoll pressed gently into the dirt. The detail of her finite features is Rubenesque. Her golden hair gleams in the sunlight. Beatrice's eyes look somewhere past him.

O sweet serenity, o lustrous freedom! The joy of life unimpeded! Lou can imagine the air flowing past his own stumps, the soft grass tickling his knolls, he and Beatrice lying there, two halves of one whole, all supernumeraries eliminated, calloused skin touching calloused—

His mother calls him for dinner. He descends to reality and scrambles out of the closet, smoothing out his hair and taking a moment to maintain certain excitements. He cascades down the stairs and sits at the table and says, "Hello, Pops," and his Pops reads this morning's paper, even though it's 6:00 p.m. on the nose. Lou's mother scurries rodentlike around the kitchen preparing food, muttering about the faulty gas stove, and she keeps accidentally banging her hips into the corners of the kitchen island and instructing Lou and his father to not expect anything that great at all. His mother wears aprons and decorates the house with myriad "**WELCOME**

*HOME*” and “*HOME SWEET HOME*” decorations from the craft store to reassure all who enter of the swallowing and intensive hospitality they are sure to find inside, and that that which they are entering is, in fact, a home. She scoops mashed potatoes onto Lou’s plate that reads, “*FAMILY*.”

“How was work?” he asks his Pops.

His Pops glares down at Lou over the newspaper a minute. “Son, it’s a chemical plant.”

Lou’s face sinks to his potatoes. His Pops’d worked for a chemical company for thirty years making acrylic cement adhesives out of 60% methylene chloride and 40% ethylene chloride which is currently the most common solvent cement used for polycarbonate parts using a joining pressure of 200 psi. Lou really looks up to his Pops, not just because he’s a dark, watch-wearing, 6’2” brute, but because he’s a skillful although somewhat unfulfilled expert in the Bonding Department at PolycarboNation, Inc., the leading adhesives manufacturer.

“Whatcha reading?” he asks his father, more eagerly.

Without looking up, he reads, “‘Man found dead with each limb chopped into seven equally sized pieces.’ Now how sick is that? What kinda freak world we livin in?”

A chill runs down Lou’s spine. He says he just doesn’t know what to say about that. After dinner, Lou ascends again to his bedroom.

He spent years in this dark closet studying his subjects, mixing colors and slaving over every detail, subsisting on whole boxes of graham crackers. Summers and winters flew by in the rosy apricot colors of his Ladies. There were many regrettable instances of graham crackers being used in certain unprofessional ways, when Lou hadn’t yet finished a painting but couldn’t wait to lay his mortal eyes on the euphoric finale but refused on a moral level to rush perfection, and he’d sometimes then fall helpless to the rough seams and cauterized edges of the cracker.

Lou never told his mother and his Pops about his work for fear that they couldn’t appreciate his art. Sometimes they asked him about what he was doing all that time in his room. They saw him sometimes carrying in canvas or oils he’d bought with his allowance, and his mom’d ask to see one of his paintings. He would go upstairs, panicked, and quickly paint over a Lady a simple dog or tree or something, and his mom would cry and carry on about her talented boy. But he didn’t tell anyone of the many nights he would stand nude before the mirror and hold his arm behind his back and imagine himself burdenless. How could he explain a suffering from

abundance? How could he tell of his desire to become without appendages, weightless?

And so, Lou became, in isolation, a man, creating a world of women whom he loved with every seared-off finger and bulging, calfless thigh, and felt like he really knew them.

Walking home from school one day, he saw stapled on a telephone pole a PolycarboNation, Inc., advertisement announcing an AdhesiFest in the park that day, for there was a 'lene surplus this year. Lou smiled at the thought of an impromptu visit with his father. He descended a grassy slope to find at the bottom of the hill a huge tent beneath which hundreds of shoppers and children swarmed. Lou went from table to table looking for his father, and when he finally came upon the Bonding Department's booth, he found only his father's coworker, Jason Thwarting, who was thirty-three and had the demeanor of a shy college girl. Thwarting stuck out his five-digit hand and said, "Lou. Nice to see you."

"You seen my Pops around?" Lou asked, taking the hand.

"You're awful young to be here alone," Thwarting said, sheepishly and with a drawl. "No, your father couldn't make it today, problem with the new trainee in the department. Something about a little 'lene spill on Mr. Addendum's Italian leather shoes. Your mom coming around later?"

The table was stocked with adhesives: liquids, gels, powders, aerosol cans, x-tra-thin tablets, sheets, EZ-move, dura-strong, industrially strong, and Toddler-Hang™, a name coined by Mark in advertising after groundbreaking research which showed the adhesive to be able to hold the weight of an average-to-stocky toddler on the wall without incident. Lou scanned the products. Thwarting scratched his head with his right hand and pointed with his left to the x-tra-thins. "Could sell ya these for a school project or something."

Lou looked and saw Jason Thwarting from the Bonding Department's left hand's thumb, pointer, middle and index fingers: that was all. No pinky to be found; only a small nub the size of a bitten piece of a baby carrot.

"I'll take four of each," Lou shuddered. He watched Thwarting in awe as he bagged the adhesives, and then Lou forked over his allowance money and quickly walked home.

When he got home his mother was starting dinner. "Lou, honey, where you been?" she said as she darted around the kitchen. "Stir this for me." Lou put his bags on the counter by the stove and grabbed the ladle.

"What's all this? Is this from your father's company?"

He watched the baby carrots bobbing in the soup broth. "I

thought you might could use it, Mom.”

She tousled his hair and turned up the gas heat, telling him to watch the stove while she stepped outside to hang on the front door a plaque that read, in bold, white cursive letters, “**BLESSED.**”

Lou thought about Thwarting as he stirred: a real-life subject. Lou trembled in sweet recollection of the light's effect on Thwarting's nub not two feet from Lou's own real face. He lifted a baby carrot out of the soup with the ladle and picked it up and held it gently between two fingers like a cigarette, and looked at it for a long time before leaning down and biting off the tip, and the clean sound of the *snap* echoed in the kitchen. His hands shook.

He dropped the carrot and ran bedroomward and opened his paints and summoned the colors to capture this divine scene; he could see the edge of the bone of the non-finger hovering in the cool crisp air. “Lou? Do these interest you?” Thwarting had said so innocently. Was Lou *interested*, he'd asked! Lou painted maniacally; he slashed and swirled with his brush, painting Beatrice once more, but now, now Lou could grant her all he'd ever wanted to: the sweet flame of reality. O, free woman! Tears ran down his face; he was unhindered, smoldering; and in the lucid flood of passion and the blood rushing through his ears he'd forgotten about the soup on the stove, and the baby carrot which he had bitten and dropped in his moment of euphoria had bounced off the counter to the stove and under the burner, and had subsequently caught aflame, and the fire spread through a small trail of oil which the carrot had left upon bouncing, and the flame crawled slowly up to the counter, and in the closet Lou was nearly finished with his great masterpiece, and the flame crawled up the plastic bag of adhesives, and outside Lou's mother was pressing the sign up against the wall until her arms hurt, waiting for the adhesive to dry, and the flame finally crept into the bag and caught aflame the EZ-move 'lene, which spread to the powdered 'lene container, which spread to the Toddler-Hang™, which according to the label was notoriously combustible, and right as Lou's Pops'd pulled in, tired and a little pissed off for having to stay late with the incompetent trainee, as soon as he'd parked and stepped out, at exactly the moment when the toe of his Pops' damaged Italian leather shoe tapped the driveway, finally with one huge billowing thrust of gas and wind the bag blew, with all the 'lene in it, and in a microsecond the gas from the stove exploded, and the house blew in one big blue and orange supernova, and Lou's mother fell and the sign shot back and hit Lou's Pops square in the groin and immediately broke to spell “**LESS,**” and Lou was shot from the closet onto the lawn, and felt a slicing pain in his left arm, and

through a cloud of orange smoke he coughed and looked down and could hear his mother screaming and his Pops groaning, and looked down and saw his left arm was just a raw red bleeding stump, completely cauterized by the soup ladle, and his eyes and mouth were all wide, gaping zeroes, and the smoke whirred as his mother screamed and they all looked at the house and saw, through burning newspapers and shards of glass and fire, hundreds of blackening white squares, and Lou, bleeding, recognized these as all his paintings he'd squirrelled away upstairs and the faux-paintings of dogs and trees he'd forged for his mom, and with deafening horror he saw that the mixture of 60% methylene chloride and 40% ethylene chloride also functioned as a very effective paint stripper and thus worked to Lou's utter terror to strip away exactly one layer of his paintings, simultaneously dissolving his masterpieces and revealing the underlayers of his faux-paintings, and his parents stood horrified at the scores of images of nude, amputated women scattered around the blazing house with their faces and bodies melting and dissolving, and Lou stood on the lawn, bleeding out of his left arm, face all zeroes in the orange smoke, standing aghast looking at the fire.

## **The Consequences of Being Colorblind**

Jarred Corona

Velvet turtles carry planets on universe-infested backs,  
ramming each other as they play bumper-shells.  
In their game of galaxy quakes, strings of destiny mix  
into new seductive knots, tying new pinkies and changing color.  
Red strings connect romance.

In a different universe, on a different turtle's back,  
you tease me about color-dot tests,  
and our purple melancholies blend lilac.

Delirious with fever, I once called you a deer prince  
and, unquestioningly, you named me a princess.  
Your emerald pupils migrated down my spine before  
they dared to make eye contact. In a different universe,  
on a different turtle, we would have blushed.

You pulled my back against your chilled chest  
as we rocketed down a log flume  
in a painting with a pink sky and baggy trunks  
and your heart murmuring on my shoulder.

I pinned a rose to a corkboard in my apartment;  
it's dead now, yellow and wilted, but still there,  
waiting to turn orange.  
I can't see orange, but I suspect  
it's similar to fireworks reflected in your green eyes.

I can see the strings. Most people can't.  
Fate exists, free will might not—that's for the turtles to decide—  
but I've always seen the string between our pinkies: Red.  
There was no surprise, then, that when our hands met, you  
captured me in a perfect cat's cradle.

Only, I can't see color all that well. My cones are small,  
and it turns out that red isn't red at all. It's yellow like a dying rose.

So I sit and wait for turtles to crash.

## **Fishbowl**

Jarred Corona

A dog runs, dying under the stings of a cloud of bees.  
*Please, rags, polish the stars*, prays one bee, a child who  
watches the sky every evening before bed  
and who will now perish after stinging a Pomeranian  
that wasn't even a threat in the first place.

The man watching from the sidewalk doesn't help despite  
the bug spray he keeps hidden in his throat.  
See, he doesn't speak the language of *Trying*.  
You know how Dick Cheney shot a man in the face  
because the universe stopped trying to be subtle?  
The man's like that. He stopped giving a shit when his mother  
told him she wouldn't kill herself  
because she didn't want him to find her body  
but then did it anyway, and of course left him to clean the mess.

She used to keep men in their fishbowl, the dirty one  
where fish only ever swam for a week before drowning.  
The mermen would appear at night, then disappear  
some other morning, flushed down the toilet.  
She kept her pain in sex, and sex in the fishbowl.

Rather than love and kind letters left behind to heal  
kids and their dissolving angels,  
the mother left her son eyes  
designed to look at playgrounds and see  
monkey bars as sharp neck bones  
pursuing dust and death.

So the man watches the bees sting the dog,  
and his only thought is that the neighbor's yard  
looks fake, like it was filled with fishbowl decorations  
and the trees were designed to be flooded.

## Plaster Bunnies and Cannibal Ducks

Jarred Corona

When I was seven, every house on Windsor Avenue had a plaster bunny. They stood a foot-and-a-half tall, unblinking, staring at the road as if waiting for some Eldritch abomination to haunt the good people of Lawrenceville, Virginia. I thought they were magic. If your bunny ever broke, the widower on Windsor made you a new one. When winter came, they all got clothes that vanished by summer.

Damian, the plaster bunny that sat on my porch, was the first to spot the ducks. When they went to cross the street, he watched the jacked-up wheels of a dusty pick-up truck mangle Mommy Duck into a boney purée. He didn't swoop in and save her. The pick-up truck was no monster, apparently.

Busy in our plastic turtle-corpse of a sandbox, my sister and I didn't notice the ducks until a few minutes later when they feasted on the poison berries that grew in our yard. We chased them with sandcastle molds. They were too fast. We didn't catch them. Our next-door neighbor did, though. And when he offered them to our parents, Mom and Dad said yes. We had new pets.

Dad transformed the downstairs bathroom into a duck habitat of mud, sticks, and water, a miniature pond buried in the claw-foot bathtub. We watched the ducks for ten minutes. I got bored and ran away. The next day, they were still there, fun to watch for about ten minutes. On day three, the stench of shitting animals was overwhelming. I hated it. By extension, I hated them. Hate came easy as a child.

There were five ducklings. One of them ate most of the food. One day, a duckling, the quietest of them all, died. Starved. Body like crumpled paper. There were scratch marks on the porcelain from where he tried to climb out. Maybe he was looking for his mother. The gluttonous one ate his corpse. Two days later, another died. He, too, was eaten. Maybe he was alive when his flesh pulled like stiff putty from his bones. But that was one duck too many, and the gluttonous duck's stomach burst. Gastric acid melted his intestines and flesh. Then there were two. My parents drove the survivors to the pond of a family friend and set them free.

Mom says I imagined this. Maybe I've imagined most of life.

The real problem was that the plaster bunnies faced the road. They couldn't see the monsters that lived in our house. There's something about cannibal ducks that makes you wonder about when you might sink your fangs into your own family, about un-scalable walls trapping you with your loved ones, about your flesh collapsing in on your bones. But that's the ABC's of growing up. They weren't the monster he should've noticed.

I hugged Damian and imagined kicking him. I wanted to put my foot through his tiny chest and feel his body cave around my ankle. Every afternoon when I got off the bus, he was there watching. And every time, I was afraid he would stop me from going inside. After all, I was the Eldritch monster he was created to stop.

## **The Banjo Lesson**

Blair Correll

Am I allowed this sensibility?  
To place myself to feel myself  
There with them  
In that time so long ago

In a shadowy and small place  
Where taught strings were plucked  
And gentle whispers of guidance once spoken  
Into stainless ears, the world turned slowly

Vibrant yellows and fuzzy blue darkness conflict  
With a bygone era's residual struggles  
Ongoing in the gloom  
Fighting back in the luminosity

Brown is not all he is or was  
Just like fingers make music but require more  
To make a Christmas morning something special  
As they breathe in life's changing genesis



Lydia Farmer

**Self Portrait on Mylar**

## **Feline**

Kaylen “Kae” Delph

I find myself making sure someone knows  
where I am, where I’ve been.

Like a cat nuzzles herself on bags of the owner she loves  
to proclaim that this also belongs to her,  
that you belong to her;  
my scent mingles with yours.

I leave behind my own with overuse of perfume,  
traces of mint from my hair, and lavender from my skin,  
so that when you look into the face of my mother and lie,  
she’ll smell me on your breath.

My friend will know my secret; it lingers in her car and  
the pullout bed I used on nights I was too drunk to stand.

They’ll wonder if mint, lavender and notes of the woods  
mixed with Moscato or chardonnay.

Maybe they mixed with fresh berries and drifting leaves  
in the perceived safety of the woods I loved so much.

They’ll wonder, then,  
do your blankets smell like mint and lavender?  
Your couch?

Was I there long enough to nuzzle in precaution,  
proclamation that I was there?

It is sad and sick that as an adult,  
I am more worried about them finding my body  
than finding me alive.

## Filthy

Kaylen “Kae” Delph

We bump noses for a moment,  
gentle whispers and butterfly kisses.  
But in the wretched silence, I study the bruises,  
and the way you’ve never said my name.  
It’s not just you—  
It’s hard to open my eyes,  
look at you,  
afraid of what I might see there.

I think maybe I taste  
my mother’s cigarette on your tongue.  
I don’t know who you taste,  
or see,  
but I know that the “I, love—“  
you began to breathe,  
wasn’t meant for me.

We’re filthy, absolutely filthy.  
Panting, sweating, crying.  
Black eyes gaze at me;  
in one last thrust,  
I think I see love?  
However, it could be  
lust?  
Aggression? Oh, only a hint.

I rest my leg between yours,  
slowly, like a cat  
when she is deciding  
you *maybe* won’t kill her,

as she leaves her scent  
on you, whether as  
precaution or proclamation,  
I’m still not sure.

We're filthy, absolutely filthy;  
and oh God, baby,  
we're both just looking for a home.

## **Greed**

Kaylen “Kae” Delph

Greed danced along the stage  
in a dress of gold, the brightest  
yellow that rivaled the sun and  
jewels that graced her bodice;  
the crown melded with her  
skull so that even in death  
Greed ruled, chosen by God  
and men and women alike.  
Greed was not the monster  
but the pretty little thing  
with blonde hair, swift  
movements and a body  
that swayed to the very  
same beat that makes  
us dance. Oh, she cried,  
screamed, wailed and  
ran and thrashed in terror  
of the things we laced  
her up in. We know  
that she was merely  
a pawn, that her  
death and blood  
were on our hands.  
Greed was our plaything,  
and oh—do the Gods  
know she is  
blameless.

*--In response to Medea, originally written by Euripides,  
but this version was translated and adapted by Carol  
Jordan with original music by Catherine Wilson and put  
on by WKU's Department of Theatre & Dance.*

## **Recipe: The girls**

Fred Games

### **Bowling Green, KY, the ones downstairs**

*Makes 4-8 hours of noise per serving*

1. I've never had roommates this loud and I don't even live with you I mean,
2. you're a tornado, every night, with your teeth working
3. hard against your tongue, and the boyfriends are extra volume. I mean that
4. literally. Sounded like you're watching your friend's dog again as he was joining in the chorus
5. because it's hard to forget his enduring whining that pulls on my ears like a hose being stretched out.
6. His prolonged dripping adding to your late day activities and nightly routines, outside again.

### ***Variation***

In the early hours, before you roll up the light, pack away the time, and actually visit the sheets, you can mix up every kind of ingredient down there: rock music, rap, Rap, rapping, heavy metal. Be sure to keep yourself dry to balance the steps you knock against the wall.

**-Your Neighbor, Upstairs, Apt D**

**For Adoption: Unwanted mutt**  
Summer Gary

Covered in caramel skin  
with a yellow undertone that I've *drowned* in  
Hated for  
being made standard of beauty for black  
because I am the furthest from black while still being black  
One drop too much and not enough  
Hatred told  
Almond cocoa eyes, pink and brown lips, loose curls kinda thick  
but too fine hair- not coils  
Got that *good* stuff  
Not that right stuff  
50% of a drop of no matter what  
Sinks into 50% of white  
The frost on top  
is etched on of your face  
Even though you never said  
Even though you are sun kissed, caramel  
Who you are get picked for you  
They say  
thinking you summer days hot  
with your crisp airy speech  
stringing letters together making *big* words with most definitions  
not known  
Get told  
forgetting where you *came* from  
Holding head high of pride  
pride you didn't earn completely  
pride you claim half the time  
Only when you get something for it  
Other half of you don't even know you part of them  
Don't claim you  
Don't look like them either with their straight glossy hair and doe  
blue eyes  
You act like  
I don't know  
Spit at me

Hybrid. Half breed. Mulatto.  
Dare *hiss* at me  
Try to knock me down  
I grew up around strong black men and women  
My family lived in centuries of turmoil  
My mother's family were the first black children in their part of  
town to attend an all-white school  
To have a good education had words of daggers thrown at their feet  
trying to stop them from rising  
My mother *reminds* me  
My granddad couldn't vote without discrimination until half his life  
was over in 1965  
Small house- seven kids, *swam* in poverty  
*hosed* at sit ins  
Several times arrested to their name  
They fought  
Dealt with invisible chains after the fact  
Don't dare make me seem muddled  
of where I come from  
of my identity because it's too diluted for you

## Bone-Yard

Kiah Grier

“There is no room for me to mourn  
my self” (Jasmine Mans)

but God don't I feel like a dead thing anyway  
like a pile of dried bones being drug across the land,  
looking for the perfect spot to be disposed in.  
aren't I a broken clock,  
that still manages to tick off beat everyday  
am I wrong for wanting better but not wanting to put the work in?  
fixing my tick-tock heart requires energy, and love, and enough  
of myself willing to be sprawled out, opened on a dissec-  
tion table in front of my loved ones  
to be judged, to be understood, to be laughed at, cared for and  
loved again

I'm not quite sure how to put the bones back in place.  
how to create the illusion of life.  
they've forgotten how to stick together  
so I keep losing pieces  
how weird it is to be dead among the living.  
how weird it is to know the difference  
but feel entirely helpless to the situation.  
is it careless if I stay this way, or is it careful?  
how do I talk about my broken, my shameful,  
the failures,  
the terrible, terrible habits  
and pretend I know better ways around them?  
do I tell my sheep follow my voice and not my actions?  
isn't that reckless?  
isn't that teaching the next generation to build their house on the  
same cracked foundation I built mine on?  
a faulty line of expectations  
that people will always manage to break.  
when people want to love me  
I want to tell them “Please don't get too close”  
“I think this sadness may be contagious”  
“I don't want to be the reason you aren't happy.”  
there are chemicals constantly misfiring,

so my words and actions never line up.  
I'm quiet when I should speak and loud when I should be quiet;  
probably why these dead bones are still rioting from their above  
ground grave  
fighting to be reborn.

28.

Corrin Kiefer

if we had, somehow, crashed together by some

*Epic*

alignment of the stars,  
then maybe we would have  
tripped

stumbled

slipped

staggered

tumbled

in love.

instead,

we sat in Love,

mistaking our clumsy plop for falling.

our Love had begun small, at first—

shifting into small spaces we had never seen before,

squeezing itself between the cracks in the floorboards,

finding its way into our soft smiles and gentle touches.

and then Love began to grow and swell;

the small places were suddenly too small.

instead it begun to hide in the dark corners of a lust-filled  
room,

listening to passionate breaths on warm skin,

watching like a fly on the wall as we danced to music in  
a silent kitchen.

and then Love grew too big.

encompassing rooms that reeked of stale beer and insu-  
perable arguments,

stretching itself out on the empty side of the bed and  
stealing the covers,

borrowing the pieces of ourselves we had given to each  
other and forgetting to return them.

and then Love left.

Love packed its bags and hummed as it made sure it had  
all of its belongings.

Love swaddled our hearts and tucked them neatly  
    into their own separate boxes,  
making sure to scribble “broken” onto both of them  
so that one day,  
    when love comes,  
        it knows that we have hearts worth breaking.

## **Florence**

Mara Lowhorn

When she falls  
she worries more about  
her pocket full of  
peppermint patties  
than the cracking sound  
of her hip meeting hardwood.

Her plan for the morning  
of ambling out to the chicken coop  
and feeding the girls their breakfast  
flits away like a gnat  
her arm is too weak to  
shoo away.

A patch of sunlight  
streams in  
through the window above the sink,  
a bigger puddle than the  
smattering of chicken feed  
spilled at her feet,  
the shine surely warmer  
than the candy coating  
that should be  
melting on her tongue.

Cheek flush  
against the cool surface,  
she stays,  
even as the angry  
clucking of hens  
spills in from the  
back door screen,  
and her stomach

groans in harmony,  
and the smell of  
peppermint reaches her nose.

## **Perennials**

Mara Lowhorn

He stuffs his affections  
into an envelope  
and sends them  
across the Atlantic.

Longing, swollen and tart,  
like raspberries  
during summertime,  
yearning to be plucked  
from the brambles.

The cold sets in,  
the underside of a pillow,  
a chill that is ripe  
for the picking.

A breeze blows in,  
the phantom of forgetting  
what it feels like  
to have someone else's  
fingers thread between his own.

Muscle memory flickers—  
desire stitched into fleece  
and the blind stroking of wet cheeks,  
stamped on his chest  
like postmarks  
from the places he wants to revisit,  
decorating the time until  
bellies become tickled  
and nails go untrimmed  
and finally,  
raspberries are in season again.

## **Southern Heat**

Sarah Olive

Kentucky summers are  
a stranger's  
great aunt's sweaty hug  
lingering  
after church on Sunday.

The air feels close,  
like a passenger on a crowded bus:  
swampy, claustrophobic—

like breathing in bone broth  
peppered with gnats  
and wading through a stew—  
an improvised gumbo  
made of cicadas and honeysuckle;

always brewing, humming  
simmering,  
overflowing

**This is My Intimate Voice**  
Sarah Olive

Listen Baby:  
My name is not  
my name—to you,  
I am Sunshine,  
Honey, Sweetie,  
Babe.

When you use my name—  
My given, Biblical name—  
I feel like this old couple  
arguing next to us  
in the Thai restaurant.

Who knows why or what  
makes them bicker over spring  
rolls and a plate of Pad Thai?

“Why are you being this way, Richard?”  
she begs.  
Who knows?  
“I’m not being any way  
at all,” he insists.  
All I know is

I never  
want to be that way.

Listen Honey:  
I’m the kind of person  
who wants to grow younger with age.  
I don’t want to be my grandmother,  
henpecking my grandfather until  
one day,

he packs his bags  
and takes the family parrot with him—

all the while that feathered fiend  
is shrieking his name  
in her voice.

I want to age like your Granny  
who, with a wink,  
tells her husband, “Ring me  
on your way home, so I know  
what time to hide my boyfriend.”

**When I attempt *Ardha Chandrasana*/"Half Moon Pose"**  
Sarah Olive

My limbs teeter like  
two toddlers on a seesaw  
The skin on my spine stretches  
like a cheap plastic bag,  
begging to break.

My instructor says to embrace  
the shake,  
the tremble,  
the uneasy quake—

then,

be like the half-moon  
balancing light and dark  
on a thin, shadowy line.



DanYelle Forrest

**untitled**

## **Sepia**

Tori Palmore

underneath the heat of a  
cotton quilt  
cold feet against  
your legs  
vinyl spinning

leather clinging to our skin  
sunbacked seats in a  
1985 Chevrolet  
windows cracked  
bent sunglasses

covered by clouds  
slipping in and out  
of laughter  
dirt under our nails  
biting back our secrets  
from the wind

## God Speaks in Blues

Noah Powers

Genesis whispers about B.B. King  
looping a lasso around the moon  
with cerulean guitar strings dripping  
slivers of cricket chirps in a club.

Psalms slap teal on granite countertops.  
Is turquoise blue or green? Next he's in,  
ask God to translate the Gulf of Mexico,  
will you?

On a blue train rides John, Peter, Coltrane was Jazz,  
I think, but he played at least one midnight blue note  
which is just navy inside out and dressed  
coolly in moonlit wine glasses drained clean.

The city of Memphis is a Christmas ornament  
on its last limb. A man shreds biblical bass  
in a procession beneath a slate sky  
threatening to tilt buckets on every frownless face.

Corinthians crests in snow-capped seas beaten  
into pulp by sherbet sunsets and the stomp of trumpets and  
dang that water is boiled sapphires with a lemon wedge.  
God might croon cobalt to the stars.

## **In a car park off Broadway**

Noah Powers

there's a flower garden  
(carnations, hydrangeas, and orchids)  
swirling in the air like a twister  
between the pillars it's almost  
a Parthenon but too much heaven,  
not enough Hades,  
(a dash of Play-Doh could make the term stick).  
Oh lord, the windows just shattered  
on the 2003 deadman-white Chevy Malibu  
I parked in here for safekeeping  
after the banks crashed.  
There's here and the rivers but  
they and I aren't on talking terms since,  
you know, but I had my first kiss  
on those teenage stained seats and I might cry.  
Never mind the twister died down,  
now it's a prairie (no dogs) with one battleship  
wrestling a skyscraper in a puddle of mud  
I'd bet my money on the puddle if I gambled  
in things and not places, put 50 on DC  
to be gargled up by hellfire on judgement day  
(good odds on that).  
These aren't even my favorite flowers but  
sometimes music rolls off the ear like  
raindrops on crashed hurricane cars.  
If you can imagine a hurricane hitting land  
in downtown Nashville I imagine  
it'd be too scared of the batman building  
(what a fucking menace).  
I used to be scared of tornadoes and doorframes  
southern summer heat is wearing a backpack  
in regular heat and cyclones pop up every  
spring like hydrangea blooms because  
to commemorate summer ending

a mommy cold front and daddy warm front  
cuddle up in a truck bed and they—  
will kids be seeing this?—themselves into  
creation that's born inside thunderclaps,  
crying clouds and fits of light. I was afraid  
of twisters until I met one just like me.  
They twirl like ballerinas in grey daytime  
it's weather from 1960s television there's  
three ways this can go, bucko, and  
only one sees you walking out of this  
home you built without me. I'd pull  
my pistol on a tornado in a quickie if I had  
either. Country music or Chrysanthemums  
barking in the backseat and I'm back  
to the future as a father with no kids  
(where's my mommy cold front?)  
Nashville pecks like a Parisian cock-a-doodle-doo  
at a slimy brown river but I love her all the same  
(is she my cold front?)  
I've never been horny enough to fuck an idea  
but I'm a man that's down for anything  
between August and May when  
swirling in the air like a twister  
(carnations, hydrangeas, and orchids)  
there's a flower garden  
in a car park off Broadway.

## **Rising with the Sun**

Noah Powers

As we almost slept, her head lay on my chest,  
hair reaching round my neck like a gold chain—  
sleep took it from me.

The sun rose early and lay across the sheets;  
she reached for my hand through its fingers.

I looked at her face,  
in the opening act of dawn,  
I saw her, and it was like

the first time I saw a Monet in person—  
Camille At The Window—I cried, thinking  
of love immortalized, frames and viewed,

and how if I was him, there'd have been yellow—  
the light drew constellations in her freckles—  
white for the sheets, pink for the shams, green—  
it soaked her eyes like sunlit sea water—

In bed, I'm wrapped in her arms.  
She whispers that I have to love her  
longer and sleep a little more and—  
if I was him, I'd paint this here,  
hang it in my mind, framed and to view,

her body pressed against me is warm coffee.  
I want to stay a little more.  
But morning slips into day,  
a cat through a cracked-open door.

Before sunrise climaxes,  
I step out into morning  
sun painting my body.

## Ruminations at the Grand Canyon

Noah Powers

You can take one more step before you're kicking air. Peter, a friend, sits on the edge, and the rocks wait beneath like Venus flytraps, so you should know better than to act fly. Don't look down, you've seen orange before, there's nothing new but fear. Look ahead. From this ridge, you can see the end of the world.

This is my first time in Arizona, too. You're not really here but you could be. Peter's here but he's not me or you and that's why he declines to heed warning and dangles his feet like bait for death to snap towards. I didn't realize how cold the canyon would be. I saw warm colors and forecasted sunshine, and I guessed wrong. I'm here, just like him; you can be a parrot on my shoulder if you want. Watch out for the tourists that move like hell-bent ants down these narrow paths. I still don't know if people were supposed to be this close to seeing the end.

If you gaze across the maw of the Grand Canyon, the opposite ridge is a horizon. You see the sky sit on the limestone. Peter's still sitting on the limestone to my left, still on the ledge, and we're talking about the height. You could write a textbook about how difficult it is to gauge depth looking down at the Colorado River. You should do that; I'd check it out. An internet inquiry says the canyon is about one mile deep. Peter wants to skip a rock down the walls to the bottom, even if you aren't supposed to. A sign might read: Do Not Throw Items Down, There Are Hikers Below. You wouldn't remember the sign verbatim. The rock flies anyway. A mile isn't much if you're driving several thousand from Kentucky to be in this moment. For the rock, it's a flash in an eternity of still life.

That little rock screams all the way down; it's terrified! It says, in the language of rocks, a prayer of excitement on its journey. Clanging off rock faces worn like old shoes by the river, it goes all the way and comet-tail echoes trail it. I don't think it hit anyone. Could they trace it if it did? Would it matter?

At the Empire State Building, they warn about dropping coins because pennies turn into bullets on the way down,

with momentum and what not. Someone could die that way. That tower is only twelve-hundred feet tall, nearly an exact twenty percent of the canyon's depth. The rock could've killed someone, but it didn't; Peter could've fallen off the precipice hanging there, but he didn't. At the end of the world, here where you could stand, time dissolves in the river floor. The textbook you write can say that, and how this canyon is old enough to be the grandparent of humanity. Interview the canyon for a primary source on that. Ask it then if we matter, if, to this aging expanse, we're something more than a skipped rock in its wake.

## **The Kids Table**

Abigail Raley

Did I prepare myself for this?  
For the den?  
I didn't know  
the floor would be linoleum.  
That there weren't enough seats for me  
at the table.

It is round and long  
like the one that had Thanksgiving  
made from oak  
and slick, warm love.

My grandmother's lap was always home  
a place of origin  
my lineage  
Encased in a creamy film  
Now sour.

My mother smiles  
Before she wraps  
herself back into the kitchen  
Warmer than the bodies  
that hurl love at her.  
Hotter than her hunger.  
She refuses to take a seat.

While I am musing  
on where my hope sat,  
she was asking me to sign another form.

To sneeze my signature  
one last time onto the clipboard,  
And now I know  
There are no Thanksgivings here.

The kerosene lamplight

that haunted my father  
is flickering out  
by doctor's lights, harsh carpet,  
and loneliness.

It is at this point  
I wish the State could feel  
the bleeding wetness

Can the State  
feel the weight my book  
carries  
when I swing it in my tote bag?  
Or does it spit?

Does the State  
drip off the edge of this test?  
Does frosted gel crisp  
his aching thighs?

How does it feel when the needle  
Pierces my innocence?  
Pale, dewy flesh sunken  
No hand to wrap around it.  
Tenderized.

To decide what I am doing  
is to pinch the gnat between my fingertips.  
When I scrawl myself across the page  
they make sure I know what I am doing.

This is the only kind of suicide  
that doesn't kill you.  
I know tomorrow what will happen

but I don't really.

If only the spitting man  
on the picket line  
knew that Thanksgiving  
smells like love.  
That he doesn't smell like my grandmother's hair  
or my mother's kiss,

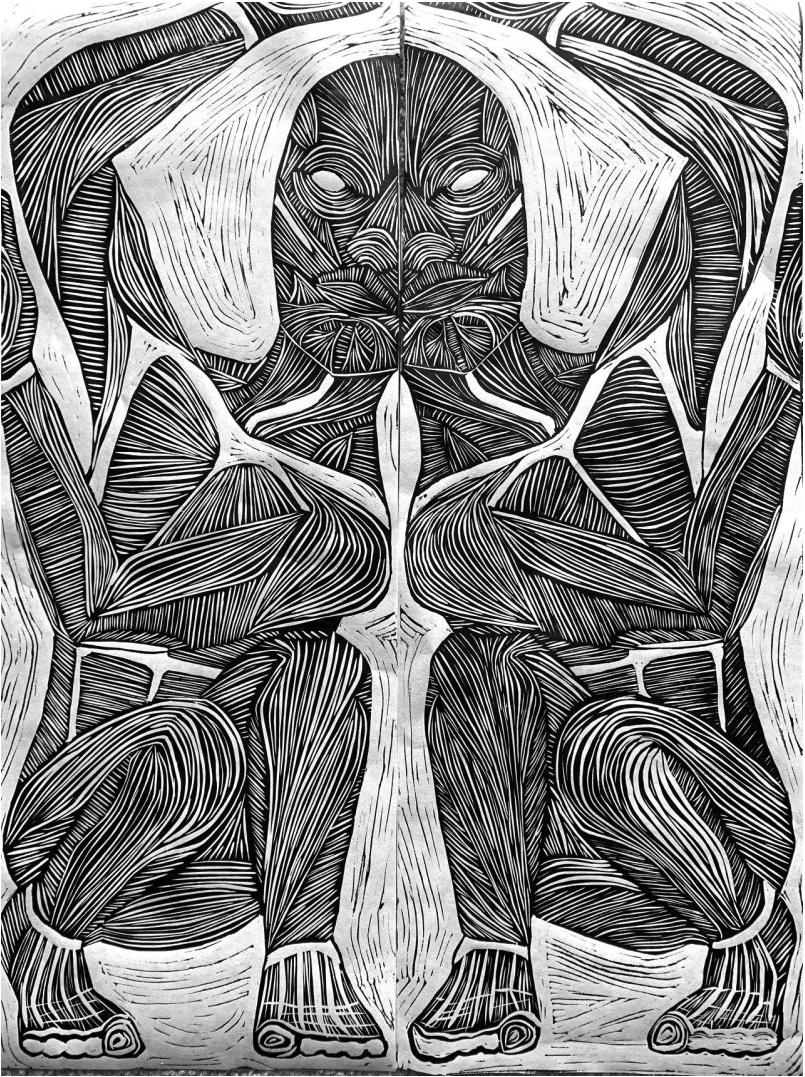
but the goo they put inside me  
and the ultrasound I can't see.  
The heartbeat I can only hear  
with cruel science  
And his voice.

It presses me  
And I'm nauseous

And the only things I need  
are to take a piss  
and for the loves and love-nots to  
dream under my cerebellum.

I know that I am one  
In a room full of people

Skulking around  
dreaming of warm turkey, soft hands,  
and the kids table.



Kendall Gott

**Disregulation**

## **Blackfish**

Mikaila Smith

At the water's edge of a sheltered cove carved out by years of angry winds and rising tides, a small figure stood alone in the dusky morning light. She was up to her ankles in the freezing water, her feet numb to the chill even while it crept up her body and raised the delicate hairs on her arms.

The hem of her dress swelled in the water each time the waves rose and dropped thickly against her skin each time they fell. The girl did not notice, as she was too busy staring out at the open sea where a ship was slowly disappearing out of sight. It was a twenty-foot double-ended troller, the type used for catching salmon when they made their desperate run from the river and out into the open sea. The ship was a hulking metal giant, freshly painted red and white to give the illusion of newness. Paint already chipped steadily along the railing and was almost completely gone where the ocean had lapped hungrily against the hull. The splotches of white left behind made the ship look as though it had teeth.

The troller's massive body held miles of netting, coolers for the fresh catch, and machines for cutting off the heads of the fish that would not sell at market. Her Papa had told her this as they had walked to the shore that morning, her grip on his hand getting tighter with each step that brought them closer to the boat's threatening shape.

"I won't be long," he had said to her, his voice ringing out clearly in the brisk air. "By the time the cranesbills start to bloom and the sea birds come in to shore, I'll be back home."

Her continued silence made him stop, and he crouched down to her level. His calloused hands reached up to brush back the warm tears that were sliding slowly down her face. She kept her eyes trained on the forest floor, watching a carpenter ant struggle in a drop of tree sap.

"None of that, now. You're to be a big girl for your Mama and brother. Take care of them. Keep that old woman safe."

He poked the muscle of her arm playfully, earning a quick smile.

"That's more like it. When I get back, I promise to take you out on the water any time you want. Maybe we'll go out far enough to see a blackfish."

At this, her stubborn silence was forgotten, her face quickly beaming up at him under a tangle of unkempt hair.

“Do you mean it, Papa? Can we really find one?”

He laughed and stood up slowly, groaning as he stretched to his full height.

“I do mean it, Aven-girl. The second I step back onto this shore, we will go find the biggest blackfish in the entire ocean.”

He had kissed the top of her head and ruffled her hair in the way she had always loved, and then he was gone- joining a group of men in a small skiff as they rowed to where the ship nodded steadfastly in the waves. He was on deck before she could blink, shaking hands with the captain, a man in a dark coat with shiny buttons that Aven could see even from where she stood. Her father busied himself right away, tying off ballasts and stacking netting into worn wooden pallets. As the ship began to move, slowly at first and then faster as it caught the dawn tide, he made his way to the ship’s peeling railing, waving eagerly as they ebbed out of the cove. She remained standing even after all of the others had drifted away, having said their own goodbyes to brothers and fathers before wandering back to their warm homes far away from the ocean’s chill.

She told herself now that she could still see his silhouette, even as the ocean mist danced lazily over the horizon, blurring the shapes that moved in a haze out on the open sea.

Just as she turned to walk back into the sheltered woods behind her, a glimmer of movement caught her eye. She stooped quickly, thrusting a hand into the frigid water. She raised her closed fist, keeping a grip on the shape inside that wriggled desperately against her grasp. It was a minnow about as long as her finger, its silver body flashing brightly in the growing morning light. She brought it close to her face, watching its gills open and close as it searched for water that wasn’t there, its small round eyes staring blankly up at the sky. Aven watched it for a beat longer as the minnow’s tail began to slow, its desperation turning feeble as it ran out of air. She stooped again to let it go, watching as it did not shoot off into the deep, but stayed close to the surface, its small fins moving weakly with the tide. She wondered vaguely if it would die.

With one last look at the horizon and the imagined glimpse of a boat’s deck where a man waved brightly even still, she turned again to the forest behind her, bare feet stepping softly on a carpet of pine needles as the sun began to ripple lightly through the trees.

Months later Aven stood in the same place, dark eyes searching the horizon for any source of movement among the white-capped waves. Since the first bloom of the late summer flowers, she had been returning to the shore at dawn each day, always keeping her eyes trained steadily on the open water.

Suddenly, as if she had willed it, the ship appeared, its patchy red hull unmistakable against the choppy water and gray skies. It slunk into the cove slowly, no sound coming from the men lining the deck. Her eyes searched the faces, light and dark, young and old, bearded and clean shaven, a collection of more men than she had ever seen all together in one place. There was no familiar lined face among those that stood against the railing, no call of her name cutting clearly above the sound of the shoreline.

When she met the eyes of the captain, she knew.

His grizzled face was blank as he walked to the railing, but his step faltered when he met her gaze amongst those waiting on the shoreline. He ducked his head and began to busy himself with the shiny buttons on his coat. She knew.

She didn't stick around for the explanation, because she had heard the stories before. Hers was not the first father to be swallowed up by the sea, and he would certainly not be the last. She was gone before the anchor touched the seafloor, fading back into the woods before anyone could stop her. She dodged quickly through the undergrowth, her breath coming in gasps as grief crashed over her small frame again and again. She clawed desperately up the steepening ground, climbing up until she reached a break in the dense greenery. She found herself on a narrow ledge atop the cliffs overlooking the cove where the ship now swayed patiently in the mild waves. As she steadied her breathing, her chest heaving from the wild ascent, she busied herself with thinking of all the ways that he might have died. Maybe it was a summer squall that blew up from the south, and he just didn't have a tight enough grip on the anchor line. Maybe someone had fallen overboard and he had bravely jumped in to save them, never mind his family and the blackfish that waited for him at home. Her blood grew cold as she imagined a blackfish circling his limp body, waiting to come in for the kill. She imagined her father floating silently in the green water, stretched out as though he were asleep, his eyes closed to the beast that swam around him.

Aven violently shook the image from her mind, splashing tears on the cluster of cranesbills that blossomed beside her. Her

eyes lit upon the flowers, her tears sitting like dew upon their open petals. With all the strength she could muster, she took them roughly between her hands, pressing them together until all that remained was a ball of purple pulp. She threw this over the cliff's edge, watching until it disappeared into the water to sink dimly into the deep.

By the time Aven made her way down from the scraggy outcrop overlooking the cove, the sun was sinking behind the cliff's rim. Strange shadows flitted through the trees as she walked grimly through the growth, following the trail she had left that morning. Wildflowers were bent in on themselves, twigs cracked and pressed into bare earth, and pine needles were piled where her bare feet had scabbled for purchase as the climb had become more difficult. As she picked her way carefully through the wreckage, she thought to herself that the path she left looked like one made by a wild animal, running rabid towards the open air.

The house her parents had built was small and squat, tucked neatly in a clearing rimmed with hazelnut trees that dropped their husks before the autumn rains. Aven came upon it slowly, skirting the tree line to try and catch a glimpse through the open window. A deep voice spoke softly, pausing often as though it were waiting for a response. It finally stopped altogether, and a lighter voice was heard just for a second, barely loud enough to seep over the window ledge. The deeper voice was curt now, and it followed a figure that stepped out of the small house and onto the clearing's carpet of thick grass.

It was the captain speaking to someone hidden behind the open door, his hands gesturing widely as he spoke. Aven felt a hatred welling towards him, this man with shiny buttons that couldn't keep her Papa safe. She broke away from the tree line just as the captain turned on his heel, marching deliberately into the woods and back towards his monstrous ship. She took off behind him, not knowing what she would do when she reached him but wanting desperately to throw each of those polished buttons into the sea. With her eyes watching the captain's back disappearing into the forest, she didn't notice a figure walking towards her from the house. She jumped when she felt a cool hand light upon her shoulder.

“And where might you be going?”

She turned to see her mother, dark hair tucked into a

heavy plait behind her ears, her face beautiful even as it was reddened by grief. Her dress pooled around her feet, making her look even smaller than she was, and her eyes were warm even as they shone with sadness. Aven rushed into her, her head nestling against her breast, arms encircling her as though to keep her safe. She choked back a sob as her mother gently shushed her and began using her fingers to softly comb her wild hair back from her face.

“It can’t be true Mama,” Aven said with ragged breaths, “He can’t be ...”

Her mother didn’t say a word as Aven’s tears drenched her chest. She stood firm and silent as the forest turned to dusk, holding her daughter close and tight in the blooming darkness.

Three mornings after the ship’s return without her father, Aven walked again to the cove’s shore, following the trail of fishermen that spent their days on well-worn wooden skiffs, netting anything that came across their path. She noticed the shoes that traipsed ahead of her with soles that flapped with each step, and the threadbare trousers that were just a hair too short above the ankle. The men who fished these waters caught enough to feed their families and nothing more. They were all either too old or too scared to join a salmon crew, so here they stayed, resigned to fight for whatever fish were left. Her father had always told her to be wary of them—they are survivors, he had said, and survivors will do whatever it takes to live. Now, she numbered among them.

Her mother had been uncertain about sending her out alone with the men, but in the end, she had no choice. She had to stay home with the baby, and Aven was the only person left.

“Do what they tell you,” she had warned, busying herself with packing Aven a modest meal in a metal pail. “Stay close to the shore and keep a good hold on your nets. Just remember what your Papa taught you.”

As the line ahead of her slowed and the men and boys began boarding their skiffs and pushing off with one kick against the rocky ground, Aven thought about what her father would do. She knew he wouldn’t have gotten on board with any of these men with their gnarled knuckles and squinted eyes, hungry for anything that would keep them afloat for another day. He wouldn’t have trusted them. Neither would she.

She ducked quickly off of the trail before anyone could notice, heading towards a path that would take her to a different cove, one where she wouldn’t be bothered.

Aven sat rigidly on the bench seat in the wooden skiff that had belonged to her father, watching the water's placid surface for any sign of movement. It remained as smooth and black as a river stone, reflecting only the straggling clouds that drifted across the sky.

The skiff had been exactly where she remembered, covered with leaves and brush and backed into a rocky crevice where it was held down with a heavy stone. It had taken her three tries to get it into the water, her bare feet sliding down the embankment as she tugged the skiff forwards, each hearty pull sending her sprawling into the undergrowth. When she made it into the water, her excitement was dampened by the plunging in her stomach as she looked around the familiar cove.

This was her father's favorite place, and she had spent many summer days with him here, counting cloud creatures and swimming before the water turned cold. It was where he taught her how to catch and clean a fish, and where he told her he had seen his first ever blackfish. It was here where he had first told her the old stories of blackfish and their kin, creatures called whales that swam like fish but breathed air like a human. It felt so far away to think about the days she had spent here, begging him for stories of those monsters that he called the wolves of the sea.

She did not think of blackfish now, but of salmon and trout, steelhead and smallmouth bass, seared over the fire and eaten right away, even as the fat dripped from the corners of your mouth. She would do anything to catch a fish.

A sudden movement rocked the boat, and Aven readied her net to toss into the water. Her stomach growled at the thought of a salmon shoal big enough to move the boat, and she steadied her hand, waiting for the fish to break the surface. Instead, the movement happened again, Aven's tense concentration turning to confusion as she peeked over the boat's low side. The water was still black and smooth, and she dropped her net to take a closer look, her nose inches above the surface. A flickering movement caught her attention, and she looked straight down to find herself staring directly into a large black eye.

Her body recoiled from the water, sending her backwards across the boat's small bench. The skiff lurched at the sudden movement, and she froze, attempting to right herself

slowly so as to not end up in the water with the monster that swam below her.

She took a shaky breath and leaned over slowly, hoping to see empty water once again, imagining that it had been some sort of trick in the light. She moved forward as far as she dared, enough to see a creature still hanging motionless in the water. She looked into the open eye, watching as it watched her. She was close enough to see rows of white teeth that stuck out against the dark water, lined neatly in a pink mouth that turned up at the edges, almost like a smile. Patches of milky white dotted what she could now make out as a large black body, three times longer than her skiff and at least twice as wide. She had finally found a blackfish, but it had found her first.

She leaned slowly back into the skiff, preparing to row herself back to shore. As she reached softly for the small oar under the bench, the blackfish moved. Its dorsal fin cut slowly through the water, so tall that Aven threw her head back to watch. It had been leaning on one side as it hung by the boat, its body seeming too big and heavy to move very fast. Now it sped forward quickly, nudging the skiff so hard that it was sent careening to the other side of the cove. Aven gasped, suddenly certain that it was just trying to knock her overboard. It wasn't until the blackfish appeared on the other side of the boat to gently move it back to where it started that Aven realized what was really happening. The blackfish was trying to play.

After a few trips across the cove, it grew tired of its game. It sidled up to the boat slowly, exhaling a deep breath of fine mist before it plunged into the deep. Aven took her own breath for the first time since the whale had appeared and sank back into her seat. For now, she was left alone to her thoughts and her nets.

It was hours before a salmon shoal came through, and she was finally about to pull her first full net on board when the whale came back again. This time the beast held its head entirely above water, its rows of teeth flashing in and out of view as it began to tug at the thick fish bulging through the holes in the net.

Aven yelled desperately, pulling as hard as she dared against the offending tug. When the boat started to list towards the creature's open mouth, she panicked, dropping her net and the fish into the inky water. She watched helplessly as the blackfish chased down every one of her salmon, its powerful tail propelling it quickly through the startled shoal. As the creature came against her boat again, she pulled out the heavy rock that had kept the

skiff from shifting in its hiding place along the shore. Before she could change her mind, she heaved the rock at the whale as hard as she could, hearing a distinct thud as it struck the beast just above its dark watchful eye.

The blackfish jolted against the boat, a bloom of blood sprouting from the cloudy white patch above its eye, the fluid black and heavy in the water's glow. With one thrust of its powerful tail, it was gone, and Aven was left alone again. She slumped over on the bench, her hands pulling close against her legs. While the afternoon sun began to move across the sky, Aven wept.

The next day, Aven was prepared for the blackfish, and she traded in her lunch pail ballast for a burlap sack that she filled with sharpened rocks. She had returned home yesterday evening with no fish and had gone to sleep to the chorus of her mother's grumbling stomach and her brother's fevered cry for milk that couldn't come. Even as her mother patted her on the back and made do with the last of their winter stores, Aven promised herself that it would not happen again. She would not let them down.

The morning started off quickly with a small school of bass that practically leapt into the boat of their own accord, wide mouths gaping as they flopped heavily onto the wooden floor. One by one, Aven held them each against the bench seat, using her father's spare knife to gut and skin them before the sun could turn their meat. She salted the meat that she cut, setting it out gently to dry in the sun. She tossed the head and unusable scraps into the water, hoping that they might draw in a crowd of bigger fish.

She was not altogether surprised when the blackfish came back into the cove. It rounded the rocky outcrop that sheltered the peaceful water from the open ocean. Its dark fin cast shadows on the water and its broad tail slapped heavily against the surface, sending up a spray that changed colors in the sun. The beast kept its distance, coming in quickly to steal the fish scraps before darting out again. The few rocks that she threw plunked harmlessly into the water, and she resigned to wait until the monster got close enough to hit.

When it finally came back into her reach, the whale rose its head above the water again, its shiny white neck gleaming in the light. The head kept rising until it was well above the skiff's

shallow rim, and Aven gripped the sides of the boat, too paralyzed with fear to reach for another rock. The whale turned sideways, rolling one beady eye to gaze at her intently. She felt a guilty twinge as she noticed that the cloudy eye patch was now pocked with a small scar.

The blackfish's head lunged forward suddenly, and Aven jumped back just in time to catch the thick silver fish that had been tossed from its open mouth.

She stared at the fish in her hand, a perfect salmon, freshly killed. A stream of blood was running from its open gills, and a single shallow tooth mark marred its sloping head. She turned to look back at the blackfish in the water, but it was gone, and the water was empty once again.

Every day the blackfish brought a fish for her, and Aven exchanged her bag of rocks for a container in which to hold the extra fish scraps from her catch. The blackfish would toss a fish into the air as it had on the first day or otherwise drop it lazily by the boat's rim. She would overturn her bucket, mesmerized as the pink mouth flashed open again and again to eat whatever fell out. She never told anyone about the strange arrangement, or even that she had seen a blackfish at all. Her mother was too grateful to question their prosperity, and the fishermen from around here never came this far from their usual cove.

Aven spent her days alone in the skiff with only the blackfish below to keep her company. She slowly began to trust it, even beginning to look forward to its grinning face popping up suddenly in the water. Each day she reached closer to retrieve her fish, eventually taking them directly from where they were held carefully between pointed teeth. The blackfish learned to move gently around the boat, and she learned to take a moment to rub the creature's smooth head when it nuzzled against the side. It seemed as though the two had found a balance.

A few months after the blackfish started visiting, Aven returned to her cove at the usual time, planning to be on the water by the time the sun broke over the trees atop the cliff. As she approached her cove, something felt different. A humid fear hung in the air, a sense so primal and deep that she almost turned around before her feet even hit the beach.

She heard them before she saw them, a terrifying mixture of shouting and vicious laughter, along with a thudding sound that seemed familiar although she did not know why. She broke through

the forest's edge to see the blackfish pulled into shallow water, tangled in netting and surrounded on all sides by the local fishermen. Her mind went blank as she watched them throwing rocks at the creature's exposed head, the dull thud now recognized as the sound of stone on skin. The poor beast was covered with gashes, some already dark with dried blood and others that still oozed sickly onto its skin. Its breathing was labored and infrequent, each heavy blow causing it to shudder with exhaustion.

She had been quiet, and the men on the shore had not yet been alerted to her presence. She stood in shock, gripped with the feeling that she must do something to save this creature that had first saved her. Just as she stepped forward, the man who seemed to be in control of the crowd said something loudly, and the others began to round up their materials and head for their boats that were bobbing haphazardly around the blackfish's unmoving head. The one who had spoken was the last to leave, and he aimed a kick at the creature's already drooping eye. The blackfish spasmed in response, and the man let off a foul spout of laughter as he trailed behind the others. None of them looked back as they rowed themselves out of the cove.

Aven stepped forward numbly, using her father's knife to make quick work of the nets and ropes that had dragged the blackfish so close to shore. She cupped water into her hands and began to wash each painful wound, wincing as the saltwater swirled away clouds of blood.

"You're going to be okay," she whispered to the blackfish as she stroked the thin skin around its unharmed eye. The beast started at the sound of her voice, its eye roving wildly, alert and clouded with pain.

Aven spoke to the blackfish as she sat with it, waiting for the noon high tide that would be high enough to push it out to sea. She told it about her father and asked it if it was the same blackfish that he had met here many moons ago. She told it that she was sorry for throwing that first rock, and sorry that she was the reason that it had been hurt today. She did not know how someone had found the creature in the cove, but she felt that it must have been her fault. She tried to explain that the fishermen probably thought that all of the whales were taking their fish, that they didn't know any better, that they didn't really mean what they did.

The whale didn't move beyond its shallow breath. Aven sat in the water with her knees pulled tight against her chest,

keeping one hand on the blackfish and the other on the shore.

When the tide rose high enough to cover almost halfway to the whale's dorsal fin, Aven stood. Her hands worked to squeeze water from her dress and onto the skin on its back, already warm in the summer sun. She moved slowly to stand against the massive head, making shushing noises as she waited for the right wave. When it came along and began to rush back out to sea, Aven began to push. Her hands pressed against the thick skin, her feet sinking deeper as the rocky ground shifted beneath her feet. The blackfish groaned from deep within its massive body, and the sound made her hands shake against its skin. She shushed it again as she slowly worked it out of the shallows, each wave pushing them closer to the deeper water where it could swim on its own.

At the last push, Aven stood back, anxiously waiting for the blackfish to pump its tail and disappear into the murky water waiting just beyond the rocks. She watched as it floated with the current, its fins hanging listlessly, one eye closed against the rush of the water.

She began to cry in silence as the blackfish bumped into her feet, drifting with each passing wave. Her hands reached out to gently push it back to the open water. It groaned once more and the sound felt more human than she thought possible, reverberating in her chest and drawing out more tears that mixed with the saltwater dripping down her face. She watched through watery eyes as the tide pulled the blackfish towards land. With a deep breath, she braced herself in the shifting rocks, placing her hands firmly on the creature's body. She fought her way forward with each ebbing wave, keeping both hands on the blackfish and both eyes trained on the horizon.

By dusk she had made it as far as the cove's opening, and she was now swimming alongside the blackfish, still pushing steadily against its tired body. It had slowly started to move on its own, the sloped back barely above the water though its breaths were now farther apart.

Whether hours or minutes passed, she did not know. The whale stopped suddenly, stiffening as though it were listening to something under the water. Aven felt a shift as the blackfish suddenly jolted forward, straining towards something in the open sea. She patted its sleek back and pushed it onwards, her legs kicking wildly behind her as she willed it to go. Without a look back, the blackfish took one deep breath and slid below the water's surface, disappearing as quickly as it had come on that first day.

Aven watched for it to rise to the surface again, expecting it

to float back towards her, listless and gray...but it never returned. When the sun began to sink behind the trees, she swam back to shore and walked home, leaving a trail of damp footprints behind her. She told her mother that she had fallen in, and they ate what was left of yesterday's catch. Her mother filled the silence with stories of the little boy's first word, although Aven could not remember what it was. Her thoughts were out at sea.

She went to sleep that night in her father's bed, her mind traveling somewhere deep and murky, filled with all of the things she could not save.

Aven went back to her cove, but the blackfish never came. She caught salmon and steelhead and smallmouth bass, and even learned to make crab traps from an old man traveling down the coast. She woke before anyone else and spent every early morning in the cove where she had last seen her father. She got there before the fishermen who had come after her blackfish, when the water still reflected the sky- night dark and full of stars. She stood in the frigid water, ankle-deep, feeling the rocks shift beneath her feet as the hem of her dress moved with the waves.

Every morning, she thought she saw it- a black fin bigger than a skiff, clear to her even as the ocean mist danced lazily over the horizon, blurring the shapes that moved in a haze out on the open sea.



Hyun Lee

I want to go home



Bronwyn Liddle

Wayward Daughter

# Concurrent Unraveling

Salvador Tinajero

Man turns, asks for a new day, a new job, a new start  
    Boy shrugs, asks for a new book, a new toy, a new experience  
        Man glowers, finds wrongs, finds rights, finds only endings  
            Boy beams, finds days, finds nights, finds how long five minutes tic

Man beckons Boy, tells him of mistakes, of failures, of risks to not take  
    Boy laughs at Man, tells him of hopes, of dreams, of a non-cataclysmic future  
        Man shakes Boy, screams to listen, to obey, to find futility in the world  
            Boy shouts at Man, screams to listen, to let go, to find opportunity

Man strikes Boy, upset at what Boy said, at what the world gave, of what he did to himself  
    Boy shrinks from Man, upset at what man did, at what he said, of what he did to himself  
        Man apologizes to Boy, knowing words won't mend, won't tame, won't heal  
            Boy apologizes to Man, knowing he was wrong, out of line, can't change

Man and Boy stand, at opposite ends, and look at one another  
    They realize they are broken, a person snapped at the hands of another  
        Realizing they are not at fault, but rather, outcomes of circumstance  
            Realizing others did this, so they know no better than to mimic  
                Realizing they can change, harbingers of bad and good

Man and Boy watch each other,  
    As each descend into tears,  
        As each howl in agony,  
            As each comprehend they are one.

Man and Boy will not hug.  
    They will not touch.  
        Not now.

## **In a House Twice Unfurling**

Salvador Tinajero

It's funny  
sitting in a house  
you built from your spine.

You caress the table  
made of your skin,  
seeing how worn it's become.

You peer at the clock,  
with two hands—both yours—  
and marvel at how far they've gone.

*Novel*, you think,  
gazing at the sweat-clear door,  
knowing full well this isn't yours.

The house you've made,  
brick by tooth,  
was for others to play and dance in.

*Glory*, you think,  
watching them sing to your marble feet,  
wondering when they'll hear you scream.

Your mouth is gone now,  
made into a hearth,  
snapping and crackling and roaring, ablaze.

But they laugh, you note,  
while the couch made of liver,  
squelches and cranes, up neck in bile.

Rattle them, you do,  
send your ribcage walls quaking,

with breaths wheezing and whirring and all-so-fatiguing.

Only a draft, they note,  
ignoring your grating glass teeth  
as their—your—windows shatter.

Mine! You proclaim,  
your carpet toes writhing in their wake,  
merely a tremble.

Out! You try,  
as eyelids, now doors,  
swing like pendulums.

Home! You cry,  
your tear-stained rooms harmonizing,  
crashing into your squatters' ears.

And for once, it seems they've listened.  
They rise and nod, peering into corridors,  
until they return, staking claim  
to what they believe was theirs first.

## **Prune**

Salvador Tinajero

Roses plume from his mouth like reeds  
They snake and twist, trailing thorns,  
Shredding lips and gums and tongue and teeth,  
What a  
scary thing.

And then we thought,  
“Oh, how beautiful the art.”

Petals bloom and float airily to his feet,  
Rosebuds brushing his nose and chin,  
Stems billowing to his ears and cheeks and hair,  
What a  
marvelous thing.

And all we said was,  
“Oh, how joyous the commitment.”

Soon, they stop to bind his legs,  
Pinching and cinching and caressing too tightly,  
Coiling and burning and aromas unfurling,  
What a  
wretched thing.

And we only stopped and stared,  
“Oh, how trifling the drama.”

Now, he stands, veins ripped open,  
The beauty he seeped, now overwhelming,  
For he has lost his own,  
In a garden of his making,

And we all wondered,  
“Oh, how did we lose an artist?”



Tara Shade

Map of the Soul

## **How You Tell Me You Love Me Without Speaking** Gabby Wilson

hands stationed at 10 and 2 on my thighs  
my body revs desperately into your palms  
the pads of your fingers familiarizing themselves  
with my garden of blossomed stretch marks.

your hands kitten lick across my collarbones  
the way my stray hairs do  
whispering themselves delicately over my skin  
from the gentle breeze of the AC.

my cheeks flush with a ripened cherry tint  
as your hands pulley themselves between my gears  
altering between gentle and peppered caresses  
and busheled fistfuls of skin that makes my toes tingle.

tracing the underbelly of my bottom lip  
you press into its plumpness with the tip of your thumb  
and compare the feeling to pressing my arched back  
into the comfort of the squeaking leather of your backseat.

they dance across my ankles  
teaching me how to slow dance  
and reminding me to brake  
when it's 3am and my feet can't settle in and shake with fierce  
determination.

elongated digits pitter-patter themselves over curled eyelashes  
they trace hearts into my eyelids  
a simple hope that I will someday see myself  
through your lovestruck kaleidoscope lens'.

i have turned into a riddling road map  
your hands roam and trek across  
memorizing established land and  
settling down in unmarked territory.

i watch your hands steer my skin  
turning left and right with no blinking signal  
grazing and hugging my dips and mountains and edges  
irrevocably loving me and leaving me always wanting more.



Kayla Worden

**Ill Defined**



