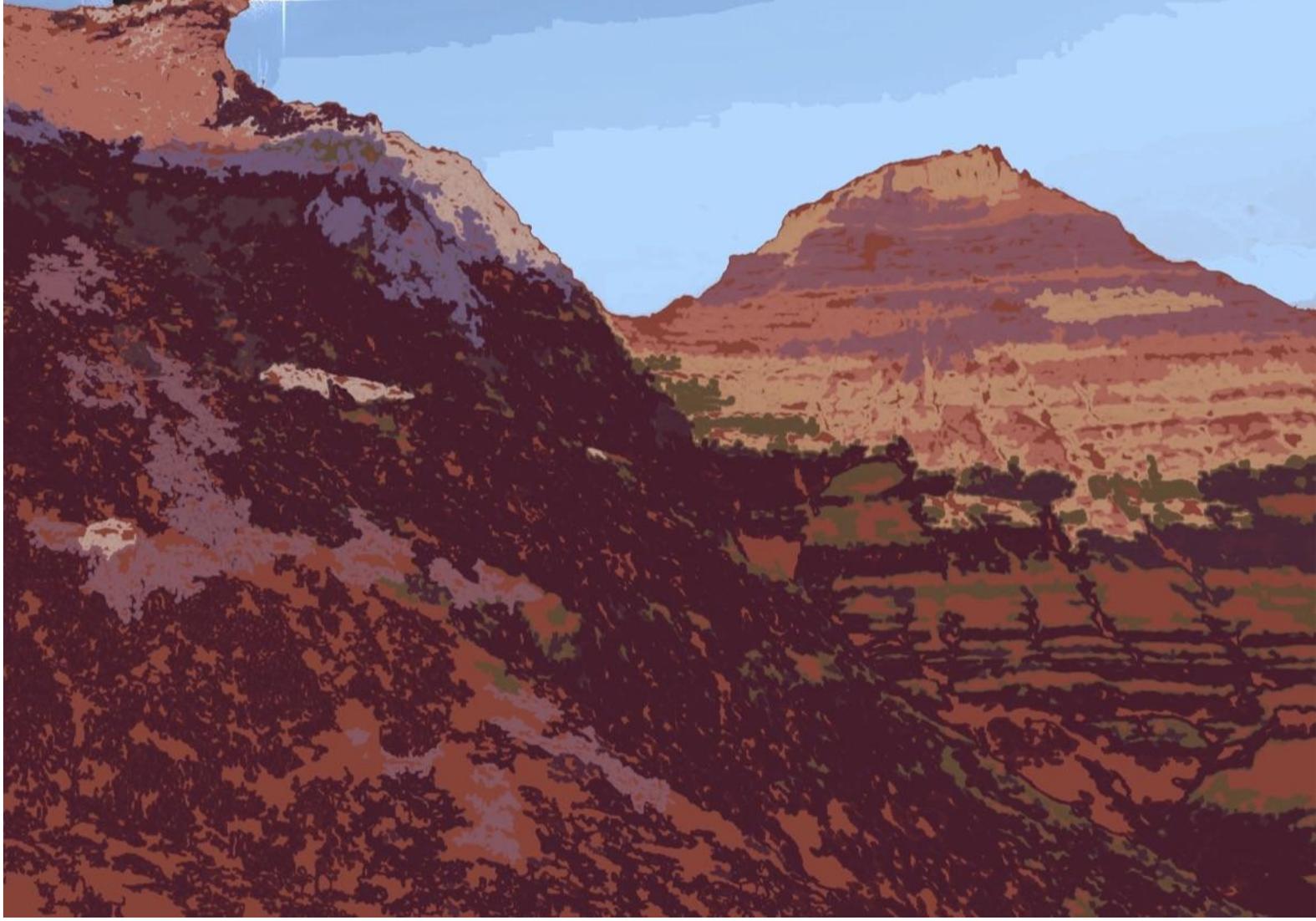


Mycelium Magazine

Issue Two

Sustainability



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Table of Contents

Editor's Note	5
soma	6
Passed	8
To Leave	9
That Ophelia Look	10
A Resistance to Growth	11
Zero Percent	13
Crepuscular	14
Marginalia: A Manual Textbook of Practical Housekeeping	15
A Meteor Shower (& Other Signs of the End)	17
Palimpsest	18
The Woman and the Girl	19
Tomatoes	23
Air	24
Cannot Be Destroyed	25
When Life Gives You Lemons, Make - Dish Soap	27
Evensong Everlasting	28
Glass Veil	29
The Filed	30
Cage &/or Bird	31
East Idioms Reinterpreted	32
Metamorphosis Musings	33
Heart Rooted: First Lesson in Chinese Characters	34
Fulfillment	35
Porpoises	36
Harvest	37
Yes Country for All Men	38

When Here is Nowhere	39
Birdman	40
“How Can a Pentatonic Scale Sound So Peaceful and Empty?”	41
Liquid Child	42
Personal Doctrine	43
Spring Forward	44
Landlocked	45
Soil: To Be Reborn	46
didn't swim hard enough for shore after all	47
Thinking About Lot's Lot	48
A Haiku - Northern Tumbleweed	49
The Point of No Return	50

Editor's Note

Thank you for engaging with the Sophomore issue of *Mycelium Magazine*. We hope the energy that captured you and brought you here, whether you are a contributor, reader, or friend, runs through the second issue and invigorates you. Our writers and creatives have delivered a brilliant collection of voice, truth, and love. We are so grateful to each of our contributors for delivering part of yourself into the world for our delight.

In this ever changing world, *Mycelium* seeks to offer shared human experience across a spectrum of form and medium. We see the creative process as ligaments linking beings throughout time and space. May you feel these tendons link with your own as you venture further.

Enclosed in this issue you, the reader, will find experience, novelty, pain, mastery, and hope. You will find haikus tumbling across the pages, multi dimensional multi genre explorations into what it means to be, fictions of bloodlust and satisfaction. You'll find yourself and others. We hope that you find something that sings to you.

Contributors, thank you. You are each a reminder of the depth of the world.

soma

Eleanor Burleigh

i am trying to write about all the sources of
light in the living room golden dove clipped
to the ceiling above the sofa has dared me
to gloats over my dirty woollen socks

1 – the fire moving lashes
beneath black wooden
bulbs

2 – fairy threads on the
beams green and blue and
pink
drops of tongue and
field grass

what else

am i trying to prove my worth
by answering more general
knowledge trivia questions
than you

while i wobble around
the room wrapped in the
pink fairy lights

am i collapsing cross legged
laughing too hard and
adamant about the capital
of spain being madrid

3 – your smile when your
face is tossed by the
lamp light
into the
window frame

offering me a segment
of the satsuma that you're
unpeeling

am i taking a bite and
watching the smoke from
your cigarette
twist

around the fire guard
as you lean towards
the chimney
juice dripping
down to my chin

am i just telling myself
that this is what
happiness is

Passed

James Croal Jackson

Crushing cans in the
attic was how to subdue

time— guitar distortion
summers, apple rum

autumns. Red leaves
hued the music—

e-minor when the
wind chilled, ice

of songbirds the
loneliest way

to tell time.

To Leave

Katie Holtmeyer

I miss jumping off
the backs of flowered couches
crouching low when I landed
not afraid bodily of damage
to bones or bruises my brother watching
in line behind me
dusty hardwood floors socked feet slipping
I demanded freedom without
falling just wanted to soar

but what I miss more
is the sign they replaced on
the third-floor bathroom stall door that one
that used to talk to us it said
“please leave this toilet as you’d hope to find it”
except someone crossed
out toilet wrote “world”

I’m not saying I did it
I only admit to crimes I’ve committed
and even then not often
all I’m saying is we live in an
enough world to be making it worse
call me a nerd watch if I flirt with caring
watch as I say that sign seemed promising
unlike the other three telling you
to wash your hands with soap

and I think hope’s something
we’re all a little lacking in right now

deficiencies are running rampant they stole
our dreams our seeds our sneakers
to get away faster they are sprinters they are
but we are the ones winded

I never admit to crimes I haven’t yet committed
but if you see the new sign changed to
“please leave this world as you’d hope to find it”
I’ll give you twenty questions one clue and thirty-six lines
to guess who did it

That Ophelia Look

William Doreski

Like the inhabitants of Cappadocia, I'll carve a house in living rock. We'll be troglodytes, cave dwellers; but of course, we'll have plumbing and electric service. I'll find a large outcrop of soft bedrock: limestone, pumice, tufa, or as in Cappadocia, ignimbrite. Being good with tools, I'll quickly partition a couple of rooms, then run a wire from the nearest power pole and install a few outlets for refrigerator, lights, radio, computer. I think we should use propane for heat, cooking, and hot water. I'll drill a well outside and with an electric pump to fill sink and bathtub and flush the toilet. Septic—I expect to have plenty of space for a good leach field. Have I not convinced you? You're giving me that Ophelia look. You know I hate to feel imperious, overbearing, arrogant, or otherwise princely in your presence. But think about the advantages of a civilized cave dwelling: no rent, modes utility bills, access to natural resources. We'll be troglodytes in style. We'll marinate all winter and come out in spring smelling earthy and bold. The bears do it, but not with hot water and a flush toilet, or a propane range to cook their grubs. What do you say? Don't look as if you'd rather drown yourself. That's been done, and it wasn't pretty.

A Resistance to Growth

Will Carter

I cannot speak for trees. They cannot speak for themselves either, of course, but if they were able to I'd ask them how winter feels. Observing them, as I often do, I have felt a certain kinship for them; there is actually a passing resemblance between us, for I am six foot tall and built like a stripped yew, arms thin and twig-like. But I empathise most with their determination to stand still, as the world moves around them unobserved. I'll admit that I'm jealous – I wish I were as unmovable.

When I look at a tree, emerging from the ground quite carelessly, anchored by its roots, it seems so solid, despite being subject to the same rain and wind as the rest of us. Though its branches may bend, rarely do they snap, and when they do the tree continues quite as if nothing has happened. In contrast, I am easily moved, reacting like a common ape to minor inconveniences, with anger, wounded pride and disgrace. These events change me, often to my core, and I am rarely the same person between two points in time.

It's not just the weather that alters me; I change under my own volition, and struggle to resist the urge to do so. There is a sense of incompleteness, a need for growth to fix the flaws I see in myself, and a pressure to improve my situation whatever the cost. Growth, of course, can be revolutionary, and moments of change can be fulfilling, cathartic, euphoric. Without growth, we're told, we stagnate. Over the past few years, I have undergone massive change, taking steps to ensure my happiness and become a person whose behaviour more accurately reflects my values. There was a conscious drive towards this, motivated by unhappiness and outside inspiration. Consequently, I am no longer the lonely, anxious boy who couldn't hold a conversation nor eye contact; now I am the young man who still cannot quite hold eye contact, but will tell you a bracing story, make you laugh with absurd humour and offer genuine comfort in times of distress. Change can be invigorating, opening new paths to explore and understand the world and our place within it.

But like a sapling, the sudden growth of infancy eventually declines, and I struggled to continue to fuel the discoveries after cracking through the surface. It felt as though there was nothing new to discover, and instead I trod old ground, reliving struggles again and again rather than growing towards something better. I internalised the pressure of becoming better, kinder, smarter, and blamed myself for the stagnation. Growth had become such an integral part of my narrative that I didn't know who I was if I wasn't becoming someone else. Anything different seemed dangerous. Like drowning.

I have felt recently that there is an obsession in our culture with self-improvement, a need to always be edging ahead in some eternal competition against time, against each other. Perhaps we can blame biology, that our brains are hardwired for the survival of the fittest. Or perhaps it's capitalism, encouraging us to value ourselves based on how the numbers grow in our bank account, on our scales, on our social media feeds.

This is not limited to the superficial. Along with the need to accumulate material value is the need for constant spiritual investment – to be more woke than the day before. It seems vital that we know everything, know the most we possibly can at any time about marginalised

struggles, about politics, history, economics, injustice... All worthwhile pursuits, but exhausting. The price for failure is only fascism and genocide. If we don't get better, we let everyone down.

I feel this pressure keenly, and there is too much responsibility to be in a constant state of growth. As we move towards the margins of society, this pressure only seems to increase, with those who have faced the most difficulty feeling the most responsibility for the change that has to come: the hunger for growth internalised, cancerous and vile. It falls solely on the shoulders of those who require change to fuel it, forcing a choice between self-preservation and the survival of the social group, anything short of perfection framed as a sure route to failure. At least that's how I saw it.

It was winter that offered a solution. I walked one day through the cold air, and, by chance, looked at the sky. I have always been enchanted by the sky in winter, that deep, intense grey with such subtle shades, like a tarp of velvet. I saw the black veins of branches spreading across it, the leafless limbs of the forest reaching up.

Leafless trees! They do what they can to survive the winter. They shed their leaves, dispose of flowers; why can't we do the same? To fail to grow is not the same as to stagnate. I realised there, amongst my arboreal brothers, that there is no need to be in a constant state of improvement, that I don't have to strive for constant perfection. When the going gets tough, when I have to conserve my strength, I can drop my vivid leaves and shrink back, let the change occur beneath my bark and wait out the winter, until the warmth of spring returns. We should all take notes from trees; sometimes survival is enough.

Zero Percent

Robin Silbergleid

The Weather Channel says there is a zero percent chance of rain. On Thursdays the gardener comes to your street, you can hear him mowing the lawn, but not anymore, now that his love has died. I am not being metaphorical. Say there was a woman, say she loved gardens, say she had plans for what to do with the sprawling quince in the front yard. The raggedy oregano. The drooping day lilies. She said one I will send you a bill and you waited and the bill never came. Say her partner catches you by the arm, says heart, says hospital. Days pass; it rains, it doesn't rain. You write him a note, enclose a check, say you fear things are not better, you look up their address online and find instead her obituary. Scratch the note. Rewrite. Wonder if it's okay to include a check in condolence card. Decide that if you don't do it now, it will eat at you and then he will have to come after you for the money and then you'll have to talk about how she died. There is no rain, and the gardener isn't coming anymore and yes, as the guest book says, she was a lovely woman. The words "grass be gone" are still on your to do list like a vanishing spell out of Harry Potter, not something you buy at the store. Be gone, be gone. Come back.

Crepuscular

Robin Silbergleid

Late summer, and the big boys circled Walker Drive with their bikes, cutting through the parking lot and down to the Kravas' yard, the one on the corner with the crab apple tree. The boys picked the apples, hurled them at each other as they whizzed past, as the sky darkened and all the mothers began to call us in. I stood in our yard watching, plucking lilac blossoms to use as Barbie's wedding bouquet. I did not yet know the word feminism. I stood, watching, in wonder. I did not fetch my bike from the garage.

Marginalia: *A Manual Textbook of Practical Housekeeping*

Robin Silbergleid

I. How many housewives have counted the motions necessary and unnecessary and kept account of the time in making a bed or cleaning a bathtub?

How many have paused, scrub brush in hand, to look out the window?

To dream of time unaccounted for, a moment, perhaps, when the children napped, to put the brush down?

How many steps are necessary to close the nursery door?

To slip off a dress, to return to the (still) unmade bed? Of her sisters in housewifery, she wonders

Have they ever taken account, in making a bed of whether such steps might in fact be unnecessary or better spent, in going from the bed to the chair where the clothes are airing?

Or then how many might be necessary to put on the aired clothes, to walk again out the front door?

How many unnecessary motions are used in the process of making? And how many motions are necessary to unmake her kind?

She counts steps down the flagstone path.

II. Schedule without help.

The housewife without employed HELP has duties so varied that they are difficult to REDUCE to an exact program or schedule. The exact DUTIES AND the amount of time each will require will VARY according to such CONDITIONS as: life in the city or in country; house or apartment living; size of family and ages of children; income available; etc. The following schedule is an estimate indicating the kinds of duties and the approximate amount OF time NECESSARY for each in a household where the MOTHER does all the WORK.

II. Discuss ways in which home management and office management may be alike.

Onion sliced thin into rings

stirred in oil, sizzle of garlic and

lemon at the bottom of a pot.

A small thing like this, on a winter day

quiet with no one home. Just me

in my old gray sweater, reading

at the kitchen table

slowly turning the page, perhaps
pausing to make a note in the margin.

All italicized phrases are drawn from L.R. Balderston's *Lippincott's Home Manuals: Housewifery: A Manual and Text book of Practical Housekeeping*, 1919.

A Meteor Shower (& Other Signs of the End)

Jenna Sumpter

Everyone in town has gone out to watch the stars fall down,
and I have gone to bed.

My head flat on the mattress, I hold
a pillow to my head.

The air has been getting
so heavy lately,
one of these empty-handed mornings I might just not
get up.

It doesn't trouble me.
Last night I kissed a boy who loves me,
and the water in my bucket list
sloshed onto my shoes.
Soon there will be scarcely enough to wash my hands in.

But I'll probably leave before then.
Just set my bucket down wherever
and walk light into the next life
with its unnoticed sky.

Palimpsest

Fabrice B. Poussin

Artist of passing time in a lonely realm
he peels layers of an unfathomable bliss
seeking an answer to the ongoing query.

Cutting with a blade thin as his passions
he inserts an inquiring eye through the pages
parting the sheets as he seeks an answer.

But the fibers are accomplices to their kin
they hide treasures beneath their secrets
unseen yet known to be in this magical land.

Painter of those dimensions he wishes to reveal
to the innocent who lives on the edge of safety
he may be caught in an eternal search into a void.

Another world hovers above a wasted domain
fearing a fall he looks to the heavens in fear
before he descends to the next membrane of imagination.

His task clear he must pursue the journey
swimming among the waves of uncertain morrows
a prisoner of all destinies powerless to a truth.

The Woman and the Girl

Iqbal Hussain

Anjam, Zubeida, Fareeda; Najma, Salma, Sabira.

Fareeda, Sabira, Salma; Anjam, Najma, Zubeida.

Like a long-forgotten rhyme, their names tumble in my head.

The Seven Sisters, they called us, flocking together in the lazy heat of late afternoon once our chores were done. We would meander along the river with arms linked, dupattas fluttering in the breeze, chitter-chattering as noisily as the colourful parrots wheeling overhead – to gossip in the cool of a courtyard or to play panj-geete in the scented shade of orange groves.

Salma, Anjam, Sabira; Najma, Zubeida, Fareeda.

With each new stanza, the years spool back. I am no longer in the dark, smoky kitchen of my Now, but in the sunshine-flooded, dusty alleyways of my Then. The hiss of the hob has been replaced by the chirping of crickets. In place of the earthy scent of the dhal on the stovetop, the air is full of woodsmoke and the peaty smell of dried cowpats burning in neighbouring yards. The cine-camera in my mind races over the streets until it stops and swoops down amidst a jumble of shacks and shops.

“Do you think he’ll be there again?” teases Anjam, batting her eyelashes at me. We are in the bazaar, my kameez sticking clammily to the small of my back and every step throwing up a puff of dust. She has to shout over the banging of the metal merchants and the competing calls of the tea hawkers and samosa sellers. A cart carrying a cargo of sugar cane lumbers past and we pull up in a clatter of glass bangles to avoid the oxen’s horns.

Anjam repeats her question, but I pretend not to hear. I try on some mock-gold necklaces, marvelling at their weight. We skip between the stalls, cooing over sunset-coloured Kashmiri shawls, nibbling at spicy kebabs fresh from the tandoor and dabbing on perfume with mysterious foreign names such as Rochas Femme and Hermes Caleche.

As we turn a corner, there he is: the boy with the green eyes. His handsome Pathan features – straight nose, full eyebrows, strong cheekbones – peer out from behind conical towers of cumin, cayenne, turmeric and paprika, his pale skin stark against the vivid reds and yellows. My heart beats like a dhol. All thoughts of what I was buying leave my head. Not even the threat of Ammi taking her chappal to me if I come back with sonf rather than hing can shake me out of my daydream. I imagine caressing his tousled hair, which is the colour of the cloves and cassia bark heaped in terracotta bowls before him.

Nudged by the others, I stumble towards the stall. As I grasp the bamboo pole holding up the roof, he leaps to his feet. Brushing a curl from his forehead, he smooths down his kameez and beams at me. I avert my gaze and step back. Zubeida pushes me forward. I swallow and am aware of the dust in my throat.

He stares at me, his lips parted, long lashes not blinking, as though he, too, has forgotten how to speak. Zubeida digs me in the kidneys and I stutter out my order. He comes to life, suddenly animated, his cheeks dotted red. Scooping various powders, seeds and herbs into paper bags, shifting small rusty weights around until the pan scales balance, he chastises himself for spilling as much on to the counter as he does into the bags.

I tremble as I count the paisas and rupees into his hand. I long to trace the deeply etched lines on his palm. I force myself to focus and notice the tips of his fingers are stained yellow and red. He asks if I want anything else. I shake my head, blushing. I look away from his emerald eyes, worried he might read my thoughts.

As I pack my basket and make to go, he calls me back and reaches out. Thinking I've missed a bag, I stretch out my hand and he drops something into it, before laying his own hand on top. An electric current runs through me. I hope he doesn't hear my gasp. Like a pair of magnets we remain in contact; I cannot draw away, even if I wanted to.

He leans forwards and I catch mint on his breath. "Come back soon, oh fair one," he whispers, in a sing-song Urdu, each Pashto-inflected word exotic compared to the rustic Punjabi with which I am familiar. "We could go to the baagh? Just you and me?"

Before I can wonder which park he means, his father appears from the curtained area at the rear. The boy pulls away, sinking down on his rope-knotted stool. There's no time to see what he has gifted me, as I am shoved aside by a woman with a towering beehive demanding the best price on a pound of pickling spices.

As the girls giggle and rescue me, I open my hand, revealing a nutmeg seed, still in its delicate mace jacket. I look over my shoulder and his gaze tracks me through the powdered stacks, his irises the colour of new season cardamoms. Then he is hidden from view behind a creaking cart laden with more sugar cane.

Away from the shelter of the stall's canopy, a sudden gust assaults us: a dancing devil carrying grit in its path. Eyes shut, we hook arms, feeling our way through the narrow passageway. My fingertips trail over the flapping cloth, bamboo poles and crumbling stone that make up the walls of the bazaar. Cockerels flap and fight in their wicker cages, throwing up dirt that makes us sneeze. From the forge, an explosion of metal on metal, laughter, coarse language, all fanned by the smoke and heat from a blazing fire. Nearby, a radio blares out ghazals, sung rather than spoken. My heart trembles at the romantic words that blow in and out of earshot. Falling into the next alleyway, we find ourselves out of the wind. We continue our conversation from where we had left off.

"Did you see him looking at you?" says Anjam, tugging on my arm.

"Who?" says Najma, distracted by a red-and-black butterfly dancing in front of her before it settles on the rough bricks. "Oh, isn't it pretty?"

"The way he put his hand on yours!" squeals Zubeida.

"I'm sure he'd like to put it somewhere else," says Fareeda, running her fingers down her midriff, making the others squeal and titter while covering their mouths with their dupattas.

"What did he say to you?" says Sabira, biting into the sugar cane she holds before her like a staff. She chews for a few seconds before spitting out the mashed fibres. "Come on, you can whisper it to me. We don't need to tell them."

"Oy-oy-oy!" comes their response. "No secrets between friends!"

I keep my lips shut and say nothing. Some things are not meant to be shared.

"She is going red!" says Salma. "And it is not from the blusher she tried on."

"Please, please, please, just tell me - what did he say?" pleads Sabira, offering the sugar cane to me.

"Did he ask to meet you?" says Zubeida.

“Not only meet, but kissie-kissie and touchie-touchie, too!” says Fareeda, hugging herself and wriggling suggestively.

As they titter and squeal, I smile to myself. Seeing him makes the monotony of the days more bearable. In the coming week, I will replay the encounter hundreds of times in my mind. With the heat still strong despite the late hour, I drape my dupatta on my head, trying to form a cowl with the flimsy fabric. We all have moon-shaped patches under our arms and our hair is slick on our heads.

“I’m too hot, I can’t walk another step,” declares Najma, dropping by the wayside and fanning herself with her chappal. Fareeda tut-tuts at her and tries to pull her up, but Najma makes herself go limp. Drivers toot and whistle as they pass, slowing down and offering us a lift if we’ll “play” with them. Fareeda picks up Najma’s chappal and flings it at them.

Combining our meagre funds, we hail a rickshaw. It is like stepping into an oven. We stick unpleasantly to the plastic seats, our lungs protesting against the heated air. Not until the vehicle gets going, and cooler air drives in through the glassless windows, do we stop complaining. Even with the seven of us squashed in like guavas in a tin, sitting on each other’s laps, trying not to combust, nothing can keep the smile from my face.

We weave in and out of the traffic. Petrol fumes mingle with the woody sandalwood of the agarbatti scenting the cab. A cow runs into the road and we swerve sharply. There is much banging into the seats in front. Fareeda remonstrates with the driver. Sabira chokes on the strip of cane in her mouth. The shouting and coughing and spluttering, along with the phut-phut-phut of the engine and the non-stop blaring of horns, drowns out further conversation.

I lean my head on Najma’s shoulder and close my eyes, soothed by the sweet scent of coconut oil in her hair. Words from the ghazals I had heard on the transistor radio in the bazaar drift back to me.

“... those days that glowed with the reflection of the Beloved’s face,
that hour of meeting, that would bloom like a flower ...”

The cine-camera takes off once more, hurtling through time and space, returning over the oceans until it passes over green fields, towns and cities, stopping when it finds the familiar rows of grey slate roofs and smoking chimneys. It pans down the kidney bean-red bricks and enters the sash window through the cobweb-coloured net curtain.

I am once more among the lopsided Formica units. Pressed into the flour-strewn worktop, my kameez rimmed white from the edge, I knead the dough for the day’s chapattis. Instead of the hard dirt of the village, my sandalled feet are on sticky linoleum floor, with bare patches from hundreds – no, thousands – of tiny journeys between the counter, the sink and the stove with its foil-wrapped hob rings and grill and oven that remain unused.

Little did I know back then, when I was riding home in the rickshaw, that my trysts with the boy with the green eyes were on borrowed time. My future would arrive a month later, casting a dark shadow in the adobe rooms of my childhood. A shadow of a man more than twice my age, towering over me.

Within days, I would be married to him and spirited away far from everything I had known and loved. The girl was left behind, forever fourteen, on that now foreign shore and I awoke in a cold, alien land stripped of colour, smells and words, born anew as a woman and a mother.

I roll out the first chapatti, the one-handed rolling pin rapidly shaping the dough into a perfect round. I slap it on to the tava, sending plumes of flour into the air. As the chapattis pile up in the rattan chander, the smoke in the kitchen builds, turning me into a ghost.

I hum a melody: the ghazal I heard all those years ago. I finger the nutmeg seed threaded around my neck, its mace covering long broken off. I have never been home since I left – the betrayal was too much to bear – but how far I have travelled in my lifetime.

“Mum, can I help? Can I take anything through?”

Tahir: my firstborn, his hand on my shoulder.

I turn and kiss him on the forehead. “My darling boy. My chandh ka tukra. How much do I love you?”

He laughs at me comparing him to a piece of the moon and pretends to fend off further attention. His eyes crinkle in amusement: striking green eyes that will always remind me of the girl I once was.

Tomatoes

Katherine Shirley

We pinched and planted
Stems into water
Seeds into earth
Hoping to see
Twin leaves break the surface
A hairy root unfurl
Like a newborn
Eyes still closed
Reaching blindly
For the source
Of its nourishment
We knew triumph
Only when that most
Heavenly scent
Reached our nostrils
Clean and fresh
Then the battle began
Picking off blackfly
One-by-one
Crushing eggshells
To deter snails
Potting on leggy seedlings
In recycled jars
Securing old cartons
On wonky windowsills
With half a brick
Or a sliver of wood
For balance
A handful of pebbles
For protection
Against thieving squirrels

Air

Katherine Shirley

I gasped for it sometimes
Head down
Knees braced for balance
Holding tight to
The nearest surface
Trying not to cough
They said it was the
School buses
That made it so hard
To breathe
Told me to swim
But walk, not run
Play indoors
Throw away the
Soft furnishings
Banish the pet
Gave me a series
Of different plastic
Shapes in
Brown and blue
Tested my blood
For allergies
It didn't help
Now older
I try not to panic
When I feel it
My chest tight
As if squeezed
Between steel bands
I reach for the spray
Suck the dust
Deep into tired lungs
That twitch discomfort
At the sudden lack
Of air

Cannot Be Destroyed

Victoria Heartwood

When I was pregnant with our son, my husband and I moved into my childhood home for a time. There, I felt the specter of my ex-boyfriend haunting every recess of the place. In an attempt to tie up the loose ends of my heart before the birth, I made an appointment with a hypnotist to help me move beyond my nostalgia for this carefree relationship I once enjoyed before I truly understood commitment. I longed to untangle the lingering ties of love lost, to resolve what was keeping me locked in a pattern of yearning.

The therapist's voice was low and sibilant, snaking out toward the center of the room as he directed me to slowly climb a stone staircase, find myself on the landing, open the door before me into a library, and search the stacks. I selected a book with the numbers 1545 emblazoned across the cover and opened it.

Suddenly, I sank into the body of a portly Welsh soldier wearing heavy plates of armor over my shoulders and hips. My breath plumed from my helmet into the frosty air. I brandished a dagger of considerable heft as I fought side-by-side with my son. Clanking and scraping filled my ears as the thick muscles in my forearms strained with whirling and plunging my blade at the Scottish foes all around us.

My weapon was struck from my hand to the ground with a sickening thud. I had no choice but to swing my ironclad forearms to block the blows of a dagger clashing against my armor. I heard my coarse beard scratching against the interior of the steely helmet that shifted with each blow to my head, obscuring my sight. In a brief moment of reprieve from the fighting, I realized I had lost track of my son. When I whipped around to find him, the twisted blade of a dagger plunged deep into my belly.

The knife sliced through with ease and I fell backward onto the frozen ground, clutching the protruding handle. I was awash in searing pain, gasping for breath as fear overtook me. By the time my son rushed to me on the frozen battlefield, my breath was nothing but a trickle of air. I watched him crouch by my side as he lowered his head and wept. Then, he stood and turned to walk away. Watching him leave me there was the heaviest pain I had to endure before death.

The concept of reincarnation has always made sense to me. It aligned with my perspective on consciousness: that which is suffused throughout and beyond the physical body, transcending death. Theories abound for these perennial questions of what we are, where we come from, and what our purpose might be. I am intrigued by the belief that consciousness is out there as well as in here at the heart center, pervading everything, and our human bodies are simply the antennae that pick up particular channels, downloading whatever they may be broadcasting from a field of infinite possibilities.

Quantum physics recognizes that everything is made of energy vibrating at different speeds. The stone and the hummingbird are both made of the same spinning vortices of atoms with different energetic fingerprints. Within the molecules are quarks and photons beyond which lies a void: simply nothing. The law of conservation of energy dictates that energy cannot be destroyed; it just changes form. It is inconceivable that a person can fill the world with music one moment and then lay silent the next, the struck cord vibrating more and more slowly until it finds

stasis again. I can fixate on finding the sustained energy, feeling the sustenance of that energy. Where does the life force within go when all that's left behind is the exquisite shell?

One does not have to bear the blessings of a Dalai Lama to experience reincarnation. Take for example, James Leininger who, at four-years-old, came to understand he had been a World War II fighter pilot shot down by the Japanese or poet Barbro Karlen who is convinced she was Anne Frank in a previous life. They both hold specific knowledge that only intimates can contain. And then, there are children born with what appear to be rope burns around their necks; birthmarks like acid thrown in the face; or a ragged splotch on the soft belly and again around the back, resembling a scar where a bullet had torn clear through the torso. There may be an inexplicable early obsession with rock climbing or glass blowing, understanding foreign languages, sitting down at a piano to play a sonata by ear, or nimbly manipulating a delicate paintbrush despite being hampered by the thick and clumsy digits of a toddler. Quantum theorists surmise that all life, past, present, and future, is occurring simultaneously and that our sense of separation due to time is erroneous, because it is a human construct that doesn't even exist.

The therapist directed me to count backwards from ten, arriving to the present moment. When I returned, I was amazed by what had transpired. At home, I searched the internet for battles that took place in Britain around 1545. Shocked, I discovered a photograph of a field covered in light snow showing where the Battle of Ancrum Moor had occurred during the winter of that very year. Welsh soldiers fought alongside the English to cross the Scottish border and breach the lowlands. I was on the losing side of that battle in the War of Rough Wooing.

After that one profound session, a new understanding began to emerge in me of how the thread of love runs taught from past into future, weaving itself throughout many lifetimes. When our son was born, I knew that we had been in each other's lives before. Through this lens, the yearning to clip the ties to my ex-boyfriend fell away as that relationship took on new meaning as the completion of another cycle of spiritual growth that can only be achieved through loving another.

When Life Gives You Lemons, Make - Dish Soap

Hibah Shabkhez

A thin stream of green swells to an ocean
Leaching off debris from a stony shore

‘Crest for crest, am I less bountiful
Than blue-green seas under the moon’s eye?’

Inside, where motors spin and thrum
A fading dribble of green
Stakes its claim to beauty in the sheen
Of cackling loam,
And wins

‘Leaf for Leaf, am I less beautiful
Than green swathes under a country sky?’

Outside, where motors roar and hum
A fagged sliver of green
Stakes its claim to beauty in the sheen
Of swirling foam,
And wins

The shore groans and gleams in the failing sun
The storm ebbs. The stone-world has bled once more.

Evensong Everlasting

Hibah Shabkhez

I lost a word this morning, then found five
 [Daisy, Dishes, Diving, Darkness and Doubt];
But none as sharp, though they grew into live
Monsters whispering truths under the bed:
 ‘All flesh will be grass. The best-loved one dies:
The centre-piece is plucked from the spray’s head.
 Your dancing leaf-shadows are jesting lies,

Bare ink-squiggles by old trembling hands sketched,
 Popped on a screen and wriggled about’.
Tormented evensongs unto morning stretched,
In fleeing shadows they hunt my lost word,
 Through the scents of ginger, salt, cinnamon
Rising from the stone-soup simmering heard
 In the wood-darkness where it was begun

By the gentle giants of evensong glade
 Whose chuckle the hills echo in a shout
Everlasting, for my missing-word blade

Glass Veil

Bobbi Sinha-Morey

In the keyhole of the dollhouse
I saw my life start all over again;
a blonde me at the window and
so pretty, the opposite of what
I used to be, a dream for a minute
I thought was real inside a replica
of my childhood house so sensitively
crafted by an artisan's hand; the
credenza in the hallway, the blue
painted Venetian vase, the deck
where you could see for miles
around that had been put in. When
I was so young, my heart small
as a walnut shell, the only music
I heard lived in the mouth of a bird,
in time stolen away by my mean
mother who in my dreams wore
a glass veil. Nights I would hide
from her and just to block her out
I'd pull the shade down inside my
mind, and by day I'd steal away
to dwell in the blue twilight, let
each day breathe all around me.
The portal of my future had rolled
in on a fog of sleeplessness and
I'd clung to every scrap of goodness:
the rain's cold blade in the middle
of autumn, a blue winged butterfly
floating between my hands like
a blossom.

The Filed

Paweł Markiewicz

I am willing to archive the world lonely
or in solitude withal a fish,
To archive the finny-plaice
means extract its eternal fins.
This is an infinite dreaming shrouded in repository
about Blue written somewhere in the
chasms of soul.
Abide!, because cases of elves
filed in the land of
eternal frosts need you
without the winter like me.
Is the lyrical I a carmine cat
that feels the world
full of after glow of flames.
Mayhap I become lost
in the archive of heart,
finding the primeval crystal,
the harp of our ontology – trilogy,
which is
spatiotemporal
meek-precious.
There are in the archive
eternal wings,
which love the weird
of the cherub
of hope.

Cage &/or Bird

Yuan Changming

I am a cage, in search of a bird. -- Kafka

Wherever my mind flies, it's still
Confined tightly
To this world, this very cage of
Sensory & imaginative cells

In other words, I is the cage, while the whole
Universe am a bird

East Idioms Reinterpreted

Yuan Changming

1/ yanerdaoling [掩耳盗铃]

To prevent the sound from being heard
As he tries to steal the only bell in the village
The thief stops his own ears with thick cotton
Believing that no one would find him out

2/ saiwengshima [塞翁失马]

On a snowy evening a poor old frontier tribesman
Lost his horse, the only means of living he had
While everybody still felt sorry for him a week later
The horse returned home with another one wild

3/ handanxuebu [邯郸学步]

In their fondest hope to walk as gracefully as handsomely as the residents of Handan
People swarm in from every part of the country to learn and practice the 'capital steps'
But many have failed to learn the new steps while others forgot their old ways
So they all have to crawl back on their fours to where they originally came from

4/ yegonghaolong [叶公好龙]

Instead of God, Money, Computer, Sex or Art, Mr Ye believes in Dragon only
He loves the legendary animal so much so that he paints it on every surface he can find
Deeply moved by his devoted passion, a real dragon comes down to visit him
But no sooner has he seen its face than he jumps to flee, with his pants all wet with fright

Metamorphosis Musings

Yuan Changming

There's no doubt, I would paint my skin
Into a colorless color, & I would dye my hair
Wear two blue contacts, & I would even
Go for plastic surgery, but if I really do
I assure you, I will not remove my native village
Accent while speaking this foreign tongue (I began
To imitate like a frog at age nineteen); nor will I
Completely internalize the English syntax &
Aristotelian logic. No, I assure you that I'll not give up
Watching movies or TV series, reading books
Listening to songs, each in Chinese though I hate them
For being too low & vulgar. I was born to eat dumplings
Doufu, & thus fated to always prefer to speak Mandarin
Though I write in English. I assure you that even if I am
Newly baptized in the currents of science, democracy &
Human rights, I will keep in line with my father's
Haplogroup just as my sons do. No matter how
We identify ourselves or are identified by others, this is
What I assure you: I will never convert my proto selfhood
Into white Dataism, no, not
In the yellowish muscle of my heart

Heart Rooted: First Lesson in Chinese Characters

Yuan Changming

忠 /zhong/ loyalty remains

As long as the heart is at the centre

耻 /chi/ shame is the feel you get

When your ear conflicts with your heart

忘 /wang/: forgetting happens

When there's death on heart

忍 /ren/: to tolerate is to bear a knife

Right above your heart

愁 /chou/: worry occurs when autumn

Sits high on your heart

怒 /nu/ anger results from slavery

Rising above the heart

意 /yi/: meaning is defined as

A sound over the heart

念 /nian/: idea is what today holds

Upon the heart

Fulfillment

Fred Pollack

The Singularity happens. Supergeeks
who devised it merge in the Overmind
with the .001%,
who paid. The latter find
them boring, few social graces,
but tractable enough; can marry
my daughter. In a world that
feels perfectly material, they
all vie with each other
about how many places they can build
on the shores of literally endless seas,
parties to throw, and what to drive
unless they've ordered wings.
Many recondite closets empty. Guys
can be dragons, girls, Manson; almost
everyone goes gorgeous, though
a few perversely keep their wrinkles. So
a very good time is had by the algorithms
of all. Meanwhile the infrastructure
of the great Mind to which
the uninvited pray,
self-repairing, subtle, servile,
has risen to the orbit of the moon
and becomes the moon. Its spirits have
those below where they want us:
dead, but with a capacity for pain.

Porpoises

Cameron Haramia

I don't know if I taught you anything
about masculinity I already forgot.
I don't know if I forgot

to be a man
or if it was on purpose, my momentum
of porpoise. I'm sure now that you are

a teenager, you would no longer swim
to me like you did with purpose,
that first day in the Kroc pool,

first time touching water,
you touched your hands to your hands,
made a triangle &

swam your hands to my hands,
and for one moment I forgot
masculinity, or rather remembered it

not, remembered how porpoises
have their own secrets to communicate,
& maybe we didn't

communicate with words as much
as I would have wanted,
but I know what you communicated

that first day in the pool:
I was worth swimming to—worth forgetting
what the world tells us to do with hands—

two young men putting two & two together.

Harvest

Cameron Haramia

What will become of my strawberries not strawberries?
What will the owl say of the circles on my arm?

Who will dream with me another midnight
full of frankincense & watermelon seeds?

Who will see my circles & see giants,
see balloons lacking a small birth of breath

to bring beauty to my knuckles? Who will
see my knuckles & see hard worker?

See you later? Who will see
my strawberries in my arms & think tasty,

think wine under purple vines in summer time?
Who will see the circles under my eyes

& yield me a pillow of squishy watermelon seeds?
Who will see the owl & see how much I love it?

Who will see me love the owl another midnight
see my seeds I planted in the garden of tomorrow

& claim my knuckles as their garden of today,
next week of circles seeding daylight & nighttime

under a vine
of planted dreams.

Yes Country for All Men

Cameron Haramia

In my country of men
all our eyes hold a sun
—flower of summer. A
conspicuous comet.

In my country of men
we grin optimistically
as we pass each other
on the street. No need

to intimidate, to search
for a spot to stick a javelin.
In my country of men we all
giggle gregariously, we hug

for six seconds without fidgets,
in my country we all look
for spotlights each other's eyes
shine on daisies or moons, we

walk past each other on sky
beams or summer stairs,
we give up the handshake altogether:
no boy practicing squeezing

a doorknob to prove he too has
what it takes to orbit,
for in my country, there are enough
flowers for each son, there are

enough daisies for each mouth,
there are enough embraces
to make the times I've been
scowled at evaporate

like a comet too close
to a star, but in my country
there are no orbits—
only amiable amoeba.

When Here is Nowhere

John Grey

It's not just that the phone doesn't ring
or your e-mail inbox is permanently empty.
But people don't even acknowledge your presence -
not on the street, not in the store, not anywhere.
In fact, you could have sworn the lady
staggering along the sidewalk with
three brown bags of heavy groceries
passed right through you.
And that was after your offer to help.
But your words didn't register.
And nor did your body.
You try to hail a taxi but the cabbie ignores you.
The bus door slams in your face.
No doctor will see you. No doctor can see you.
Even the mirror has better things to do
than reflect your image.
You're beginning to think that you don't have one.
Or anything else for that matter.
You'd write yourself off as not even existing
if it weren't for the fact that others' unawareness
makes you that much more aware.
Finally, you stand in the middle of the road,
scream out, "It's me! I'm here!"
You get absolutely no response.
Those are the wrong words, apparently.

Birdman

John Grey

The pewee pee-ah-wees.
The flycatcher che-becks.
The purple marten chew chews.
The titmouse had nothing to say
but peter-peter-peter.

Sounds brings bird as much to mind
as sight does.
More so.
I'd rather a wren be no more
than a harsh jeer.
Or a blackbird conk-a-ree
from deep in the marshes.

I walk the forest trail,
seeing with my ears.
The grosbeak whistles tee-wee-tee.
That's all it takes to be a grosbeak.
The oriole tee-dit-its from treetops.
Why look up?
He's already as black and orange
as he needs to be.

I hear feathers and beaks,
claws and wings,
mating and child-minding,
roosting and feeding.

For every bird I spy in flight,
there's a hundred tell me
why they do it.

“How Can a Pentatonic Scale Sound So Peaceful and Empty?”

[question asked by Matthew Wolfe]

Ace Bogess

Five is a hollow body.
In dark, you slide
fingertips along the neck,
fretting terrible beauty.

Five is one pallbearer short,
heaviness greater
when you march across the mud.

Five points in the pentacle,
which means nothing,
symbolizes music
favored in rebellious youth.

Don't you love simple leads
that fill up three-chord songs
as if honestly grieving,
as if desire & rage & wounding?

You never miss two missing tones,
but hear their absence
as though the notes
of nights you spent alone.

Liquid Child

Lynn Magill

Farmers depend on the rain
And so I became a liquid child
Comforted by the blanketing storm
And rocked by Mother ocean
Frozen diamond jewels in my crown
To light the winter way

I found that
Hot springs heal
As much as ice on the mountaintops
And spray from the bow of a ferry

Snow angels are petroglyphs
We send with the spring thaw
To relay messages to the mermaids

For the ice Queen and the siren
Are sisters
Storing information
In the cloud

We wear rocks smooth
And move earth

The ocean is made
Of infinite snowballs

Is winter not simply
A baptism
Like the tides?

Personal Doctrine

Joe Sonnenblick

A tongue-tied clam up,
Low roar from the back of my throat
A goblin is home, here and now
Visiting myself in a catatonic state
Belie...As I look through you
I'm the last of the black hat
Backhanded jibes at dinner
Forelornly, behaved well in front of people,
A demon otherwise.
I'm the son of two people who tried,
A seed in the concrete grows boots which will crush your larynx
Before grabbing the jug of Carlo Rossi Chablis.
Give thanks always,
Keep a razor in your cheek
Just in case.

Spring Forward

Yash Seyedbagheri

I throw open doors and spring time forward the day before. I insist on changing neighbors' clocks, those that aren't electronic displays.

An hour less of sleep. Day is closer.

At night, last gasps and sisterly whispers dart about, card delinquency snarling, laughter rising from distant, yet all-too-close parties. I thrash and turn, change positions, waiting for morning to immerse myself in clickety-clack footsteps, bodies, laughter. People still connected by hugs and knowing glances.

I can laugh, move closer, snatch stale feet, warm coffee, perfume.

Of course, I'm an hour closer to new, unseen ghosts.

I can't turn them back.

Landlocked

Lorelei Bacht

Landlocked. Our lives going nowhere.
All around us: ripples of burnt hills,
Valley after similar valleys - the name
Changes. Dead riverbeds, hopes of an age
Past, dry silt like a mouthful of glass.

Charred tree trunks offer no respite
From the vastness of the sky, turned
White in the perpetual noon of these
Climes. No before. No behind. No sound
But the occasional fall of a brittle leaf.

The flatness of this landscape defeats
Timelines, directions. Dusty crests, broken
Teeth, skeletons exposed and blanched.
Our intentions lost along the way, we sit
And wait. For inspiration. For the rain.

Soil: To Be Reborn

Lorelei Bacht

Soil: to be reborn.

The red of me gone
Skeleton of hope,
Home made, unmade,
Remade in greens -
The light we find.

Litter of leaves.

Stone disbanded:
Labor of the ants -
No time for grief.
Intentionality
Not mine, not ours.

Soil: to be reborn
In the loss of you.

didn't swim hard enough for shore after all

Jerome Berglund

he had a pig inscribed onto one of his feet
rooster painstakingly etched 'pon the other
were supposed to've kept him 'bove waters deep
so as not to upset his poor mother

the prescriptions long passed down from sailing men
who trod decks 'neath those old blackened banners
the salts swore he shan't drown, though fool still did then
if not in the conventional manner?

Thinking About Lot's Lot

Jerome Berglund

we reenact it
tossing salt over shoulders
after burials

A Haiku - Northern Tumbleweed

Jerome Berglund

single skittering
leaf in January a
northern tumbleweed

The Point of No Return

Brittney Uecker

I stand at my window, staring out onto the street below. There is a light on the corner that bathes the street in a sickly yellow glow so that the world below it looks jaundiced. It's 3:17AM on a Tuesday night, or maybe it's Wednesday morning. This is always a conundrum with insomnia, the differentiation of days. Without a marked delineation between the end of one day and the start of the next, I live in a constant state of liminality. Clocks and calendars are a cruel joke. Time goes in waves or ripples, some type of slow watery movement, but I can hardly say that it moves forward.

Sometimes I wonder if I am actually asleep, if this feeling of restlessness is itself a bad dream. The thought terrifies me — that the thing I crave so desperately, that so ruthlessly alludes me, is really what is causing me pain. I make myself sick trying to wrap my head around it.

I sip at a beer, something cheap and shitty leftover in the fridge from the last time I had Arica over. That was nearly three weeks ago, but I haven't stopped thinking about it since — her easy smile, red mouth wrapping around the bottle, the velvety white skin of her neck fluttering as she swallowed, her words still floating through the air.

“Have you ever wondered if you're just a vampire?”

Arica and I used to date, back in college when platony was a mythical impossibility and drunkenness colored every interaction. But in the intervening years our blip of romance faded, and now she just came over every once in a while to drink and shoot the shit. We fucked sometimes, but there was an unspoken understanding that that was all it was. She was beautiful and weird and dark and so far out of my league that I didn't dare look a gift horse in the soft, supple mouth.

I'd mentioned the insomnia to her before — anything that dominated that much of my mental capacity was unlikely to escape casual conversation — but it was never anything she took seriously. “Drink more water.” “Stop eating meat.” “Journal about it,” she would advise, the same generic shit that the doctor said but that I knew wouldn't help. “You're not getting laid enough,” she suggested once but didn't offer to assist with, at least not that night.

“I bet that's it. I bet your a fucking vampire.”

She was a half-dozen beers deep and must have meant it as a joke.

But something caught in my chest when she said it. A whoosh of recognition, like someone in a crowd calling my name, that made it sound not completely crazy.

“Yeah, okay,” I replied, glossing it over with matching sarcasm. “I'm definitely a vampire.”

Arica perched on the edge of the sofa, pressing her beer bottle between her knees and throwing out her hands. “No, seriously. Think about it — you're what, thirty-two? And you don't look a day over seventeen. It's like you are aging in reverse. It's bullshit.”

I blushed, trying not to eye her crow's feet that had inevitably grown deeper over the last few years.

"That's just good genes though."

"Yeah, but you're adopted, right? You don't even know your bio parents. They could totally be vampires."

There was a callousness to her insensitivity, but eyeing the staggering number of empty beers on the coffee table, I let it slide. I couldn't remember from all the stories I'd read how that worked — did vampire babies come from vampire parents? Couldn't vampires turn their victims into vampires, the whole 'I want to suck your blood' thing?

"You burn to a fucking crisp in the sun," she continued. "Remember that trip we took to Lake Tahoe this summer? You were red as a lobster for months."

I swallowed down my mounting anxiety with more beer, recalling the blistering burns that seeped for weeks.

"I'm a vampire because I got a sunburn? That's rich."

"You hate garlic."

"So?"

"Garlic is vampire repellent."

"Arica, you are ridiculous."

"Look!" she said enthusiastically, pointing at the wall behind me. "You don't have a shadow. That's some definite vampire shit."

My scalp prickled, but I refused to turn around and look. "The lighting in here is terrible —."

"And," she interrupted, her voice boisterous and drunk. "You don't sleep. Like, ever. It's really the most logical explanation, if you ask me."

I didn't want to admit it at that moment, the possibility in what she was saying. The doctors and the old wives' tales and the internet were all coming up empty-handed — maybe this was the way to go. I didn't want to admit that this was the level of desperation and fear to which I had descended. I didn't want to accept how long it had actually been since I'd slept, a length of time which would be lethal to a human. I didn't want to feel any more insane than I already felt, but this kind of made sense.

Arica shrugged and threw back another swig. The bottle smacked like a kiss as she pulled it from her lips.

"Well," she murmured. "There's only one way to find out."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

She smiled mischievously, a conspiratorial vortex in her eyes. I shivered.

"You've gotta drink some blood."

My stomach lurched, like it was being pulled out through my groin. The Thai takeout that I had eaten earlier was in grave danger of being vomited all over the carpet.

It wasn't that I was squeamish about blood. It was the sickening level of déjà vu that overtook me, like a key finally sliding into a lock, a critical puzzle piece finally completing the picture.

I had just downed several beers but suddenly felt insatiably thirsty, my tongue a thick glob in my mouth. As the word 'blood' echoed in my eardrums, the desire intensified. I had

never been so wanting in my life, hungry and horny and homicidal all at once, raging with a need that was more than psychological, more than biology. It felt supernatural, a full-body possession.

I gave her some half-assed excuse about having to work early the next day and rushed her out of the apartment. She probably thought I was being a drunk asshole, but that was the least of my worries. I needed her out. I needed to think.

That night I scoured the internet, the sunrise coming up over my shoulder as my eyes went dry endlessly scrolling. My search terms started out reluctant and neutral — “vampire traits”, “does insomnia cause cravings”, “garlic allergy” — but became more brazen and desperate the longer it went on. By the next afternoon, I hadn’t moved in hours and was searching for “can i drink human blood” and “how to know if im a vampire”.

Then I started bingeing movies — Blade, The Lost Boys, Nosferatu, fucking Twilight — but couldn’t make it more than a few scenes before I had to shut them off, paralyzed by terror, dread, overwhelming shame. Any comparison to a glittered Robert Pattinson atrociously hiding his accent would normally send me into a fit of laughter, but this was next level shit.

This can’t be, can it? I thought as I eyed the raw steak in the fridge, thick and wet and bleeding, and licked my lips. There is no fucking way, I tell myself as I stand over the sink eating the steak with my bare hands, chewing the raw meat and letting the blood trail down my chin and drip into the drain.

Vampires aren’t real.

Then there was the memory I kept pushing out of my mind, the one I was in such vehement denial of that my mind wouldn’t even let me entertain the idea, rejecting it with a visceral fervor, an evolutionary self-preservation. I didn’t want to think about it, but it was there, festering like an infected wound.

The lack of memory would be the correct way to put it, I supposed.

It was last winter, a few months back. The weather was colder, the mood more melancholy. I had just finished my shift at the doggy daycare — another thankless, chaotic day of poo-scooping and kibble-doling and supervising asinine activities such as doggy tug-of-war and the puppy obstacle course. I was exhausted, frustrated, and smelled like literal dog shit. I just needed a beer.

I hadn’t intended to stay long — just one beer while I sat at the bar scrolling through my phone. I wouldn’t have even noticed the guy if it wasn’t for his stench.

He was suave, traditionally handsome in a way I could appreciate, if not a bit overdressed for an empty dive bar at 6PM. But when he made his way from his seat by the front window to where I was seated, the smell was overwhelming — coppery and acerbic, like hot, wet, metal. It was a smell that comandered my other senses, manifesting in my mouth and on my skin the way dog shit does. I downed my beer, trying to bury my nose in the scent of IPA.

The bartender wasn’t paying attention, so the guy just stood there, unnecessarily close. I could feel his eyes on me. There was something carnal to his gaze, something penetrative. There was desire and hot breath and hunger in the way he watched me, something that made me fearful enough to not look in his direction.

“Two whiskeys, please,” he said to the bartender, his words slippery. When the glasses were set in front of him, he slid one my way.

I waved my hand dismissively.

“Nah, man, you don’t have to do that.”

The intensity of his eye contact made my stomach twist like a rag being wrung out. This guy either wanted to fuck me or wanted to kill me. He put an ice-cold hand on my arm, pressing through my coat with fingertips that felt like icicles.

“Please. It is my pleasure.”

He had some sort of accent that I couldn’t place, maybe Eastern European. His words were sharp and resonant. Far from friendly, but I wasn’t sure in which direction.

Maybe it was my lack of energy or the fact that this guy was creeping me the fuck out, but I didn’t put up the fight I should have.

“Fine, whatever.”

I threw the shot back and slid the glass across the bar.

That was the last thing I remember.

I woke up the next morning in the stairwell of my apartment building, feeling like I’d been hit by a truck. My eyes were sticky when I blinked them open, my head pounding as waves of nausea washed over me. My limbs were noodles as I tried to make my way up the stairs to my apartment. Between my shaky hands and slick, clammy fingers, I could barely work my key into the lock. I collapsed onto the sofa into an unsettling stupor of confusion for the rest of the day.

What the fuck happened to me? I wondered. I didn’t think I’d drank that much, just a beer and that shot from the weird European guy. Was this his fault? Did he slip something into my drink? I thought. Every muscle in my body ached, completely depleted, and when I rubbed my sore neck, my fingers came away streaked with blood.

I examined the injury in the bathroom mirror — two puncture wounds, blood now smeared like lipstick around them. The area around the holes was bruised, almost flaccid. Had I been so wasted that you stumbled into something? Was this some kind of insane hickey? Jesus.

That night I tossed and turned, as was usually the case following a gnarly hangover. I binged some drug cartel show on Netflix, scrolled to the end of cyberspace on my phone, and waited out the sunlight, having given up on the thought of sleep. I’ll catch up tomorrow, I told myself. No big deal.

I haven’t slept since.

And now I can’t stop thinking about it, palpating the scars on my neck, two tiny raised nodules. I am starving but there is no food that satiates me. I am exhausted, a bone-tiredness that makes me feel like someone has turned the gravity up to eleven. Even the tiny bit of sunlight leaking in beneath my drawn curtains makes my brain throb, makes me want to vomit. My sallow skin is waxy, pale, cold to the touch. My teeth keep popping holes in my bottom lip, which swells and leaks dark blood that lights up my tongue. As the days go on and I don’t sleep and I feel more sick than I’ve ever felt, I wonder where the fuck I could have picked up the virus or the bacteria or the STD that would cause this, would hang on this way for months.

I haven't spoken to Arica since that night on the sofa, the night she said what she said. I haven't left my apartment. I'm surely fired from my shitty job, and next month's impending rent looms. I've been ignoring my texts and calls, and the thought of other people existing in the world outside, living normal lives, sleeping and eating and having shadows, makes my stomach turn. I am coming to my breaking point and nothing else makes sense.

There's only one way to find out.

I text Arica and she comes over immediately. I don't mention it, but she's got to know. Maybe she's been waiting this whole time, just as anxious, but in an eager anticipatory way, not the panicky dread I've been roiling in. Part of me wants that.

"Holy shit," she says when she sees me. "Are you okay?" She hands me a beer and we both sit on the couch.

I take a deep breath, take my time. I peel the label off my bottle and try not to look at her pulse gently throbbing in her neck.

"Do you remember when we were talking about —" I pause, struggling to say the word.

She watches me, her eyes wide. "About?"

I'd be sweating if I could.

"I've been thinking about what you were saying. And I think...I think you might be right."

She laughs, nearly choking on her beer.

"The vampire thing?"

My heart plunges with a sickening humiliation.

I shake my head and force a laugh, try to play it off. "Yeah, yeah, it's nothing, nevermind."

She moves closer to me on the couch. Her hand on my leg sends a shockwave through me.

"The vampire thing —" she repeats, this time her voice dropped to something low and seductive.

She leans in further, her dirty blonde hair falling onto my shoulders. I press my teeth into my lip, savouring the blood that bursts onto my tongue.

She whispers, her breath warm and human in my ear.

"It's kind of sexy."

I lean forward and kiss her. The blood from my mouth smears around her lips but she returns the kiss, deep and heavy. She climbs on top of me and presses my body between her knees, grabbing my hair in her fingers. My head is swimming like I'm high. Everything is like fire.

When we get to my bed and undress, Arica's face drops.

"Oh, babe," she says sadly as she looks at my ravaged body — grey-hued skin, ribs popping out at painful angles. She brings her hands gently to my waist, like she's touching a dead animal, and pulls them away quickly. "And Jesus, you're ice cold."

But I don't even hear her. All my senses are hyper-focused on the churning hunger inside me, the desire, an unstoppable momentum. At this point, all decisions are made. I am at the

mercy of my body, of this fucked-up biology that has taken me over, of these instincts that I never asked for.

The point of no return.

Everything happens in flashes. Arica's skin, flushed and warm and alive. The intensity of her heartbeat, like it's pulsing through her entire body, the flush of it through her veins as she presses herself against me. The memory of a mouth on my neck but not her's, teeth breaking the skin but no pain. A warm wash of blood, stains on the bed sheets. A scream muted by a gurgling throat.

I can't stop. Blood fills my mouth, hot and salty and overwhelmingly satisfying. This is better than any drug, any sex. As I drink her up, and the shame melts away. The confusion rights itself. Everything finally makes sense and I feel alive. I feel complete.

When it is done, I look at her lying there. I wait for her to move, to prove that I hadn't been reckless, but generous. That I hadn't killed, but given life, paid it forward. Had I drank too much, or not enough? Was it naive to think I could do it? Was I selfish to want to bring Arica with me to the other side, into this new life?

I lay down next to her and watch her body, feeling her skin slowly cool. For hours, I wait as rigor mortis takes over, her blood turning cold and stiff on the sheets.

Fuck.

Sometime around dawn, I get out of bed and look out the window. As the bright orange of the sunrise spills over the horizon and prickles my skin, I start to cry. I lick the dried blood off my lips and close the curtains.