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A.L. Craft

Smoke of You

curious eyes open me up like a mortician
poking around my insides with precious care
seeing through many facades and skins to be shed

i am beyond naked
caught with guts spilled and palms facing up
ribcage full of swallowed conjured up futures
and words stored away for later consideration

do you see me now, my love?
be a dear and sew my soul back together
press moth wings and bird feathers into the gashes
and stitch my wounds with your silver tongue

be sure to take a bone or two with you
and remember me laid out on this cold metal table,
as cast open as i have ever been

the smoke of you will leave my lungs for years to come

Anabell Donovan

If I Turned Myself Inside Out

If I turned myself inside out
I would be like a glove,
all seams there to be displayed,
each one uneven and rushed,
like my stitching.
There wouldn't be lace,
orderly and dainty,
like the minute crested
waves at the lake.
No, no lace.
My last two ribs,
odd boning in this corset,
childlike and unfinished
I should have a waist like a wasp,
but things don't work that way for me,
just an oddity in X-rays.
A pause, and a startled
"Did you know...?" from a doctor.
Inside out flesh gathers a bit
around my right hip,
my atrocious use of patterns
and a horseback riding accident,
one leg slightly shorter than the other
and an almost imperceptible limp.
When I'm tired,
When it's about to be cold.
And the sparing ones still sort out my
thread of life, coiled in my chest,
behind my heart.
But here in Texas you never know.
You just never know.

Briana Gonzalez

Lynda Ann Healy and the Swan

A metallic blow. The wings stealthy and still
above the wounded woman, her thighs caressed
by shadow hands, her dress caught in his teeth,
he holds her helpless, fist to face and hip to hip.

How can the present push away the truth of the past?
How can her name slip into forgetting as he stowed her
under his wing and inside his nest? How could she have
felt anything but feathered frantic fear beneath his ferocity?

After,
the damp Washington soil engulfed her for
a whole year beside the mud grave-markers
of violated ghosts. One of many,

her name haunted newspaper clippings;
does she cry out now in her resting place,
knowing the world will remember his white,
airborne face and not hers?

He floats in the middle of glory's lake.

Brock Splawski

Insults

“Instagram,” Will said, “is nothing more than institutionalized bohemia.”

Will said that because he thought it would be smart. It wasn’t. Maybe the actual statement itself, devoid of context, was smart in a subjective sense. But there is no real place for a statement like that to be said, and have it received well in any decent company. And he said it in front of his own co-workers, sitting together for lunch.

Each one at the little conference table turned towards him. Derrick, Mike, and Jess. Three people whom he would have never known or hung out with in real life but brought together by the simple fact that they all needed money to survive.

Derrick sat closest to Will. He was the one who was talking about Instagram in the first place. He saw a friend’s post on some other site about *The Social Dilemma* and was saying how that made him uncomfortable.

Will thought Derrick would’ve gotten what he was saying. He was agreeing with Derrick, after all. But instead, he just got furrowed brows and slightly puckered lips.

Maybe Jess could have gotten it. She was sitting kitty-corner, had a tattoo on her left arm, and was generally the office ‘radical’ (meaning that she took a heavy interest in beer and electro-clash music, and occasionally espoused support for Ruth Bader Ginsburg).

It was a fairly easy, educated guess to assume that Jess knew the meaning of the word *bohemia*. So, why was she giving Will a look of such confusion? Maybe Jess herself was on Instagram. Maybe they all were. He certainly did not mean to offend. Though, it was a rarity for one to be purposefully offensive, anyway. Will supposed he was simply paving his own road to hell with his good (ish) intentions.

Mike ignored Will. He was across from him, sitting on his phone, reading something. He was much older than anyone else at the table. Will could not tell if he was sending a signal of disapproval, uninterested in the overall conversation, or both. That was certainly respectable.

And then, Will suddenly remembered. Shit. It was Thursday. His designated day to be shat on by the office.

“What does that even *mean*?” said Derrick.

“Who asked you, ass-wipe?” said Jess.

Oh well. At least it was Mike’s turn tomorrow.

• • •

Not everyone participated in the roasts. Mike ignored it all, of course. Rita was a bit more vocal in her displeasure but did not raise so much of a stink as to put the practice in any jeopardy. This behavior would have certainly put them at further risk for being fired if it weren’t

for the many trudging years of loyalty and camaraderie that kept them at this office. They had become fixtures.

Will was new to the office and did not have such a luxury. But at least he could smooth it out. Any perceived insult that he gave would be met with a smile, to ensure that the recipient understood that it was a joke.

Today, the butt-end of the roast was Ann, over in accounts payable. She was a new hire and had just started that week.

The interviewers had told her that the office roast schedule was relatively flexible, compared to most places, but that it was a pretty brutal endeavor at times. She told them that at her last job, they did roasts in *weeks*, not days; this schedule would be quite an upgrade for her.

Derrick's voice boomed over the rest of the office. He took delight in these kinds of things. "Ann, we are going to send your ass back to Sioux Falls if you don't get your shit together! God *dammit!*"

"Oh-hoh, Derrick, you are really gonna get it next time you're up!" Ann said in an attempt to bring some humor, and normally, that would have brought some courtesy laughs. But today, it was all crickets.

That afternoon, Will decided to head down to the bathroom in the basement, next to the large conference room, as it was always empty. He went downstairs to find Ann alone in the room, tears streaming, with a half-eaten box lunch beside her.

Will attempted to say something, but as soon as Ann noticed him, she straightened herself on the chair and quickly began to wipe her eyes away.

"I'm sorry, Will," she said hastily. "I'm just letting it get to me."

Will again attempted to say something, but nothing felt particularly appropriate. By the time he thought of something good, Ann was already shuffling out of the conference room, her eye makeup still slightly smudged.

When the others noticed her makeup, their insults turned directly towards that.

"Are those tears? You crybaby!" said Derrick.

"Dumb slut! Bet she was in there stuffing dicks in her mouth," said Jess.

• • •

The fourth time Ann had to be the roastee, she could no longer take it. She thought she could tough it out, but the walls caved in after a particularly rude remark by Jess about her cashmere sweater.

"I know they told me in university that the insults would be worse out in the professional world, but you just don't expect it to get to you, you know?" Ann confessed to Will, who had transitioned to eating lunch with her and Mike in the basement.

"College can't teach you anything good in their insult studies classes," Mike replied bitterly. He sounded depressingly old. "Way back when, when companies were first

implementing these insult days, they used to have designated handguns that managers could use. Couldn't get much done with a Glock pointed to your head!"

"I think I'm going to put in my two weeks. It's getting ridiculous," Ann said. Will nodded in an attempt at solidarity.

"You know, you'll have another insult day in about a week. It might be worth just quitting and leaving," Mike noted.

"Leave? Without a two-week notice? That'll go on my outgoing employers' report, for sure!" Ann responded in a defeated tone. "And once a potential employer calls Derrick up for that report, I'm toast."

And so, she left a notice. And when that fateful day came, Derrick really let her have it. It was downright incessant, even for the fixtures.

"You pathetic excuse! You couldn't leave soon enough!"

"Dumb bitch! Whore!"

"You fucking little shit bag, you ugly—"

"Enough!" Will finally piped up, at the end of what was a day of total onslaught.

It took the whole office by surprise. Everyone stopped what they were doing. Jess, Mike, Adrienne, even Basil at the front desk. Ann, tears coming down her face once again, looked up at Will, who was attempting to stand tall and face Derrick once and for all.

Will had finally done it. He had stood up for what he knew to be right.

Derrick himself was surprised by Will's remark. Astounded, even. He had never heard Will speak that loudly before. It was almost a shout.

After a few seconds, though, he was able to gather himself.

"Ann, you're fired," Derrick said. "And Will, you're fucking fired, too." And then he went back into his office, slamming the door behind him.

Caitlin Mundy

What the Universe Will Allow

The Call of the Void whispers
from the shadows, leaves wonder
at the rules of this world,
what is already laid ahead,
what can be carved out.

Some days my knuckles turn white
against the steering wheel
to keep from swerving
into the traffic.

Standing at the edge of a cliff
my heart spells fear
in Morse code.
I'm not afraid of falling,
I'm afraid of jumping.

One step from an ending
I don't want,
I can't stop
picturing the free fall.

I can't breathe.
It would only take
one
singular
breath,
the briefest misjudgment,
an
exhale
of control,
for everything to change.

A rock through the window,
my phone in a river,
a knife through my veins,

my fist in his face.

The question
of choice
or submission
lives forever
in the not doing.

Tell me, sweet universe,
whose game am I playing?
Is it one I can win
with the right gamble?

The answer has a cost
far too steep
to pay.
Or else,
the answer laughs
as we ponder at the paradox.

Is the control in the holding back
or is there no control at all?

Cheyenne Brabo

Fire-Breathers

In the dusk of a hot day, she appeared
To sort out earthly peace from agitation,
Dunking cloth in kerosene and piling it on;
Sweet things burn brighter than mean ones.

He drug the corpse to the yard
Where heretofore they built a pyre
And made a pact with its holy flames
That it only burnt the flesh that wronged them.

Yes, the blaze could bake, broil, and boil
Any food two lovers could eat save for
Meals with nourishment—they made a buffet of
A lightning-charged sky and burning elm;

The sort of feast that could only make chaos and—
Without knowing their wounds needed consistency
If they were ever going to heal—they got sicker,
Acting like medieval healers letting blood.

And where could a food chain end?
I wouldn't know, certainly not when my town
Is forever cloaked in their ashes, so even rain
Comes to Earth in the color of misery.

Every child born in our state is like this—
Desperate and half formed—even those of
These two fearsome and famous fire-breathers
Are not free, they only catch black-lung first.

And I'm ashamed to say that I am one of them,
Choking everywhere I go, prepared for them to
End the world like they forever threatened.
Send your daughters away from here,
Little girls are never safe in the darkness.

Clarissa Jakobsons

Upon Finding Father's Application for Reparations

The memory of his funeral reawakens.
A man who survived concentration camps
and the Gulag, he lived to heal others, but now...
My sister called: *Come tomorrow to the Bedford
Funeral Home at 1 PM. Father is dead.*

My children stayed home. I arrived
with a neighbor's Bible glued to my right
hand, read verses clearly marked to my mother,
sister, her husband, and a Catholic priest.
His eyes peered into me with disbelief.
Then his own erratic, spoken phrases
stumbled across the room.

Mother hovered over father's body
and cried: *A doctor in a cardboard box!*
I thought, *Who put him there?*
Then she commanded, *Follow me.*
This child obeyed without question,
stepped down steep, short, cold steps.
Sister leaned on her husband's
shoulder, while a banister supported
my weak, confused body as if stuffed
in concrete, without air. A Gulag.

From nowhere his body appeared,
slid through a metal door, the latch
clicked, separating our bodies forever.
I clenched that Bible. Someone flipped
a button, flames sparked through the peephole
enveloped every spirit. The ground shook
bones. Motionless, electrified. Mother said,
We must be sure these are his ashes.

Walking to the car, smoke filtered the skies
inflaming breath, the odor of burnt flesh

lingered on my skin. Looking to the sky,
a towering chimney streamed a train of darkness
winding toward *The Last Stronghold*.

Courtney LeBlanc

A Month After My Dad Died, I Dream of Him

He looks just like he did in the pictures we thumbed
during his last week—trim and impossibly young,
his face unlined and his coal black hair still thick.
We are at a party, standing close and talking. We are
somehow the same age, in that magical way of dreams,
though he is still my father, and I am still his daughter.
When he reaches out to touch me, I wake, the promise
of his embrace sliding off my skin in the cool morning air.

Frostie Whinery

Snakeskin

She looked dead when I found her
stretched around a group of rocks
at the heart of a desert.

Her skin was pulled from her body
lying limp past the tip of her tail
and I wept.

I sank to her,
cradled her in my arms,
and whispered,

Who did this to you?

Her triangular head rose from rest and she said,

I did.

I wiped sun from my eyes.

Why?

She slithered up my arm
and grazed *my* cheek
with *her* cheek
and said,

Darling,
look closely at my shed skin.
See the scars. See the mites.

Now look at me,
 f r e s h a n d f r e e.

Hannah Priman

Bad Appetite

Tally the times it grows, unlike a rose
No scent, just the lingering of a pest
Submerging inside your chest.
One would suggest that seduction is sprouting
The smell of it catches the senses
The taste satisfies but makes
One sick with consequences
All it was, was a simple surrender.

The mouth drools from the eyes of desire
If the grounds are dull,
Must you levitate higher?
It joyfully whispers,
“take a bite!”
It wants you in the night
With no stars, no shine of any kind.
Repeat the bite
Until you recognise the tasteless fright
And begin to see with no sight
The night does bite, there’s no doubt
Otherwise, why do you have all thorns
and no petals?
A prick causes blood, but petals
Infect the eyes with beauty and
Floods the air with fragrance.
Put thorn and petal together
And it has its purpose.
One without the other will
Surely lose its treasure.

Bad habits hunger for more
Residing in a place you built
Passed the skin, passed the bones
Centred inside
A home you made a welcome mat for.
Fooled into a constant state of pleasing

What little time you have left breathing
How one must break it to win the war.

The Tallies equate to circles
Emotions swirling in familiar patterns
Where your mind lives blind in the alleys
Where rubbish rots and poison churns
In stomach knots.
How goes the rose you grow?
Soil is like the body
Be sensible about the seeds you plant
If roots are bad, they spread and spoil
But picked, change can come.
A bush may bear fruit from
A simple wise choice.

But bad appetites will want you in the night
Bears no fruit, instead bears a void
Desist adhering to the voice
Resist the night
And the night won't bite.

Imogen Sweet

Soul Loss

It's a bind that lives in each of us,
Hanging in freely
or deeply,
Lurking or sleepy,

It wakes up like a putrid confession.
For each soul,
living in its own recluse
holds so tightly

Like a river contained
to only constrain,
for the upmost importance
and forever remain,

Unknown to itself.
And pouring tirelessly in to one pot of soil,
Niggling away at the source of its truth,
In a reflection

Caught an eye,
Caught two.
Many a time
which dissolve in their hands,

And still hesitant,
A slight forward glance
And shadowed by darkening light,
Which began to lift in my arms.

Time was fast,
Deeply so
Minute by minute was gone,
And forever.

Intertwined like a tentacle vine,

Raw and confined
It wasn't a matter of who or why,
But mine was simply lost.

Jamie Gallo
Daybreak

The eagle sweeps the
African sky
the beautiful white
tail sweeps, too

Man praises his
two black,
too beautiful
deep-set eyes
and his rows of
killer nails

He follows the
monkey to the leaves at
the top of the coveted trees;
he always dies last

The Man's housewife
sweeps floors at
home and smiles
to him; always
sweeping
with laughter

Cheeks,
skin,
teeth
bared to him

A ragged,
embroidered gown
full of lice

He follows
he abuses you
both his greed and war

Alone we live
survive
and die

Death follows
Death will
invite you in

Jeanine Walker

Five Praying, Overheard

They spoke for thirty minutes, maybe more.
Five voices rose and fell, an insect drowned.
To them the sound was words.
Their heads bowed (I saw this from the ground).

Five, they each sat with both hands clasped,
Hands two dogs that ache to fight
But rest first, slow in each other's sure teeth.
One woman's lips, glazed, fell on her raised thumb.

On the ground I knelt slowly down
(I was careful not to make a noise).
I touched the doorframe slightly with my palm
And watched a man, his eyes half-poised,

Whisper in between the beats of sound.
Another man stood tall
With hands raised, palms turned toward the sky.
I felt small, a mouse or dog,

Didn't want to make a stir or scratch,
Or have one catch my eye. I sat still
And watched them pray, close enough
To hear their voices rise, though their voices,

Words to them, were to me just sound.
Did they pray to make lips move,
Murmur each with each? I didn't know—
I only saw—my body on the ground.

Josh Sippie

Crooked Angels

Every child from Nowe Czarnowo grew up on stories of the hooked trees in the Krzywy Las and Simon was no exception. Stories of ghosts and wraiths, of demigods' intent on making a point and mythical beasts with the strength of a hundred men. But no one told the story that Simon's grandmother Zofia told.

"God is fishing for angels," Zofia always said with a smile. "I would know, I've seen people taken, reeled right up into the sky like trout." Simon always got excited at that part because she'd make the squealing sound of a fishing line reeling in the catch. But when Simon's mother and father disappeared in those woods, the notion of God having taken them to be angels lost its shimmer.

"Why wouldn't he take me too?" He asked Zofia.

"Because I need angels down here too," she said. She smiled again. She was always smiling. Only this time she was faking. Her smile looked tremulous, unsteady, shaken. He wanted to hug her, but he didn't. He thought only of her story. Of his parents being reeled in like trout to be angels in the sky.

All Simon's life, Zofia told him to keep the story secret.

"The more that know, the less power the story has," she said.

It sounded sacred, so Simon never questioned it. But his grandmother's fractured smile had kicked up the dust of inaction. He had to do something, even if he directly disobeyed her. He took the story to town and started asking around. Nobody had heard of Zofia's version. Many laughed at her, or called her a madwoman, a spinster, a bedeviling hag.

"Fishing for angels?" One man snorted. "Your parents were no angels. My condolences, though, of course."

Simon went home, straight to his bedroom. He collected his slingshot and his father's too-big messenger hat, clutched it to his head, said his prayers, and walked for the Crooked Forest during Zofia's afternoon nap.

He'd taken this walk with them so many times. While neither parent had the same storytelling capacity as his grandmother's fishing story, they told him that decades ago, these trees were planted with a purpose. There was a scientific reason they all looked like fishhooks. When Simon heard that, he saw the trees differently. He saw the purpose behind them, even if he didn't know what that purpose was. If you stood just right, each one would line up perfectly with the one in front of it, like soldiers at attention. That's no accident.

"It's probably meant to point to something," his father had said once, wearing the same hat Simon wore now.

"Like what?" Simon had asked.

His father shrugged, but his mother smiled.

“They point up, don’t they?” She said, but she didn’t say anything else about it, no matter how much Simon asked. “Ask grandma,” she always said. And just like that, the scientific purpose of the trees disappeared, and his grandmother’s story reigned again.

Maybe it really was his grandmother’s sacred duty to guard the truth. Maybe they really were fishhooks from some God in the sky, determined to pluck angels like fruit, when they were at their ripest. It still had a violence to it, though, and as Simon saw the hooked trees now, his heartbeat increased. He’d never feared the trees before, but it was different now. *They* were different now. They had been ever since that day.

He nocked a rock into his slingshot and mustered what confidence he could as he scoured through the trees, watching for movement. He spent his life in these woods, doing exactly this. Only back then, it was a game he’d play with his grandma.

“Catch the fish before God does,” she’d say, prowling through the trees with him. But there were no fish to catch. Not then, not now. Being alone in the woods, Simon realized the absurdity of the whole situation—fishhooks baited for angels? It didn’t make any sense. And why would God need so many hooks?

He sat on a tree bend and stared up at the sky. If there was a God up there, he wouldn’t be able to see through the clouds. He wouldn’t be able to see how alone Simon was. How empty everything was.

Simon’s breathing began to staccato, but he mustered himself before any tears could escape. He couldn’t decide whether his parents were taken or if they’d just abandoned him to start a new life. He tried to remember if it was overcast the day they disappeared. Maybe God didn’t even know the answer.

“Simon.”

Simon sat up, the voice vaguely resembling his mother’s. But his grandmother stood across from him, still in her slippers and gown. She was one of those people who had to be dressed to sleep in order to sleep.

“Oh,” he said.

Zofia half-smiled. “Am I so unremarkable?”

“You sounded like mom.”

Zofia sat on the tip of the hook with Simon and put her arm around him. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said. She smelled like potato and leek soup. Yesterday’s dinner.

“Where do you go?” Simon asked. “When you come out here and go for walks?”

“I go where you are. Where we are.”

“Are you trying to get hooked too?”

“Is that what you were doing?” Zofia frowned at Simon.

“No,” Simon said. “I don’t know what I was doing.”

“You were looking for them. I look for them too.” She paused, waiting for something, but Simon wasn’t sure what. “Who do you think will find them first?”

Simon looked over at her. She hopped to her feet and prowled through the trees, no longer able to bend and hunch like she used to years ago. Simon didn't want to follow. He didn't want to play this stupid game anymore. But she did. And for that, he joined her.

Julien Berman

Corona in Perspective

I

I'm glad my grandma isn't around
For these times of fever and little sleep
Because she'd worry and only buy cheap
Things—she'd lie in bed with her soul wound
Tight while wondering why she's alive
In a time when the air is holding our fear
No one can hear her shout for her dear
Son to come give her oxygen to survive
She's watched him growing up in her clutches
She now feels his music that she can't help but play
Just this once, and she shouts her voice through
Calling out 'til her cries for human touch
Run ahead through the night toward better days
While she views the pandemic on the news

II

Chapter 1:

We who view the pandemic on the news
Cry for the thousands of our dead brethren
To share the pain of loss we are now veterans
Of humility, we fight and unite so as not to lose
Our faith.

Chapter 2:

We who live as the pandemic on the news
Who travel in the caravan towards the west
Caged in detention centers and orange vests
Our camps filthy, we can only pray in pews
Of rotten blood.

Chapter 3:

I can only watch my people on the news
If bodies could rust, I'd be falling apart
They seem desiccated, drowned and pliant
My brethren over on the edge of the world
My living room a temple for grief's own mark
What can you see in the eyes of the silent

Strangers on the border?

III

What can you see in the eyes of the silent
 Men who lost the battle, whose bloody selves
 Lie strewn among scattered fields of violent
 Carnage? Frontline Walmart workers ravage shelves
 Even as packages are ripped out of their arms.
 Drops of dew fade until all that remains
 Are corpses in the grass and the baleful charm
 Of the enemy under which our ancestors are maimed.
 I can only see moments in the eyes of the silent
 Man that lost the battle. He shall grow not old,
 as we that are left grow old: the enemy invades
 The suburbs of his flesh on the now-violent
 Homefront—a man sighs then gently turns to mold
 A casualty of fate on this Great Plague's crusade.

IV

A casualty of fate on this Great Plague's crusade
 Dust are the blood-red hearts which beat to these measures
 She takes the crimson currents back for Herself as treasures
 As recompense for the wounds that have yet to fade
 She takes our breath as we have taken Hers for years
 Our breasts tremble under Her retributive might
 As Hers rise and fall with the tide in the smoggy night
 6 feet deep they taste the Great Plague's tears
 Rice paddies breathe when the locusts stay home
 Her eyelids open to the heavens as She prays once more
 We gather at a distance for her pre-mortem revelry
 Coyotes are Her coroners, howling to Her fading storm
 The raccoons crawl through the empty jungle-land floor
 Before once more Her canals clog, snuffing Her melody.

V

Before once more her canals clog, snuffing her melody,
 I'd like to perform for my friend in the hospital bed,
 She'll listen to my virtuosic embrace, listless and dead
 For what use is a music degree save for an ethereal elegy?
 Then I, my timid service done, can bite my nails once more

And search for an online gig in this money-starved moor
 For want of orchestral festivity, the after-9pm air is mute
 On these plains there is only the wind, mimicking the flute
 But when I play for that woman with no road ahead
 Caught in arts neurosis, though she can scarcely see the screen,
 Through the Zoom-meet I can only feel the acceptance in her face
 Of the end—the notes are scissors to her thread
 She sees herself on the computer in a grayed-out sheen
 She feels what I feel and smiles as our connection transcends space.

VI

Their connections transcend space; the baristas lie in the gutter
 A trash bag wanders along the now-empty pier
 And the half-crumbled boardwalk can't help but shudder
 Under the bemoaned wail of the Ferris wheel's gears
 We'd go there in the throes of youth to numb our pain
 To stuff our faces in kettle corn and chat up a stranger
 To shoot a man and win a pony, to soar on a Sea Plane
 To glut in carn(iv)al debauchery and to disregard danger
 Tonight I'll settle among the ashes of the boardwalk
 For the baristas have fallen to a land far from here
 This long pleasure shore died in us today
 See the Ferris wheel, whose subjects have turned to chalk
 Stains on hands that scoop litter beneath the rotten pier
 Sick of the bloated stench wafting our way.

VII

I'm sick of the bloated stench wafting my way
 This is the Year of the Mask and the Nurse
 I wonder if anyone can see me through the
 Kitchen window as I walk back and forth
 From the desk to the sofa to the bed
 A normal pattern that creeps up and suffocates
 Bit by bit—rust on the doornail, mold on the
 Parsnips, a plastic bag over my head and neck
 Squeezing, squeezing, snapping sticks, smashing
 Bones, rotting by the fridge; I'm in an amber maze
 When I stand naked in the shower to be found
 Years later in statuesque perfection, and the only

ringing is the porch chime that says ‘This is yours to decide
And yours to remember.’ I’m glad my grandma isn’t around.

Kelli Lage
Spilled Oil

Spilled oil seeps into my veins
I cough out exhaust.
Her scales weep
for they'd rather breathe in fire.
You drink from the springs,
and become ravenous for moments passed.
I can taste these days in the back of my throat.
The sun burns for those who weep.
We put on the charade of slumber
when midnight stalks by,
hoping its shadows don't spot us.
Tremors laced into silk robes.
The fallen howls stick to my skin like molasses.
In another life, I'd dived into the candied pool.
Dust falls from my eyes.
Beyond the gritty window, I see the ghost
of my many selves swooped up by ravens.
With each drop of sweat,
I free them and all they stood for.

Lucía Guzman

Eighth Crow

I am within the mouth of the moon.
When Death arrives in his chariot of silver,
I will be able to say
that I have been chasing it for millennia.
When does Death end?

I am forgotten by divinity,
I become so close to Death's gentleness
that I learn to endure the malignity of it,
shifting in clarity and fragility,
it becomes a deeply intimate affair.
the gravity of my heart is torn
from artery to artery
to make room for it.

It is like every dream I've ever had,
translucent in the frame,
visceral in the night,
head beneath
waves of moonlight.
It devours the soul,
and remakes my bones
into daffodils.

Death
takes millennia to come,
counting its cards,
playing hands of hearts.
saint-maker, mind-reader,
it takes my violets
but not my heart.
who was I
before it?
a bare pillar of salt,
grief?

It haunts,
saint-maker
will-breaker,
chaos becomes you,
and I become the stars.

Marshall Bood

Taking to the Bed

when I was young
I would take to the bed,
ripping into the foam
of the cheap mattress...
pieces falling away

he pushes me
to the floor again,
everyone laughing...
I never answered
why I didn't fight back

Melissa Kerman

Karma's Boyfriend

From the opposite end of the bar, you watch your boyfriend kiss his date's cheek. He's wearing the leather jacket you bought for his birthday last month, and it looks like he got a haircut. He must've decided impulsively that afternoon. Otherwise, you would've known, considering you log his schedule and memorize it better than yours. Your boyfriend waves to the bartender and asks for two Jack and Cokes. You didn't hear his order, but you don't need to.

No one knows your boyfriend better than you.

Definitely not Katie. She's like a discount version of yourself, down to her (dull and drugstore box dyed) hair, (unevenly dispersed) freckles, and penchant for (knockoff designer) knee-length boots. You're not sure what your boyfriend sees in her. Well, aside from her eagerness to give him head in public places, like when the pair snuck into the bathroom last week at The Tavern. According to your notes, tonight would be their fifth date. If your plan succeeds, it'll be their last.

You glance at your rose-gold watch—your boyfriend's Valentine's Day gift, and another reminder of his disregard for your preferences since he knows you prefer silver—and tug your beret lower. 8:30 PM. Natasha should be here any minute. Maybe. She's your boyfriend's tardiest mistress. She almost foiled your scheme during their last rendezvous, when you anonymously tipped the police that your boyfriend sells anabolic steroids. Natasha was supposed to arrive at your boyfriend's place at 9, but she showed up at 9:30, exactly when the cops did. Her lateness didn't generate the same effect as the cops banging on the door and your boyfriend opening half-naked, with Natasha's lipstick smeared across his neck.

The ordeal cost your boyfriend a thousand dollar fine and some embarrassment. Evidently, though, not Natasha's affection. She continued to answer his booty calls for the following two months. Poor girl genuinely believes they're exclusive. In her defense, it's what your boyfriend he told her, and he's pretty convincing. You, of all people, know that. However, after tonight, he won't be able to tell Katie nor Natasha anything.

Your phone dings. *I'm about to walk in. Will you please tell me your name?* Nosy girl, this Natasha. She didn't believe your first message: *Hey, I know this sounds weird, but the guy you're dating is seeing multiple other girls and will be at The Village Bar at 8:30 tonight with one of them.* She demanded you tell her who you are and why you're contacting her using a texting app number. You didn't answer, but you knew she'd show tonight.

You peer at the door, right as she enters. Natasha shares your curvy figure, but she's about six inches taller. Her eyes dart around the bar until her penciled eyebrows narrow on your boyfriend. She stomps halfway there, then she halts and resumes in a strut. That's the right attitude. An unbothered bitch trumps an angry bitch. She taps your boyfriend on his shoulder. Both he and Katie turn. Your boyfriend's face resembles a teenager whose father caught him pillaging the whiskey cabinet.

The music's too loud to hear their dialogue. It doesn't look good, though. Your boyfriend's fidgeting with his jacket collar—his nervous habit, along with caressing his beard—while Katie and Natasha converse with theatrical gesticulations. Katie almost whacks the guy sitting next to her. Eventually your boyfriend throws some bills to the bartender and trudges out the door.

Mission accomplished.

As you step outside, your boyfriend texts you: *Hi, love. How are drinks with the girls?*

He always texts you when he's down, of which you're typically the cause. Like last week when you pretended to be the girl he banged on St. Patrick's Day, now pregnant, and in need of abortion money. Your dumb boyfriend couldn't question the story—he was too wasted to recall whether he pulled out, so he sent the money and blocked your (fake) number.

Quickest five hundred bucks you've ever made.

Leaving now, felt tired...how is your night? What have you been up to, babe?

He responds within a minute: *Too tired to come stay the night? I'll make u breakfast in the morning :)*

You didn't lie. You *are* tired. And you have work tomorrow, not that you care about your lame marketing job, peddling shitty products from shitty businesses. But you're also slightly horny. And you have a few tasks to do.

Never too tired for you babeeee. I'll be over in a bit!

You hop into the nearest cab and open your Blitz List. You've had a productive two months. During the first, you swapped your boyfriend's shampoo for Nair; his hair fell out in clumps, and he donned a hat for weeks. You ranked that stunt one star out of five. Two stars for when you hacked into his email address and deleted urgent messages from his boss; four stars for when you gashed his back tires, and his car broke down on the way to work. Four stars for when you trickled water into his employee laptop (which you later did to his PS5 and TV cables); he lost countless work files and had to reimburse his company, even when he claimed the device "spontaneously combusted."

Two days ago, your boyfriend lost his job. "As long as I don't lose you," he had murmured in bed, grazing your ear with his lips.

He doesn't need to worry about that. You're not going anywhere.

You remove your other phone from your handbag, the phone that's connected to his iCloud. Looks like he just redownloaded Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. And texted his old college girlfriend saying that he wanted to visit her this weekend.

God, the man couldn't be loyal if his life depended on it. Which it did, sort of, but he's too stupid to realize that.

• • •

What do you do when you smell your lover stinking of someone else's happiness? Do you inquire about it and risk your assumptions being correct? When trust breaks, it shatters. If

you confront your boyfriend and he lies, do you accept his falsehood and pretend nothing happened? If he tells the truth, do you stay like a desperate fool, or leave the person you love?

None. You do none of those.

You tried to cheat. But no one knows your body like your boyfriend does. Plus, cheating wouldn't allow you to "get even," because "even" cannot exist if your boyfriend doesn't know about the revenge. If he did, he'd leave *you*.

You used to think his self-esteem was higher than yours. Maybe it is. Mostly, though, he's incapable of loving you the way you love him.

You slip the phone back in your purse, next to your Xanax and laxative bottles. You slip a Xanax in your boyfriend's drink when you sleep over, planting your attacks at the first sound of his snores. The laxatives go in his purified water pitcher. He thinks he has IBS. You tell him tell him a gluten-free diet might help.

Getting "even" requires mutual suffering. Both parties must experience pain.

The cab pulls into your boyfriend's complex. You text him that you're here and he tells the doorman to buzz you in. You open your Blitz List again. You could pour bleach in his laundry detergent. Steal his new Rolex, after you pawned his last two. Download a virus onto his desktop computer. Puncture his sink pipe.

It's easy to ruin your boyfriend's life. He believes he's irresponsible and has awful luck. Recently he joked that he might have bad karma, yet he paused before he laughed. He didn't think you caught it. But in that moment, as his face registered the possibility, you smiled.

This is how it feels to get even.

You walk into the building and whip out your compact mirror. As you wait in the elevator, you shove a floss stick between your teeth and swipe on some mascara. You silently curse yourself, resenting your undying urge to impress your boyfriend. You pierced your nipples because he once told you it would look sexy.

His door is ajar when you arrive. He's scrolling through his phone, which he tosses to the couch when he sees you. He stands, wearing nothing but a towel around his tan hips, and flashes his crooked grin. It's the one you fell in love with nine months ago. He walks to you and cradles your head in his hands.

"I missed you today."

He kisses your forehead. Your heart explodes like a volcano. He lowers his lips to yours and you melt like lava, hot and fluid in his grip.

"I missed you too," you whisper.

"I know," he says before he bites your lip. "Promise you'll stay the night?"

You rest your cheek on his chest, your face tilted towards his kitchen. There's a pink scrunchie on the counter, and it's not yours.

"I promise."

You're not one to break promises. Your boyfriend won't lose you because you won't lose him. Yet, as your head rises and falls with his chest, his heartbeat calm and calculated, like a clock, you remember you'll never really have him.

Paris Jessie
Hollow Springs

it is bedtime
time to hold for dear life
“hold on”
holding

my iris fears the inside
of an eyelid
gripping my shirt, so that

under does not depart me
the hairs from my skin
are already swimming in air

the curtains are closing

form the body into rock
shape
challenge is coming tonight

take hold of my own hands
squeeze
so, they may each still feel

the curtains are closing

from this pressure comes
a gas that sweeps the body
followed by exhale

the curtains are closed

Patricia Davis-Muffett
As Easy as Swimming

Seventeen long months, this child grows,
learning her mother's voice
as she searches, tireless,
for the dwindling salmon.

Finally, the calf emerges, swims.
No more than thirty minutes—
she is gone. The child, imagined, hoped-for,
the future of a dwindling breed.

What was it that made her
keep the vigil, risk herself,
to keep this child afloat seventeen long days,
1000 miles, nudging her toward air?

Was she convinced
she could save her child
make her whole again—this being
she loved already, as it slipped from sea to sea?

Those nine long months I carried you
as my mother slipped away.
Laboring in water, my head beneath the surface
as I fought the urge to scream.

Finally, your whole self in the world,
no matter my imperfect carrying,
Here you are, the rush of love immediate.
I would do anything to buoy you toward air.

Thirteen years. Still miraculous, alive.
This summer, that orca mother
carries another calf. As if this is
as easy as swimming, she continues.

Renee Gilmore

Waiting, We

Waiting, we
held hands
we shifted on hard plastic seats
we flipped through old golf magazines, seeing only the ads
we excused the doctor for running late
we listened politely
we went home

We opened the cupboards then closed them,
looking for answers among cereal boxes and soup cans
we drove the convertible around the lake, searching the perfect blue sky
we forgot about the biopsy, then remembered
we left the milk out on the counter
we chatted with friends and pretended we were cheerful
we hid the pamphlets inside the junk drawer
we misplaced the remote and changed the channels by hand
we sorted all the socks in the laundry basket
we laid on the bed and watched the ceiling fan, without talking

We wondered, closing our eyes, if there was something
worse than fear
we flinched when the phone rang
we washed the same clothes twice
we searched for reassurance
we quarreled
we aired out the house
we lit candles at church
we lit candles at home

We went to a movie and left our popcorn
untouched
we cried behind the bathroom door
we reached for each other in the dark
we ate hot fudge sundaes with salty pecans
we forgot to put out the garbage
we gave up on sleep

we picked at weeds in the yard
we avoided the internet

We counted our blessings
and did not feel closer to God
we considered absence, but never spoke of it

We drank pots of strong coffee and read the paper
we watched a Little League game, with a catch in our throats
we told ourselves different versions of the same truth
we marked off the fifth day, then the sixth
On the seventh day, we woke to the sound of the wind.

Tom Gumbert

A Promise is a Promise

He drains his whiskey, then wipes his mouth on his sleeve before shuffling to the deck railing and heaving the glass. It arches, reflecting the dying rays of the sun in a twinkle before smashing against a tree. The conversation had been difficult—hell, it had been brutal, and it left him feeling brutish. He knows what he has to do; he just hates the fact that he has to do it—but a promise is a promise.

Gripping the railing, he draws in a deep breath before exhaling while counting to ten. Lightning bugs flicker between the oaks and elms on the downside of the hill and he focuses on them, allowing their rhythm, and the alcohol, to calm the tempest of his mind.

“It’s sparkly,” she giggled holding her hand out, fingers splayed.

“Like your eyes.”

“Like my heart.”

“I can’t believe that you said, ‘Yes’.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Umm, because you’re young and gorgeous and perfect and could do so much better than me.”

“Nonsense. You’re by the far the best man that I’ve ever dated, and there’s no one with whom I’d rather spend my life.”

“It’s wonderful now, but what about years from now? Will you really be willing to take care of me when I can no longer care for myself?”

She twisted her mouth as she considered this. “I’ll tell you what—I promise to marry you and make every day we are together special. In exchange, you promise that when the time comes where you cannot take care of yourself, you will do everything necessary to ensure that I don’t have to.”

With a sigh he returns to the now vacant battle-site and pauses. She had retreated to the bedroom, and he can hear her giggle at cat videos, her go-to for mood improvement. The evidence of their ‘conversation,’ the test results, remained in the middle of the floor where he had thrown them. He stoops to retrieve them, totters, and balances himself by placing his hand on the carpet, momentarily reminiscing of his collegiate football days.

He brings his hand to his knee, and on the third attempt, makes it upright. As he walks to the kitchen, his eyes land on the diagnosis. *Lewy body*. When the doctor first told him, he thought she had said, ‘Lewdy Body,’ which he imagined a condition associated with the porn industry, not something he would have—and certainly not a cognitive disorder.

Opening the cabinet, he retrieves two tumblers and sets them on the counter next to the bottle of Jack Daniels. He had overreacted. He can admit that now. It was just so unexpected. Twenty years of bliss, and now she’s invoking the clause. He’s just not ready. Twenty years with

her is simply not enough. Damn. He knows she wants him to hire help, just as he knows he won't. He'll honor the clause—but on his terms.

From his pocket he pulls out the vial. Why is this so hard? Goddamn child-proof containers. He loses track of how long it has taken before he manages to remove the cap and unable to control his trembling hands, spills the contents on the counter.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?” he looks at her and his eyes find focus.

“You were zoned out. I was asking you if were ready to come to bed but you wouldn't answer. Are you okay?”

He looks from her to the counter and back to her.

She follows his eyes. “You made us drinks.”

He nods, though he isn't entirely sure that he did. Someone did. Was it him? He can't remember.

She smiles and picks up the two tumblers. “Come to bed. Maybe this will help you sleep.”

He looks around bewildered. Strange voices closing in and flashlight beams cutting through the early morning dew, creating grotesque images from Mother Nature. *Who? Why?* He stumbles toward a tree as he tries to hide behind it, feels the sharp pain in his foot, and falls to the ground.

They call to him—it has to be a trick. He doesn't know his pursuers. Clawing at the low branches, he tries to stand but cannot. His heart races as they come closer, closer, closer.

“Larry, are you okay? Oh my god, your foot!” The man crouches and picks up shards of glass, blood smeared across the surface of the largest. “Let's get you up to the house.”

He won't go—not without a fight.

In the backseat, teary eyes watch as the gurney is loaded into the ambulance. Suspicious glances and snippets of conversation—'Rivastigmine and alcohol, Inimical? Murder?' pierce the air. Uniformed men place “Crime scene,” tape across the threshold.

The door opens and an officer leans in. “Do you remember your rights?”

“Yes.”

“There appears to be drug residue in the whiskey glass. Do you remember anything about that?”

He tries to focus—tries to remember...

William Rowden

Wounds Shaped Like Hands

His hands
were on me,

and that leaves marks,
leaves wounds.

Now I
am made of them,

these
black freckles, these

burn marks,
handprints.

Plucked,
taken.

Ripped
from the root—

I built no calluses.
Instead, I hid

underground,
gliding veils

over myself,
this hoodie, these gloves.

So cloaked,
I can't be seen

tending,
tending to myself.

My plump, pink
skin—

So bare
that it's begging:

Touch me,
touch me,

someone,
but no one

like him,
no

claymation hands,
and no pottery slip.

I escaped,
narrowly,

to this cave,
to this echo,

and lingered there
in the black.

and silence
becomes a cloth

stitched over
my open mouth,

and a voice
from the belly

of this cave
groans

and says,

“You cannot
be hurt
if you cannot
be heard,”
so I follow it
into the depths.

Zach Murphy

The Last Weekend in July

It was the summer of 1993, and Keilani and I sat by the crackling fire as the bullfrogs croaked a sonorous symphony, the grass swayed from a whispering breeze, and the stars zipped in different directions across the vast night sky.

“What a weekend,” Keilani said, resting her hands on the back of her jet-black hair.

“Rad like a cat wearing sunglasses,” I said.

“Satisfying like spelling Sriracha right on the first try,” Keilani said.

That was our thing. One of our things. In fact, when you’ve known someone since the age of five, you amass a lot of things.

I leaned in toward the warmth of the fire, took a deep breath, and prepared to tell Keilani something that I hesitated to tell her all summer. “I decided I’m not going to Northwestern.”

“What?” Keilani asked.

“I’ve thought about it a lot and I just don’t think college is for me,” I answered.

“But we had it all planned out,” Keilani said. “Together.”

“I’m so terrified of tossing four years away,” I said. “And going into debt forever.”

“Why did you wait until the last minute to tell me?” Keilani asked. “You always do that, and it drives me crazy.”

“It’s not the last minute,” I said.

“That’s another thing you do,” Keilani said. “I know it’s not literally the last minute, but you just have this affinity for suddenly dipping out on plans.”

“Like when?” I asked.

“Remember when you didn’t even show up to your own birthday party? The party that I organized!”

“I had the flu!”

Keilani stood up. “And the time you said you would pick me up from my dentist appointment and didn’t show up?”

“I had a panic attack about driving in downtown traffic,” I said. “I had just gotten my license!”

“I had to use a pay phone while half of my mouth was numb!”

Keilani tossed another log onto the fire and a flurry of sparks burst into the air.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Keilani sat back down, fanned the smoke away from her eyes, and brushed the ashes off her sweatshirt. “I’m going to miss you. That’s all.”

“I’m going to miss you, too,” I said.

“So, what do you plan on doing?” Keilani asked.

“I want to save the world.”

“Like Wonder Woman?”

“No,” I said. “I keep having these dreams about rainforests losing their color and oceans warping into garbage dumps. I want to try and do something. I’m just not sure what yet.”

“Maybe someday there will be an invention that allows us to see each other’s lives from far away,” Keilani said.

“Sure,” I said. “And maybe Blockbuster will go out of business!”

We both laughed until we snorted.

Keilani reached over and grabbed my hand. “We’ll still look up at the same moon,” she said.

I wondered if I’d ever have a moment with Keilani like this again. “What a weekend,” I said.

Keilani sighed. “Over too soon like a Prince song.”