

# Yalobusha Review

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Volume 30

Article 1

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Winter 2020

## Full Issue

Journal Editors

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### Recommended Citation

Editors, Journal (2020) "Full Issue," *Yalobusha Review*: Vol. 30 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol30/iss1/1>

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Editors: Full Issue



# YR:30

WINTER 2020

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Untitled

Winner of the 2020 Barry Hannah Prize for Fiction

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Runner-up of the 2020 Barry Hannah Prize for Fiction

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art

[Marissa G. Muller](#) is a writer and iPhone photographer living in L.A. She posts views, vibes, & pics of her dog Otis.

# UNTITLED

Jasmine Settles

On my 25th birthday, I ate like a Queen. Dined like I hadn't before, and obviously, I hadn't, at least not in this capacity. *Cuisine: a style or quality of cooking; cookery.* In my opinion, Cuisine is a historical professor of any culture, land, sea, and colonizer. As a southerner, food makes sense. It makes whole of halves and is a proportionally scaled balancing act, like sweet tea to a salty palate. But this was my 25th, and my palate craved swamp water. As a lower Mason-Dixon resider and Bible Belt Rester, *food is life.* Food is essential to my identity and my ancestor's existence. So we eat and feel while existing. We taste and thrive while manifesting. And we never die because *food is life.*

We arrive six feet below sea level. There I am in the pages I've read, and all the texts are now loud and breathing a bold font that is crawling up my nostrils and down my spine. I rolled down the window to have to wind whisper to me, "about time... we have been waiting." The city, the infrastructure, the space, and the time all seem to stitch into one another, forming this new world made just for me to experience. A new home that I had never gone to but was revisiting. So now, in the land of feast.

It is time we eat.

We sat across from one another, anticipating nothing but the expectancy of easing hunger. When my order proposed itself, nothing could make me happier than I was at that very moment. Not even Jesus delivering it himself could make me salivate any harder. Beautifully plated, it rested in front of me, intimidating my virgined taste buds. Grinning from the plate, a fried soft-shelled crab floated and reminded me how batter, grease, and high heat make a lot of things....well, everything taste like a *delicacy.*

This crab, well let's call him... "*him*"? Him, only because I am conditioned to think all things are instinctively male, like God. So, let's give this crab a name. I believe there is a significance in naming things that were taken from their home, family, and environment. And in this case, I would assume, it was sacrificed for the sake of this text. At least I hope, sometimes purpose is tricky like that. Yet and still, I hold a

deep sympathy for things that experience trauma in this manner. So, in honor of, I will address the fellow formerly known as *him*, as Freshwater Bayou Baby. This Freshwater Bayou Baby was accompanied by a bath of long grain rice, hopefully, picked by well-paid hands. Slave labor is still legal. *Still*. This rice and Freshwater Bayou Baby both sat in a bath of:

- *preheated butter*
- *sweetly browned rue*
- *sautéd bouquet of the holy trinity*
- *drenched in shrimp stalk*
- *stirred with the power of steamboat paddles*
- *simmered with the added remains of other Bayou Babies*

All of this was blended with the original recipe of seasonings and spices that are buried in the mandibles of someone's ancestors, possibly mine. Twenty-five years after my mother gave me to the world, my current state of existence is about a foot below sea level. The aromas here notified my senses that they were crossing into Cajun customs, and the feeling of a spiced heated history I had only seen in font and photo was now living. Near the end of my meal, I am filled. Capsaicin attacks my taste buds, but I am in delight, and I am at peace knowing that the foreign battle in my mouth feels like home, and at home, you become reminded of your past life. The menu calls it *Blue Crab Étouffée* for twenty-three dollars. I call it *Priceless, Casa, Maison*.

Its heat over-bared my tongue. I mentally assured myself I was accustomed to this type of heat, but I wasn't. My palate was underdeveloped due to misplacement of home and body. My track record for spicy food topped at Memphis styled Hot, and what's a hotwing to handpicked spices? Even, "Is it that hot? But you love hot foods", from the voice across the table couldn't provide me with assurance enough. It made me think jokingly that maybe the ancestors made it this way to keep massa from wanting the only meal they could make at the time, but massa wouldn't want it, he had already eaten. I chuckled to myself; maybe, you did too reading that. After guzzling the last of my swamp pop, I asked for forgiveness for not being able to finish all of my spiced rue and rice. The ancestors understood.

### *Hot Enough to Melt Sugar*

The walk back to the hotel was more vibrant than the walk there. The moon was out, and that meant people were charged and charging. We slept in *55.67 percent* of the moonlight that night, and my soul had rested in its bones for the first time.

The following day in mid-heat of the summer, I sweated profusely in the middle of a plantation. There I learned that even in my humor, I sometimes assume correctly. The tour guide explained how the enslaved would work in this same type of heat, and how it was *hot enough to melt sugar*. They worked sun-up until sun-down, often leaving food to be the salvation at the end of a horrendous work day. The workers of this land, the hands buried in this dirt still held spices in them, because *food is life*.

Gumbo and Étouffée were meals for those enslaved, pieces of a whole made from scraps. Dinner wasn't brought in their suitcases from their homeland, because, well, slave-ships didn't include a carry on or boarding luggage. They only carried what they had in their bones and braids. Now they were catching the scraps that massa would throw out the back door depending on what he could afford. And decades later, I ate. I loved and appreciated a history of suffering and surviving on scraps because it tasted like I'd known how to cook with sweat and stir with backbones. My history could now be sold back to me as a delicacy, and I devour it as only something delicate should be. With Honor. In 25 years of living, I was still being reintroduced to a people that codified my current existence. I may not have met them or lived their life, but at least I got to eat at their table of sacracy and know what this bondage tasted like.

*Tasted like...*

Fried battered covering crabs' legs and torso. The Mississippi pushed them this way, and I could taste it. The Mississippi had pushed me this way, so I could taste it. The Natchez trail now ran in me. On the way back to the city, we passed through swamps and even saw a gator or Louisiana deer on the side of the road. The vegetation reminded me of this movie that someone dear to my current knowing and understanding of New Orleans and myself, had introduced to me. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, one of the most beloved movies I had ever seen. I thought of Hushpuppy and her father in that storm hoping for the waters to be gracious because leaving their home was no option. They were the swamps. They were the bayou babies, and something wanted to take them from their home, batter them, and fry them into the conformity of modernity. Modernity was pushing them. Levees are always damning to someone. Always. During the creation of New Orleans colonizers did not understand or intend to understand the mobility of the natives, so removing them from the land and from the most abundant resource they had, water, they inevitably forced them into permanency. This permanency removed the people of the swamps and shoved the waters to kill, but Hushpuppy and the dwellers of the swamps made home of it all regardless.



In one of the most memorable scenes, little Hushpuppy finds her strength within herself. She holds a freshwater bayou baby in her hand as her father encourages her to “beast it.” “Beast it!” he yells, “BEAST IT HUSHPUPPY!” Hushpuppy rips several legs off of the crab and sucks the meat and juices from its innards. She then throws the carcass down and stood on top of the table, arms flexed, screaming through the depths of the swamps in her accomplishment. Her surrounded family cheers her on. She had found her strength in her fingers, and life in her hands. She had found food.

### *Feet Need Food Too*

Now back in the city, we walk the streets of French and Spanish labeled cobblestones. The richness of New Orleans battered and covered my legs and torso. The streets have mastered the art of grabbing hold to your skin and sinking into it. I accepted it. The upbeat music conjured streetwalkers’ feet to move, and everything that was there was supposed to be there, for me. Months before knowing that I would be finishing my 24th lap around the sun, miles below sea level, a red book cover called to me in a local bookstore. It was titled *Voodoo Queen*. Voodoo had always been something of different indifference to me. I would tell myself, “I don’t believe in it, but I don’t play with it either, because it can only hurt you if you believe in it.” Which holds some truth but the point was I was lying to myself about not believing in something that I obviously believed in. Voodoo is real. It can hurt you, and it can also heal you. In the story, Marie Laveau was the Queen, The High Priestess of the land. I searched for her through those streets, in people, in buildings, on signs but I only saw pages of books I had read. Eventually, I realized she was not to be found in the physical state, and I began to understand that it was meant for me to be in quest of her knowledge of the spiritual world as it worked simultaneously with the physical and metaphysical world. So, we walked, and I continued to see page after page after page. I saw the square where the enslaved celebrated on Sunday and where Marie conjured on Sunday nights. The place where church was created. Later that night, we made way to Frenchman Street. Each building held a beat of its own. It held a specific service for whichever feet needed it. A rhythm, a tune, a word. Many pairs of moving feet with joyous spirits. These buildings encapsulated life beyond death while providing nourishment for the soul and food for the spirit. Dying was not an option, for we had music. Dancing became the heart as the music pumped it with life. The movements I observed were feet begging to be fed. This is when I saw Marie. She was in the bodies of these spirits, dancing, feeling, and loving. She was in the drums, the trumpets, the sax. I felt the spirit of New Orleans as it thrived

miles below sea level, and she was in it.

Eventually, we were found by the music that our feet craved as it babbled and as we stumbled across the cobblestones. It forced us to peak our heads in. Some old-school song was playing, that I am sure everyone in there felt I was too young to know. I walked in and let the server seat me. She must have known it had been my birthday because she gave me the best seat in the house. She placed me just to the right of the band. I could see all of the members ready to cook what my soul had come here for. They played old-school, even older-school, and some newer school. But it did not matter to me. My feet wanted to move, and my heart wanted to smile, so that is what they did. The dance floor had now made room for life and joy. The more I danced the closer to the music I got. I was close enough to smell the cologne and perfume of the band members while they were cooking, stirring, and strumming notes.

In all my years, I had romanticized New Orleans. Laid with it in text. Cuddled with it in chapters. But this. This was different. This was my own work. My own creations. My own writings conjuring outside the bounds of my imagination. All of our ideas need space to breathe. To exist. To live. And that is what New Orleans was doing for me, allowing me to live while existing, taste and thrive while manifesting because *food is life*.

### *What Is Freedom Food?*

The next day we scurry out during daylight. Trying to keep our eyes as non-touristy as possible but for me it was impossible. I could not stop reading and writing and imagining all at once. Again, like the day before it was time to eat. We stopped at a small family owned Jamaican restaurant, that from the outside look exactly how I imagined a family owned Jamaican restaurant to look. Nice and cozy. On the inside, I felt like the menu knew I was coming because I wanted everything my eyes could read. Boswell's had a menu full of Jamaica's most exquisite cuisine. We sat across from one another again, anticipating something this time. To be fed, to be recharged because *food is life*. Once our orders were placed, we waited, because there is nothing "fast-food" about the process of preparing a history with hands molded from the same dirt as the food that was grown. Soon the waiter brought over our beverages and plates. Ox tails, callaloo, jerk chicken and rice sat next to each other, but all smothered together with the gravy of the oxtails. As a side dish, I ate beef patties for the first time. The crust on the beef patties flaked in my lap, and I ate that too. I drank a handmade spiced punch, the sugar from the sugar cane coated my lips and palate, while the callaloo seemed to clean my teeth.

This meal felt historical, but not as historical as the Blue Crab Étouffée I'd had the day before—which I equated to my lack and spars reading of Jamaican history—as well as lack of education on Jamaica and its people. So, I ate and was educated while being fulfilled.

The owners had the TVs set to a news station. Trump was writing his name and writing a history of how he would be the president to create an immigration ban that would deny those who wanted freedom into America. He would ban the people from which he considered “Muslim Majority” countries. These were the countries that he felt posed a “terrorist threat”—Libya, Iran, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, also randomly North Korea and Venezuela. Then I began to think how I am sitting in a moment of history. I imagine the ancestors of the people who are being denied access into a country that holds the “image of prosperity and progression”, and I wonder, *What did they eat in time of protest? What did their palates crave as food for life? Did it taste like freedom? What does any form of freedom taste like?* Then I think about my children learning of this moment in history that I am sitting in and them asking me, *Mommy, what were you doing at this time?* And guiltily, I will only be able to tell them. Nothing. I was simply enjoying a culture's history with my mouth, a form in which I chose to explore it. I take an even larger gulp of guilt. I wash the thought down with more punch because partaking in a lands cuisine is the closest thing to freedom I know. The sweetness of the sugar cane punch reminded me of sugar plantations in Jamaica. The hands of that soil still found the right balance of sweet and tang in this tropical punch. And I recall when I read how the Beckfords had written their own history on running a sugar estate in Jamaica. I could never forget their horrid stories of raping the land and its women. Taking the enslaved for all they had and negating the fact that all things that are rooted must be uplifted by an even more powerful force. The enslaved aboriginals would take back the dirt that created them, in a rebellious act of freedom. They set fire to the sugar fields and homes of those who enslaved them. And I can taste the smoke leaving the land in the barbecued jerked chicken. The ox that ran in fear now drenched in gravy over rice and this history was delicate to taste. I was nourished with the idea that in some way or by some bipartisan union down my ancestral lineage I was to know what that bondage and freedom tasted like. I was then left to question, *What will I feed my children? What nourishes them in a country that bans anything it cannot comprehend or colonize? What will they eat for life?* I gulp more punch. Which enslaved will I be? I take a bigger bite. Which freedom will I prepare? But guiltily I eat. Finishing my plate without any conclusions — for now, I was only able to exist and hope to never die because *food is life.*

*Leon Sings During Grace*

I leave New Orleans a year older than that of which I'd arrived. I didn't feel any older, but I did feel something. I can't specify what I felt, but "full" would suffice. We packed our rental to head back to Memphis. To head back home. I'd felt like I was leaving a part of myself in New Orleans, and I was. I also felt like I was taking new pieces of a whole back to the only home I knew. On the trip back, the playlist seemed essential. Personally, I could have rode in silence for 6 hours with the windows down and surveying the land. Interrogating it for all it had to tell me about itself. All the secrets and people it held, but instead, we listened to music. I reminisced on the food I'd encountered and how fried Alligator did taste a lot like chicken—seriously—and I'd had it for the first time in New Orleans. The place I felt I should have had it. Then breaking the internal act of organizing my newly created memories, I was played a song. A song I had never heard, but knew I was supposed to listen to it right then. As we followed the Natchez trail back home, I knew I was supposed to be introduced to Lisa Sawyer. I became immediately envious, because *she was born in New Orleans...Louisiana and she was granted with the name Lisa Sawyer, with long hair she had the skin of the sweetest praline.* And I thought how beautiful, how sweet. I wanted to be as beautiful as Lisa Sawyer, and I wanted to be sang about as loudly as she had been. *She had a grandmother who was Indian, and her mother name was Eartha.* As Leon continued to sing of his mother, I envied her because she would never die. She would forever live in the soul food ascending from her son's lips. She would feed the nostalgic tunes created by Bridges, and I would sing this song to my children one day while serving them a seasoned plate with a side of sweet tea. Then I will tell them how food is life, and how the Mississippi carries a lot of it, including us. And we will say our grace in hopes that they get to touch the soil of New Orleans and eat at a table of sacrary just like their mother years ago. They will know all the things that nourish and feed; while devouring all the things they can call home, all the things that they can find freedom in, and at grace they will pray to never die because *food is life.*

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**WINNER of the 2020 BARRY HANNAH PRIZE**

Of "Untitled," judge Kiese Laymon says: "Untitled" is dripping with evocative deeply southern sincerity. The piece knows and wonders about food, knows and wonders about culture, and most importantly it lingers and wanders through our journeys to liberation. It's a we piece, shrouded in "I" clothes. It made me want to read, write, eat and wail."

Based in Memphis, Tennessee, Jasmine Settles is a writer and creative director. She is currently a graduate student at The University of Memphis, where she will be obtaining a Master's Degree in Literature with a concentration in African American Literature. She is also blessed to create work as the Executive Artistic Director of HomeGrown LLC, a production company based in Memphis, TN which serves as a creative space for local artists. As Artistic Director, she is also the co-writer and co-producer of *Women's Water*, which is a staged choreographed performance piece that takes the audience on a journey of acknowledging the presence of water throughout their life.

# STILL LIFE

Jules Hogan

## *Shell*

Raised on a scratch of land near the mountains, Ahnani watched dust settle into afternoons. Grandmother performed witch-magic and bred Rhode Island Reds. The circadian clock of the seasons. Circadian, like cicada, who left their husks dry and cracked on telephone poles and broken trees.

Grandmother fried the chickens in panko and bacon grease. Smell so dense she had to open a window. Soft white bread, peas and carrots. Sunday lunch after church, all the ladies in their wide flowered hats. Cousins rode bikes up and down the unpaved street, played baseball in an empty field. They cackled like crows, threw rocks, called her haunted.

You are like the cicada, Grandmother said. Soon you will break free. Ahnani imagined herself crawling under the soil, pulling clay over her head like a blanket. Sleep now, for seventeen years.

As her hair grew long, Grandmother plaited it into tight and even braids. She wound rubber bands around the tips, kissed the pattern traced onto her grandchild's head. Grandmother read from the bible and hung bottles in the trees, to keep the haints away. She poured water on the fires that neighbors set in the yard. Planted beautyberry in the scar marks. Grandmother taught Ahnani to dance, hips swaying in the kitchen, door open to let the music cleanse the night.

Ahnani learned to bear the violence on her shoulders. Rivers run red with the blood of your ancestors, Grandmother said. Your history is what makes the cotton grow. Can't take that lyin'. You gotta learn to rise.

## *Fish*

Where they first met: Debo's Bar and Grill, where Ray's band played Thursday night jam sessions. First, Ahnani noticed his hair, long and brown, free-falling around his face. She imagined plaiting it like a horse's mane, sewing flowers

through it, tying it in knots around her pinky. Second, she noticed his eyes, brown and catching, reeling her in.

She leaned into the wall with a martini and turned a cherry stem against her tongue. Knotted and swallowed, a spell for possession.

Be careful, she said, after he kissed her in the womb of night. I'm not what you think.

And what am I thinking, fortune teller? Ray asked, his hands on her spine, her shoulder, his fingers stitching to all her bones.

How to answer that question? Shape shifter. Changeling. Stories of children stolen from beds, replaced with fae. Stories of women found in alleys, the refuse of men. She touched his denim sleeve and whispered in his ear, so that her teeth were hot on his neck. First, he kissed her, hard and fast.

I'm not gay, he said.

Me neither.

Then, I guess, can I take you out to dinner? You're the most beautiful creature I ever saw.

She swam against his current. Moths flicking kamikaze into the streetlights above. She lit a cigarette and he watched her, how her hands transferred the fire, how the lighter disappeared into the curves of her hips, how her body was a magic trick.

They walked long miles in the wet empty streets. Summer rain had cleaned the air. The humidity steamed off asphalt. The screams of barn owls in the fields, the ghosts of the south.

### *Fruit*

Ray ate with his hands. At the Dragon King Chinese Buffet, elbows on the table, sleeves rolled up. Chow mein between his fingers like hair. He ripped into a chicken wing, teeth opalescent with grease.

Ahnani sipped her wine, white and cool, fresh after the heavy dumplings and MSG, umami. Chopsticks she never learned how to use. Nails acryliced into violet spikes.

Tell me what you do, he said. A command. Licked scallions from his teeth. She imagined reaching out and plucking them, slipping them into her own mouth.

I'm a receptionist, she said. I told you that. I work over at Gestamp and answer the phones, send the mail.

Maybe you did. Maybe I was just too distracted. He winked.

After dinner, a walk down Main Street. Shops all closed. The bar, pumping with bass and guitar. Hillbilly music. Shouting and stomping music.

Ray slipped his hand into hers, leaned over and kissed the top of her ear. At Dragon King, he drank whiskey on the rocks, was properly tipsy. His hand was warm and dry, rough in places and cracked, like the tectonic plates under their feet.

Take me home, Ahnani said. She imagined him licking into her. Arteries opened. Unlike the horror movies, he'd leave the lights on. She stared at the pits in his cheeks and imagined herself being unpeeled like an orange.

Oh yeah? he asked. What do you want to do?

He drove, and she trusted him. His trailer behind a chain link fence. She followed him through the door, into a room that smelled like pot and sweat and wet cement. He turned on the lamps and lit a bowl. He slipped the offering to her lips, held it while she drew.

It happened like she expected. His thrusts a call for war. Her nails knives in his back. He wrapped his hand around her neck and pushed the air from her. The room darkened and he slipped his thumb into her mouth. Slapped her back alive. When she came, her body called out its white flag. He finished on her chest, tangy heat between her nipples.

### *Candle*

Friday night and she waited for him. Pork chops in the oven. Green beans on the stove. Instant mashed potatoes on the table, congealing. She pressed her palm into them, imagined this was what brains felt like.



Ray came through the door in a storm, his face gray.

Babe? she asked him. She reached out to touch his shoulder but he pushed her off.  
Ice in his eyes.

Just give me my damn dinner, he said.

Ahnani reheated the potatoes, scooped beans and meat onto a plate. Slid it in front of him. Whiskey and ice in a tumbler.

I wanted peas, he said.

She refilled the ice tray. I'm sorry?

Peas, you goddamn bitch, I wanted peas.

She turned to the sink, hands shaking. Eyes focused on the tray, filling and refilling, water spilling over the plastic edge and into the swirl of the drain. Crash of plate into the linoleum.

I can make you peas, damn it, you don't have to explode, she said. Her voice a quiver of arrows.

If I can't eat what I want in my own goddamn house, I don't know why you're here, he yelled. Hand at the nape of her neck.

Ray, Ray, Jesus Ray, get your hands off of me.

Down to her knees.

Eat it, eat it off the floor, you stupid bitch. You gonna act like a bitch, you can eat like one.

Mashed potatoes in a soft heap, gravy gray and thick. Hot on her tongue. Ahnani smelled blood, felt grit bite into her knees.

### *Hound*

Her life quiet, hemmed at the edges. She remembered the azaleas her grandmother planted, shorn in the winter, covered in plastic bags. Ray came and went in unpredictable tides. She titled the other New Ray. New Ray was cold,

sharp-toothed. New Ray fucked. New Ray believed incomprehensible myths about the Deep Web and secret governments, a race of alien people who controlled the strings.

It was New Ray who decided she was pregnant.

“Don’t do that, Ahnani,” he said, as she brought a menthol to her teeth. “Pregnant women shouldn’t smoke.”

She held the cigarette, still lit. How to explain the physical impossibilities of this?

Don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t eat fish. She never liked sushi. New Ray blessed her flat belly with his ear, listening for the thudding of an unborn heart. Old Ray painted the extra bedroom yellow, hung curtains.

Old Ray brought her sunflowers and lilies. He washed the kitchen floor. He hung new shutters and opened the blinds. Old Ray was made of light.

New Ray questioned her stomach, as if it held a secret.

What did you do with it, he asked. His voice a growl. Liquor in his teeth but that wasn’t what made him mean.

Play nice. Roll over. Show your neck.

His hand over her face, grabbing the skin of her cheeks. Pucker up. Brought her head to his mouth.

You’ll never be a real woman, you bitch.

Threw her to the bed and stormed out into the night.

*Egg*

The feathers began appearing in her pubic hair, up the path to her navel. Downy at first, soft. Ray ran his fingers through them while they watched television. He blessed the filaments with his teeth.

I told you it would work out.

Ahnani wondered if the feathers were connected to her pregnancy, somehow. She

imagined a nest, laden. Little bird babies, born of the biological imperative to stay alive.

Ahnani tried to put New Ray away, rituals and experiments. Was it this dress? That lipstick? Those words? He came out stronger, his eyes deeper. Ahnani could see a physical change in her man. He bought a gun and always kept it near him.

For protection, he said. For the baby. He kissed her belly. Ahnani tried to feel for an extra heartbeat. The baby would be the size of a beer can by now, she thought.

Days, when Ray was at work, Ahnani stayed in the trailer. The temp agency she worked for stopped calling her. She pulled feathers from her navel and watched tiny beads of blood form. She researched pregnancy on a variety of websites but could find nothing about spontaneous growth of plume. She shopped online, buying slinky silver dresses and bejeweled heels. Shawls and scarves and fluffy slippers. Pearl earrings and gold necklace chains. She maxed out her credit card and then Ray's. She told him this was for the baby.

As the boxes arrived, she carried them into the spare room. Made a nest of silk and lace and leather. She hung the jewelry from the lamps, threw the scarves over the windows and lights. The room took on a soft, umber glow.

She tried shaving, but the razor caught in the tangle of the down. She felt an itchy tingle as feathers sprouted around her neck. At night, Ray gasping next to her, his hands on his chest. Her body bruised, sore.

She tried to imagine what type of bird she would be. A raven? A peregrine falcon? A gold eagle? Or an ugly bird, a trickster, a thief? A magpie. A crow. Even as the feathers spread, as her bones reorganized into strange patterns, Ray still believed in the baby. He brought her folic acid tablets and chocolate. He burned the palms of her hands with cigarettes if he caught her smoking.

Her feet became scaly, her toes, curved. She watched her talons with a new joy. Ray threw lightbulbs at her, as if it were a game. They shattered in her hair and she imagined slicing through the tendons in his neck.

He disappeared for two weeks. New Ray, with Old Ray over his shoulder like a dirty bag. Ahnani stayed in the trailer, preening. She rubbed coconut oil through her glossy tail feathers. Her wings were growing, spreading, long and thick, which made clothing hard. She wrapped her new body in printed cloths and towels. She

kept the television turned to the game show network and watched Family Feud and ate popcorn from the greasy bag.

Nights, she roamed the woods, naked but for the gossamer feathers. She found a deer carcass in a roadside ditch, the bone partially exposed, yellow and grimy. The smell slickened the night but it did not turn her. She touched the ribcage and thought how it looked almost human. More human than herself, this new creature she had become.

When Ray returned, he smelled of sweat and smoke, like the rancid bottom of an alcoholic's trash.

Where the fuck have you been? Ahnani asked him, not turning from the television.

The band, we toured, New Ray said.

Toured some other woman's body, I'm sure, Ahnani said.

Why do you give a fuck? Ray asked.

Just stating the facts.

Ray came fully into the room. He reached out to stroke the top of Ahnani's head.

Don't touch me, she said. She turned to him. The dark filament along her neck and chest, her shoulders bristling.

What the fuck? Ray asked.

I told you not to touch me, Ahnani said.

Ray reached back, pulled a lamp off a table, swung it at her face. She dodged, and screamed, a striking sound from the depth of the forest of her.

He jumped for her, grabbing fistfuls of feathers in his hands. He pulled. Blood sprang along her chest and she ripped her talons into his back.

Ray rolled to his feet, pulled the gun from his jacket.

I didn't want to fucking do this, he said. He pointed it at Ahnani, held the trigger in

his finger.

I should've known you're a fucking monster, he said. I should've guessed. I was gonna do this the humane way. But someone or another has got to put you down.

He pulled the trigger and she sprang upward, wings catching the dank air in the trailer. Glass shattered as she exploded out the window, leaving a trail of feathers and blood. She caught wind above the treetops, and followed its current, between the broken teeth of stars.

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### **RUNNER-UP for the 2020 BARRY HANNAH PRIZE**

Jules is a writer and advocate from the Blue Ridge Mountains. You can read their stories or essays in the *Raleigh Review*, the *Sonora Review*, *McSweeney's*, *Appalachian Heritage*, or elsewhere. Jules is a fiction candidate at ASU, where they currently serve as an associate editor for *Hayden's Ferry Review*.

# SPECIAL POEM ABOUT MYSELF

Patrick Raneses

This isn't really about me, nor is this really a poem. This is just a bunch of spam: a bulk of unwanted messages, sent and unread.

~~~

Filipinos love to eat. Even when we don't love to.

~~~

I was made out of: Pork Shoulder, Ham, Salt, Water, Potato Starch, Sugar, Sodium Nitrate.

Slick, shiny flesh, like the sole of a wet foot. Stretch mark patterns over pink.

~~~

I used to get red-faced when my white roommates would ask me what I'm cooking. I would hide the rectangular tin underneath the top layer of garbage in the bin.

"Smells salty in here," one of them might remark. It would be strange if my kitchen at home didn't smell that way.

~~~

"Give that to me," Mom scolded as I tilted the contents of my plate toward the trash. She ate the rest of my breakfast, more than her fill, reminding me: "Do not waste food."

Every once in a while, Mom will still remind me how, at dinner in their little Metro Manila apartment, Grandpa would leave the meat for her and her siblings, while he would eat with his hands some bagoong (little pieces of fermented fish or krill in some sauce) over whatever rice was leftover. Later in the night, after singing for the family, the strings of his guitar shined sour and greasy.

~~~

I tried working it out in my head. An American food that became Filipino that I now eat in America—as a Filipino American. Spam is more Filipino American than I could ever hope to be.

~~~

Special Processed American Meat: Introduced to the world by the Hormel Food Corporation in 1937, Spam was a ration for Pacific-stationed Americans during World War II. There was a couple million blocks of Spam scattered across the Philippine islands when the Americans left in 1946. Extra rations.

~~~

*Is SPAM Good for You?*

*“The short answer: no. Spam is not a healthy thing to eat. A 12-ounce can contains six servings. A single serving holds 16 grams of fat, including six grams of saturated fat. One serving also holds 33 percent of your daily recommended allowance of sodium and a pretty hefty dose of cholesterol. While the reduced sodium and lite versions obviously contain less of the bad stuff, a Spam-heavy diet wouldn’t be a good idea.”*

~~~

When I went back home for vacation, I saw a photo of my parents in front of the Golden Gate Bridge and I was struck by how different they looked. I wondered if this was a phenomena that occurred to all Filipino Americans when they prosper and have kids in this country. Or maybe it was simply a Filipino thing, our love for carbs and fatty meat, of which my parents didn’t hold themselves back from. My parents had gained so much weight since moving here.

~~~

I stared at my shirtless body in the mirror and noticed that my sides were sagging. I envisioned the outlines of my father’s bowed stomach on my torso and I quickly turned off the lights, shuddering and shamed by the thought.

~~~

I recall the first time I tried making something with Spam. I peeled off the flimsy tin cover. The stuff seemed elusive. Meat? It defied even gravity: I vigorously shook the upside-down can, violently pounding the bottom a dozen times before the pale pink block slid onto the cutting board. It was slick—a little glob of gelatin hung off the lip of the can. It never looks appetizing.

~~~

I wanted more white boy meals while growing up. I have since then realized the remarkable similarities between Spam and foods like chicken nuggets, Cheetos, and the like. I'll admit that I still like all of those things.

~~~

#### Spamsilog recipe (Spam, sinangag, itlog):

It's easy. Dice a few cloves of garlic, maybe the whites of a scallion if you have one. Cut your Spam into patty-thin slices and fry on the pan, rendering out the fat content until a crispy, colored, scablike surface forms on both sides. Remove Spam; put in a little cooking oil and toss in the garlic and onion.

When garlic has begun to brown and onion looks transparent, mix in some dry, day-old white rice until most grains are coated in oil and matches the color of the garlic (try adding some soy sauce for that extra brown). The Spam is salty enough, but season the rice with salt, anyways. Lay rice next to Spam, on top of it, wherever.

On the hot pan, add some more oil and crack in an egg. Tilt the pan and baste the hot oil over the snotty part until it turns white, then salt and pepper the top. Slide the egg on top of the rice. Chop up the scallion greens and sprinkle over the dish. Squirt some banana ketchup on the side if you like.

~~~

Despite how easy the recipe is, Mom was surprised that I knew how to cook the Spamsilog for myself. She took the stay-at-home parent role very seriously while raising her kids, and thus she was more or less the only person who would handle things in the kitchen. She always made more food than we needed. As an



adolescent, I got annoyed by this—it seemed like an iteration of the wastefulness she always told me to avoid. Later, I thought she did so to make up for all the meals she missed while growing up. Now, I realize she simply just wanted us to eat, a lot, because regardless of how you feel about yourself, eating your fill is good.

~~~

“Make a mix of incongruous ingredients until—”

“Feign exoticism, epicureanism and pawn it off—”

“Take the refuse, you refashion—”

Just don’t waste it.

You fry it until it’s poetry.

~~~

I made a half-serving extra and I ate that, too.

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## **RUNNER-UP for the 2020 BARRY HANNAH PRIZE**

Patrick is a senior at Fordham University Rose Hill as an English major and Theology/Creative Writing double minor, enthusiastic about discovering, appreciating, and promoting writers and artists of color. He is interested in the cross section of literature, ethics, and art’s role in contemporary culture as a whole. He has interned at Kundiman, is currently working at the Rose Hill Writing Center and is now interested in pursuing a career in the publishing industry.

# MOUTH SOUNDS LIGERO

Su Nadeau

I feel like my mouth has been lost. When I woke my mouth is where it's been meant to be and it still makes mouth sounds, but it's direction is lost to me. When I speak it's a whistle. When I shout there is a hum. When I am quiet there is quiet.

The rain falls and my body is lost to me. It's where it's supposed to be, but it is no longer mine. It lies in bed, flat on its stomach. I call out its name, but there is only a whistle where my mouth used to be. It is a coaching whistle and there is no ball, no mechanism to give it any strength or attention. The whistle is hollow. It stops calling, because I've asked it to. When the whistle, hung from my neck, hits my chest it makes a mouth sound. A groan or a murmur.

The body wakes up and rouses itself from the bed. I try to watch its movement, its routine, to see if it's one that I know. It goes, undressed, from the room and the bathroom and sink make sounds.

I'm left to watch the bed, it's unkempt and the sheets are scrunched in ripples in wake of that lost body. I call the body LB, but it sounds more like a hum because I'm shouting.

For a moment, I think LB hears me and comes back to the bed, but LB is only pulling the sheets back in their place. And the comforter. The pillows lean on one another and the comforter is folded in the corner.

Downstairs, LB is in the cupboard, is grinding coffee, is pulling a chair in and out from the table. Then there is quiet, but quiet that LB is making and not me. I wonder what he's having for breakfast. I get angry, I can recall a routine, but the details of the previous day are lost to me.

Then my sense returns and I'm certain it is a dream. The medication I was given. Their symptoms. Vivid dreams. This is all this is, I'm certain. My hands, at the wrists, are able to rotate and I try to pinch my skin, and I'm unclothed, but there is no strength in my fingers. I wiggle my toes and hold my breath. It feels like minutes go by, but my diaphragm fails to sputter and kickstart my lungs. My lungs, for that

matter, never lose their comfortable place in my ribcage.

As a kid, I was drowned. Or not drowned, but held under water. It was the ocean and all of its malice. When I was a kid, I was standing in the shore line where waves lose their might and crash into the beach. The waves were to my waist, I was a child. My favorite was to try and run back to shore as the wave and its dregs were pulled back to the rest of the ocean. Sometimes I would lie on my own belly and pretend to crawl back to shore only to be sucked back out to the ocean. I'd scream, and I had a mouth then so I could scream with all the shrillness of a five year old.

But when you're really pulled under there is no time for any noise. A wave, it must have been large though I didn't see, collapsed me into the shore and its rocks. I was pulled out in the undertow. A dreg. It was peaceful being pulled out. The rocks and the sand orbited my body and I was still—my body rotated and I remember feeling the bottom, but I know I didn't flail. Though I lost up and lost down and lost left and lost right, I was calm.

Until the undertow stopped, until I tasted the salt water, until sand filled the vacated space of a tooth lost in gummy candy. Then I panicked, then I filled my lungs with water, then I shouted and made no sound.

That was the first time I lost my voice.

This is the first time I've lost my body.

There is a whistle and it is full. It comes from the kitchen, the warble of a kettle singing.

My knees gain their movement and I bend, the same with the elbows. It is smooth and I feel like I am able to glide. Up and down, there is none of the stiffness of the morning. The sun is beginning to rise and I don't cast a shadow.

Cast in a reflection, the clouds are dark and thin and there are colors surrounding them. When the sun emerges in its fullness I see how round it is and I can hear it. It whistles.

When LB is back there are clothes on its body and then a back pack and then LB is gone. I try and follow; my body is warmed enough that it has movement again. Though my steps are awkward even if the movement is not. My legs, arms, and hips are smooth and move with ease, but there is a newness and it lacks

coordination. Though when I fall on the stairs I am caught by my own body—not LB—but this new body in its nakedness and lack of shadow. At the bottom of the stairs I become intensely aware of my vulnerability and my body is warm all over and I am coated in sweat, but my hand is dry when pressed to my stomach.

Out in the world, it is perfect. The sun is behind clouds and it is quiet. A bus goes by and it hums. There is the whir of a bike chain and I'm gliding along the street. Though I am slow, though I am methodical, though I am unorthodox, I move forward.

When I get to LB's work I try the handle, but I lack the strength. I can see LB inside through the big glass windows. LB is in the kitchen and the new one is at the counter. The opener is on break, flour and white cover their arms.

LB does the dishes and I feel my own fingers pruning at the thought. LB is new, but not newest. LB is learning. LB is eager. LB is doing its best.

The day is slow and a slight rain begins to fall. It isn't until the new one leaves for a cigarette that I get inside the bakery. There is no smell and I am angry. I should smell pastry, bread, and coffee.

I go back to the kitchen and LB is forming loaves. When I see LB in all its fullness I freeze again. I can see myself grabbing it and pulling its body back into myself. I know my hands will grab first from the neck and I will approach LB from behind. It is clear this is the only way.

Time passes before my body moves again and I am not nearly as angry. LB has a strange control of motion that I am jealous of, but I admire too. LB crooks at the hip and the elbow follows suit. The body has coordination mine lacks. I want to smother it. I can see, with an inhale, my own body expanding to envelop all of LB and to hold LB there until there is quiet. I will grind LB through to his bone, dry him out, and turn him to flour. I can see the way its body will form loaves. Too dense for pastries. Too dense. I will save the flour and turn LB into soda bread. I will save the flour and will turn LB into gingerbread. I will save the flour and turn LB into sourdough. I will save the flour and turn LB into fruit cake so LB is thrown into the garbage. I will save the flour and leave it open on the counter so moths will make larvae in LB. I won't save the flour so LB will be discarded.

I move toward LB, but when I press my hands to it there is nothing. I can feel my hands, but they have no strength. I am unable to wrap my fingers into LB's throat

and I am unable to pull him to me. I am unable to smother LB. I am unable to grind him to powder. I am unable to put our bodies back together. I am unable to be LB.

But I try.

LB is unbothered. LB moves in the kitchen as though I am not there, as though I have not clung to LB hoping we become the same. I decide to leave LB to see if I have reflection, but I can't open the door to the bathroom. I decide to wait at the counter, unsure if I want to be in or out.

The rain becomes heavy and as it falls there are flashes of thunder that illuminate the sky. Each bolt, unseen in shape, illustrates the rain and there is a crack of thunder. I am drawn to it and I go to the window. It is full length and I press my whole person to the window and try to be closer to the rain. I want to feel rain and the way each drop disperses and is lost to my skin. I want to feel skin.

The sky is illustrated by lightning and I count thirty three rain drops. Really I count two before the lightning is gone. I count five in wait for the thunder. When it claps its ugly throat I feel the glass tremble and I am excited. That is what I want to be. I count thirty-three.

I go to LB and I say, let me illuminate you. I will illustrate your hands, especially your hands. The way they buckle and display veins. I will call out your fingers, all ten. And be sure to know where they bend and are crooked. I will be certain to celebrate the hands and the way they are lost in flour. I will be certain to. I will be certain. I will be. I will. I.

As I had spoke to LB my eyes closed and I hold my breath—I hold my breath! We are one and I know I've done it and that I have my body back. That I am LB, that we are together, that we are that we, that I. I can feel the warmth of dough and nails scrubbing it from my fingers, wrists, and forearms, but when I open my eyes I see me and then I see LB. Except I hear me. I press both ears to me and I hear the words in my left and I hear the whistle in my right.

LB goes to wash his hands and I am clung to its neck, but me, the newest one, cannot move. The other me is milk white and shapeless and hideous and beautiful and awesome. In that I feel awed by the mass of body clung to LB and then it lets go and drifts behind LB. The milk white me—MW—shuffles its mass behind LB as LB goes through the motions of closing up the bakery. On LB's clothes are smeared white shapes from flour. My body feels a dull warmth, when I cease

thought or motion I feel warmth, but when I try and shift my body or think of that warmth it is gone and there is nothing. I am slow. Slower than MW and LB. I try to call their names, but instead of a whistle my mouth groans. I try again, but my mouth feels full.

In my mouth there is flour. It is coarse, like sand, and there are clumps of brown sugar that are hardened and old and sharp. I try and swallow, but all I can taste is salt and when I make noise it is as a groan—as though I can't help but attest to the deliciousness of what I've consumed and this makes me angry and helpless. My words won't fit out around what's filled my mouth. I move to the counter. The salt makes me thirsty and I can't help but gulp at the contents of my mouth. I can hear LB and MW moving to leave. At the threshold of kitchen and front of house the lights click off, I try and shout and I sound as a whale.

MW has elongated as it moves to keep up with LB, it grows and lengthens and looks to me like a slug. I shout again and my noise is drowned by a clap of thunder and then there is the light that precedes thunder. LB has a jacket pulled around his neck and his face and is hidden to me, but MW is exposed in its shape.

They leave through the shop door and MW is barely able to slide through as LB is quick to shut the door and bend to lock it in place. I am inside, in the dark, my movements are slow and I feel a pull against me—it comes from the kitchen. Something is clicking and there is the beep of the alarm system.

LB and MW turn from me and as they do I am painfully aware of all the noise out of doors. I hear every raindrop collide with the earth and the groaning of the bus as its brakes slow its progress. There is a car horn, there are footsteps. I close my eyes and steady myself on the counter, I feel light and the warmth has left me and I struggle to open my eyes. Unsure of my feet and hands and up and down and body and counter and left and right and there is fire in my lungs and it escapes as the gruel in my mouth drips down and out and my eyes open and are stung and they only want to close, but—

LB walks across the rain slicked avenida and—where the curb met pavement—a toothless mouth opens three car lengths wide and, in language dipped in sea water, says, Well, so much for that.

There are sounds and they are my body. I feel them in my feet and it swallows me in warmth from the bottom up. Outside, a rain is falling and makes the world hazy gray lines that intertwine with the stop light's indecisive color.

The door seems to open for me, I am drawn out as though I am being pushed and my feet are moving too fast for me to keep up. Crossing the street, the stoplight flicks gold. Between two parked cars, the wide toothless mouth opens—smiles. I start to cry and the tears warm me and drop into my mouth. Hello, the mouth says. I taste the ocean and gulp it down. If you have a moment, the mouth says, could you tell me when *Thriller* was released?

Bathed in light, I say, Of course, but it is a mouth sound.

---

Su is fascinated by soups, bread, and humans. He is a special education teacher and MFA candidate at Columbia College Chicago. Su's work can be found in *Entropy Magazine*, *Green Mountain Review*, *Timber Journal*, *Literary Orphans*, and elsewhere.

# POSSIBILITY IS A KINK

A Conversation with Sarah Sgro



Photo by Sarah Sgro

**Sarah Sgro** is the author of the full-length collection *If The Future Is A Fetish* (YesYes Books 2019) and the chapbook *Without Them I Am Still A Mother* (Letter [r] Press 2017). Sgro earned her MFA in Poetry from the University of Mississippi and is pursuing her Ph.D. in English at SUNY Buffalo, where she studies waste in relation to gender and futurity. Her work appears in *BOAAT*, *Anomaly*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *DREGINALD*, *The Offing*, and other journals.

**Helene Achanzar** is a senior editor of *Yalobusha Review*.



**HA:** Congratulations on your first book! To begin, *If the Future is a Fetish* starts with a list of things the book's singular speaker accepts into, holds within, and rejects from the body. What is it about the body's thresholds that captivates you?

**SS:** The opening excerpt frames the body's thresholds as an ever-shifting matter of agency. I'm obsessed with the extent to which we can control what enters, exits, and remains within the body, its memory. The first list, which explores the "things I don't allow inside," portrays the body at its most agentic, flexing its power to reject what tries to trespass: no nitrates, no one who misspells my name. Still, fear and sensitivity live within ostensible authority – do I stop my right hand from slipping in because I don't want to touch myself, or because I'm afraid to? To say that I "allow" things to remain inside is also fraught: to what extent can I discipline the flow of juices, humors, blood and bile? Maybe I let former lovers stay because I know they'll never disappear. These paradoxes feel consistent with the book's larger fluctuations between artifice and vulnerability, both of which are always intertwined. There's so much I wish to banish, that I claim to have banished, which continues to churn.

**HA:** The book's larger fluctuations also concern children in the collection. In this book you are pregnant with prescription drugs, pregnant with salted nuts. You want a child born from the moon and from your mouth, yet you eat a child as a light snack. You declare, "I want to have my child & eat her too." Some of these ideas are oppositional upon first read but the connections between these conditions feel taut. How would you describe the relationship among them?

**SS:** My interest in corporeal agency also extends to the processes of pregnancy and being birthed. Your body is filled with someone, or you spill from someone else's body, with differing degrees of control. Relatedly, I'm always thinking about Julia Kristeva's approach to birth as an abject "revolt of being" which threatens the binary between self and other—how the child is both part of you and matter that is terrifying in its newness, exposing how the body spills.

I find myself continually writing against a stable self, in this collection and more recent work; the speaker becomes her memory and its contents, pregnant with her trauma and the names of former lovers. In some ways, birthing a physical child represents an antidote to unwanted impregnation. It's a choice which crafts a future that can promise to repair the past. Simultaneously, as I hope the collection suggests, this is an impossible expectation—first, because time isn't so conveniently linear, and second, because the child is not a voiceless clone. The

speaker's relationship to pregnancy slips in the same way that the self slips, continually encountering unstable paradoxes. There are many contradictory desires which seem to promise safety in their own way: to ingest, to expel, to nourish, to refuse.

**HA:** One of the ways I see the rejection of a stable self in these poems is through the recurring characters, which are really just initials, and which might really just be extensions of a singular speaker. These initials (J, A, M, X) stand in for the names of former lovers, but to a certain extent, they act as projections of a self. For example, "J's body is no copy of my body" and "A's other woman wears my menstrual coat." That these characters are so loosely formed, having little that tethers them to a world beyond the speaker, feels meaningful. Can you expand on this idea?

**SS:** I'm interested in your reading of these letters as being tethered to the speaker's world alone. Initially, I worry about what that does to their independence as potential characters in the collection (however amorphous), but you're right that unstable identity applies to J, A, M, and X as individual and collective constructs. When writing these poems, I had loose past lover personalities associated with each letter — J: the high school boyfriend. A: the current partner. M: the one night stand (perhaps most fluid in its representation). X: the speaker's first queer love and lover. But, as categories do, these designations certainly fail and fluctuate throughout, both intentionally and unintentionally. To some extent, they are doomed modes of organizing the mess of the past, which re-muddles itself with each re-telling. I never thought of them as physical extensions of the speaker, but that seems like a generative description of how memory manifests.

**HA:** The final poem ends the collection sharing the same concern as the book's title: the conditional *if*. What should readers take away about the concept of possibility? What, if anything, can these poems tell us about the future?

**SS:** I think of this collection as living in a conditional tense without resolution, a map of ifs that rarely lead to thens. In some ways, this approach entails a rejection of causality and even teleology. To stay in the "if" and resist the "then" is to always introduce possibility and to never quite arrive. I'm drawn to this highly queer mode of time, which is deeply indebted to Jose Esteban Munoz's *Cruising Utopia*. Queerness thrives as an "if", a not-yet-thereness which stretches beyond a fraught present (and collectively traumatic past).

When I think of the future as a fetish, I think of the future's carnal allure as potentially utopian corrective. Possibility is a kink! Simultaneously, I think of fetishes as talismans or objects of worship; the future, which can never quite be grasped, is a somewhat inanimate construct onto which we project dreams, fears, desires. And amidst this all, the future is subversively animate in its own right; it offers so much, but promises nothing.

In many ways, the speaker concludes the collection by clinging to a reparative vision of the future ("I will reassemble...if they leave, I let them"). For anyone who has experienced trauma, this faith is essential for survival. But within this conviction lies a knowing rejection of any certain "then." Whatever this book says about the future, I think, relies on an anti-logic of "if" which urgently embraces the future's potential while resisting the finality of closure.

# TWO POEMS

Ansley Clark

## Lake With Many Rooms

Always distraction— the “you” the desire object

as in you enter like a crushed flower of a person perfuming  
like an enormous lake

light

this hungry chamber and my ledge deranged with sun

*desrengier* literally to move from

orderly rows

in my thin orange robe those sparkling parties where I knife  
through rooms looking for someone to sleep with

where the you steadies my hip in the shower  
touches beneath my tongue with his thumb

or in flaming reams

curls into obsession

a gold animal I want her to tell

me what to do

then upon my waking

the desire object

like a sliver of dark bitter light

or an envelope flat of air and trying to remember what I wanted to  
remember there was

perhaps a message I was meant

to receive

what I mean to say is these kinds of dreams happen sometimes when I am  
lonely

### **To Reject This System Would Require Another System**

A spontaneous moon necessitates its own rules

then the disorienting orange dusk

the exit only illuminated when cut from the lack of an exit

in preparation a woman embroiders her own disruption

transfigures into a manic light the most direct form of herself

the new structurelessness ranges almost mammalian

every city has always hosted this low hum

but now no longer theory we are required

to accept what we did not think we could

a match strikes a match strikes a match strikes

the unraveling is what but when and how

Originally from the Pacific Northwest, ANSLEY CLARK now lives and teaches in Colorado. Her work has been published in the *Colorado Review*, the *Black Warrior Review*, *Sixth Finch*, *Diagram*, *Typo*, *Denver Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook *Geography* (2015) is available from dancing girl press.

# [PROLOGUE. BEFORE SAYING]

Joshua Bird

Prologue. before saying

There are events  
A sky dislodged of its architecture

Added up there can be a whole  
Mimesis of a Great Moth

---

I am jealous of the distance you have described. beyond  
language. what have you been doing out here with the  
high insects.

overgrown boundaries whisper to  
your entertainment.

when you said make room

---

I razed a whole city night. with barren  
hands. asking what occurs after a silent kind  
of

JOSHUA BIRD is Joshua Bird is Joshua Bird. a poet hellbent on semantic  
saturation; or, how to estrange language. he confines his tendencies to solipsism,  
both in and out of short bios. also a contrary possibility. for more and/or less:  
[joshuabirdpoetry.com](http://joshuabirdpoetry.com)

# APPREHENSIONS

Ayesha Raees

Some names divide in bleached mouths. Some bodies exist in no choice. The ghost was once a body. The ghost was once a repulsive thing. The ghost and I make out on my couch. When I think of form, I think of a sack. Every sack doesn't have a fetus. Every fetus has a mother. The womb is a vessel. The womb is a home too small to climb back into. Yet, in every drown, I am in forever try. Once the sky turns color, the hand rises to trace it to a horizon only to become a shadowed fist against the light. No one believed the ghost in the corner was a good ghost. No one ever believed me. The water ices and then melts. The family laughs and then dies. All strangers befriend me and then line up to leave from JFK. Who wants debris when there's always rock? In the bottom of a frozen lake, is my friend. Call her Fish. At the corner of the road, is my friend. Call him Deer. Falling asleep on a pill, is my friend. Call her Respite. Leaving the roof, a vessel of no wing, is my friend. Call her Off. What is there pulsating in the sky? My eyes are too weak to see the end to all this distance. The ghost is a forever thing. Forever is as long as me. When I think of my dead friends, I become forever not alone. In front of me is a beautiful day- genuflecting for my forgiveness.

AYESHA RAEES identifies herself as a hybrid creating hybrid poetry through hybrid forms. She was a 2018-2019 Margins Fellow at the Asian American Writers' Workshop where she also now serves as an Assistant Poetry Editor. Her work has appeared in *The Margins*, *Apogee*, *Cagibi*, *Wilderness*, *Cherry Tree*, and elsewhere. Raees was shortlisted for the Judith Akbar Poetry Prize and won the University of Findlay's Deanna Tully Contest. Her work has further been supported by the Millay Colony For the Arts, Brooklyn Poets, and AAWW. Raees is a graduate of Bennington College, and currently lives in New York City. Her website is: [www.ayesharaees.com](http://www.ayesharaees.com)

# THREE POEMS

George Kovalenko

## The Stars Down to Earth

Some people call that tinsel-tetanus cut the sky is suffering, *the moon*.  
I say that is a matter of perspective. You came around today and I thought,

I could get real deep into astrology.

*The Real* too often gets confused with actuality, and anything

in actuality is actually really hard to get accomplished with you hanging 'round  
the bargain bin of my ideas. I'd say I had a dream, but maybe it was just the frost

under my soles that broke and opened up as a reminder that the earth insists  
on holding us aloft. The space between any two objects is called a symptom.

Maybe a meteor fell on Tunguska, maybe you just brushed my arm.

Minerva's owl must be gorgeous, the dusk, however, is inscribed with awful signs.

So, quick, gather apostles, study middays, yell obscenities into the sink.

If we could just unrule the world for a day.

## Salience

In the dream, it was the stuccoed bark  
of a mechanical money counter, piped  
through a bas-relief-accented burial hall.

In the dream, this marked an sense



of scope and took the place of what  
the lovers in Helsinki had said the dream  
was meant to have in it, before they drifted  
off together, baywater around a vagrant riverboat.  
Even this bold, blue anxiety—its thunderheads  
accessorized by starlings in the afternoon's  
narrowest hours, refracted in the superstructures'  
rippling chrome—creaks, in the dream,  
with the absence of anything resembling  
a guarantee. In lieu of this, upon awaking,  
after we have polished our gums, a lance of blood  
worms, sinkside, to the drain:  
hard evidence of all our gormandizing mysteries.

### **Thermology Ending with a Working Heart**

*after Mary Jo Bang*

I think I've heard there is no thing so hot to touch  
it can't be handled. To try this, I would like to cock  
the unattainable and lob it like a javelin across the room,

clean out of its distinction as a concept  
and into the fleece-scorching heat of the moment.  
Imagine, a hot-air-balloon that's swelled

and knows no limit to its physical potential.  
Its basket peopled by a clump  
of tourists—visas to this side of youth

so near to running out—some certain  
and some nauseous, watching the palmy country  
spreading tumid, arras-like, and tight as the ball

and whorl of a thumb. No fun, to be so close  
to earth when our ideas inhabit heights,  
when such impossibilities are dammed behind

the firmament, white as a welders torch along the rampage  
of a jackhammer, bright as the guts and smelters of a heart.

GEORGE KOVALENKO is a poet whose work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Colorado Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *DIAGRAM*, and elsewhere. A recipient of fellowships from New York University and the Saltonstall Foundation, he lives and teaches in New York City

# TWO POEMS

Jessica Yuan

## On the Set of Big Brother

In the Real World, each wall must compress

its own secret. Cameramen piercing  
into some wet out-turned sac, dye-saturated chamber  
held close to its neighbor

by post production. Replacing insulation, breathing heavy  
when *it starts to get Real*.

Crowding to the one-way mirror or cooling vent,  
behind the space

called thickness, larger than what it watches  
discerningly. Where the magic happens.

A door, squeezing one room

out of another. Calling loudly upstairs when upstairs  
grays into empty  
thirty lateral steps from the entrance.

Why bother coming in from the sun?

Why count your stars in a four-sided room, swallowing  
two sides before the main meal  
is trucked into

the kitchen, which must have everything wrong,

which revolves

around its main appliance, the spiral stair.  
Every door and its lever

shushing to whisper  
*as seven strangers collide*

into the long stretch of hallway lined with pinhole  
incandescents below

backup flood light surveillance, past  
the lengthy processional  
to a bathroom which one stranger used unknowingly

rather than for effect.  
No weather proofing between heat wave and hillside.

*Find out what happens*  
when face meets face. In the corner

on the back sheet, somewhere just like inside

the shutter contracts its iris  
around a heated earlobe  
bracing for the first screamings of the day.

Then you sit in your own plasterboard box,  
lean into the glass.

### **After Miasma**

When the body was porous,  
stuffed pink with orders of dry  
  
and damp, condensation

and sap  
at the border: and to submerge

a limb would risk  
percolation  
of smoke to fever (wintered

into lung) ingested  
or drenched: what swam

in the rot  
beneath a white square of cloth

shed open  
for desert and mountain (blasted

dry) and landing over the portico's roof

where the dying lay  
between four columns

for whatever was offered  
by air  
slinking through: pneumatic thread

mounding expanse into mouth,

wet glossy ghost  
of wind and finger  
wafting dust

from the surface. Then the surface  
(pierced by  
an eye-lens) spilled its viscous folds,

harboring  
minutiae of contaminant, invisible

from the glare of a porcelain doll,  
all shell and immunity (no organ

to unfurl)

from the porcelain wall, bleached dry  
on all enclosings

when the windows shut  
and ceiling sprouted

another breathing machine: metal, hollow,

filtered tube of an engine to lung and crouch  
and listen from the network of latticed vents  
squared in

with fluorescents and sharp metal points  
which go under

the surface of things.

JESSICA YUAN is a Kundiman fellow, and her poems have been published in *jubilat*, *Boulevard*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Journal*, *American Chordata*, and *Zone 3*, among others. She currently lives in Boston, where she is earning her Master's in Architecture at Harvard.

# FLORIOGRAPHY

Kelly Hoffer

*a translation*

dianthus

myosotis bindweed myosotis,  
bindweed viola bind  
digitalis, weed  
chicory. amaranth  
bind bellis perennis bind  
weed bellis perennis bellis perennis.

bindweed chicory, weed  
amaranth bind chicory. viola  
tricolor, collinsia weed  
sedum.

wild geranium bind ranunculus, weed  
amaranth viola  
canina bindweed petasites  
weed convulvullus  
weed wild carrot weed crocus  
versicolor bind  
prunus padus,  
plains coreopsis bind  
viola tricolor.

sweet william

forget me not in the scorpion grass,  
my heart's ease is dressed  
in lady's glove, fastened  
bachelor's button. the prince  
feather wakes the day's eyes for just  
the sight of daisy daisy—

and so, I'm nursing hurtsickle, become your  
love-lies-bleeding in a bluebottle. love,  
in idleness, my innocence turned  
to stonecrop.

a dove's foot prates the lesser celadine, as you  
my velvet heath  
dog hung with butterbur,  
proffer me the devilgut  
in lace, in a cloth  
of silver and I  
cough up the birdcherry,  
a golden tickseed, and watch  
my heart        cease.

KELLY HOFFER is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop in poetry. She was recently a Creative Writing Teaching Fellow at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand. Her work was recognized as a finalist for the 2017 American Literary Review Award in poetry and as a finalist for the 2018 Omnidawn Single Poem Broadside Contest. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *BathHouse Journal*, *Radar Poetry*, and *Turbine/Kapohau*, *The Bennington Review*, and *Hubbub*. She is currently a PhD student in English at Cornell University, and so she lives in Ithaca, NY, very close to a waterfall.



# NECROPOLIGETICA

Nicholas Alti

I've created an intangibility machine / I'm unsure of what it is / how to hold it / like affection /

a dwarf star / I'm hanging in existence ill / gratuitous nebulae / gargantuan ganglia / withdrawals

without reprieve / how might I ameliorate / could turn inward / disgorge / evaporate / morphine /

I wear osculum haberdashery / leak / indistinguishably / my gore from my health / Cartesian wilt

and here comes consecration / pirouetting across millennia / blessed be my cosmological guilt /

I've many medical detriments / in a sea of warm water / I limp broken still / in a sky of liminal

convalescent zephyrs / one must protect one's head / modulation of respite / within an injection's

radius / thermal iconoclasm / heaven again arises / such a meaningless fable / where is my dealer

when needed / dimebag Eucharist / the medium says I've lost my faith / predictable Catholicism /

this vessel's encephalon is lackluster / this vessel is lackluster / in fact I could not lack better / let

spill an anomaly / sacred dysfunction / hieroglyphs of exit wounds / sprawled across my vertex /

rosemary apology / gardenia apologia / how can I give you / saturnalia / a scintilla /  
of elation

From the depths of the rural Midwest, NICHOLAS ALTI is a disabled depressive with trigeminal neuralgia, poor timing, and a modest criminal history. He enjoys all things nebulous and anomalous or otherwise bizarre. Recent yowls have found homes at *Swamp Ape Review*, *PULP Literature*, *gaze*, *Always Crashing*, and *Grimoire*. Nicholas is an assistant editor of poetry and fiction for *Black Warrior Review*.

# THE SACRAMENT: APOSTLES

Alexander Scalfano

I.

alone in my skull there is only a blue sun that never sets on the irradiated bones

the scurry of scavengers makes shadows play on the ruins

unsettles the ashes in my lungs

I hold my heart under the lake water to wash the oil from its feathers

a black lacquered headdress of alien feathers I wear on feast  
days for the god of wishes, the god of little twilights,

the god of lost birds, the god of summer discord

this ritual is about forgetting

and forgiveness

this ritual is vacation from the lost planet

this ritual is apology to your hands who love me

I want you to hold me under the lake until a new god claims me

II.

the lake slides to my vision like a pearl bracelet breaking from a girl's wrist  
like the shadow cast from a loom in Okayama

like a sprig of lavender suspended in a cup of tea

I was sure I could love you regardless

when the wind cupped my face with both its hands and said gently:  
“it’s not against you I’m breaking”

and each wave on the lake

(because it’s a day for things to imagine they are larger than themselves)

was a tongue curling around the word “feel”

and I’m as stunned as the oriole in the wind’s hair,  
out of season, the wrong color now

where is summer?

I came to the lake to hide the water sign of when our hands touch

not the fire of a new skin

something soft

a bit of me I don’t hate in  
an oil glaze of my being

I came to the lake to wash it away for you

something the moon might ladle onto your sleeping face  
how else could you love me like this?

and the wind against the window

a sister to your kindness

ALEXANDER SCALFANO is originally from northern Alabama and graduated from UMass Amherst’s MFA in Poetry program. He currently teaches English and Creative Writing at Dublin School in the mountains of southern New Hampshire where he is also the founding editor of the school’s arts magazine, *Layman’s Way*. Some of his poems appear in *Atticus Review*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *New South*, *smoking glue gun*, and *Jellyfish*.

# TWO POEMS

John Goodhue

## Dream

The vista here is quick, wishful.

Here's to coming-to amid a night's worth of guiding thru resemblance  
the words defining their own.

Allowedness, possess, heart ore, ink, inasmuch.

If only there weren't some gesture for the way the executioner is always a bee  
searching the same garden.

Always the smell of trout lilies, just before history.

A spike of sun now on this house  
fly,  
late and wrong.

Sound  
of a shovel in the sky  
making too much room.

## Everything In Modulation

yes song is seeing and the size of a moment is the half-life of a color in it.

so its duress vibrates at a wave notation mistaken for the fracture it causes.

so something between that balance, something  
as if housed in glass.

if one ends up where they end up and before  
the rest  
and truly feels this is where they ended up.

if one is mistook.

if one insists upon self while in a canyon.

explain the insane mass of prayer in a given  
april  
when we are so well in its intended liquid.

break its brick, harvest its figment, parade it apart into a land of pictures.

you who go unnoticed where there is nowhere  
to go and not  
be.

you that pulls together our system from a long series  
of dark vowels.

you, believing replica.

yes beyond you there  
are limits and beyond limits a blackened prairie redone with gold

advancing

like history, treasure, garlands of strung together occasions of capacity.

we stood in it, saw its work, moment-struck.

brick, glass, steel, bone-- at some point these become the same  
constituent.

we talk to see around its prismic space.

less flesh, more mind  
less flesh, more mindful  
ness.

we know the moon's exact distance to earth, the worth of a tree,  
are having trouble determining the size the brain swells to  
thinking about this, what mods appear when it imitates flight, envisions

plummeting

into blue.

then not at all.

we've changed the body into the ladder that leads into the same body.

yes there is so much color in the trees at the hour before ache begins.

begins and becomes a snake jaw dislocating,  
a three legged table, poor  
spirit moving like smoke and the way

it's filling, somehow or other, what's never here.

what if carrying around nostalgia were not the carrying around  
of a wild amphibian.

what if colors were looser, slipping  
into heightened degrees of genuine copper, floodwater, forsythias'  
perfect shadows, shattered jaw, to relate  
in some way to the tonality heard when someone says

abide.

they  
are.

death is.

yes it feels like rain, like many things.

the creek beds dare fill up first  
with water and then what water means.



now there is surprise at the taste of water.

a wildness of eyes like necrotic stars and of  
the dead,  
strange but necessary, a flag on the first noticeable day  
of wind of the century from now to when.

name their electricity.

name its serum.

name the yardstick of fade and recall.

see actual thought like a real branch, the impression  
it leaves  
of a square inch of tenebrosity that is always here.

grant it boundaries.

yes we don't look like we are  
any more  
in this p.m. light, in this divide between brain bind and wane  
and breeze.

what's come of the loops and pops and loud tocks  
we've let into our bodies.

what's come to the mind alone is a small planet, a song planet.

how to not feel a part of it.

how not to be dust.

the spoken world reaches, wraps the ear sufficiently  
before meaning, refuses a standard judgment to

forget, be going.

another daybreak, another headwind, another head full of dark  
common sense feeling adverbial in this wind,  
another daybreak, another.

we open eyes,

and to build and become and to shake free to build fate a glass room  
in the vibrating air to place in it forever the word

stranger.

what is it inside that needs to never have enough words  
left for nomenclatures of loving one  
self.

life traverses a poem and catapults better noise.

asks  
in nether  
waves, canorous gas.

the circuit in the dust in the head  
with its part tradition part particle part sun-bricked  
sparkle  
begins again in the final cobalt of the world with a ha.

yes.

head in that direction, gust.

to love the big day death requires of us is

not to not care to know

why us.

a plain old grasp spends days.

moonlight is not the only thing letting eyes

generalize.

not the only evenness

coagulating sign and referent

into occupied space.

our dead are

never known

for what we do not mean them for.

they may only be that orange mortar,

that violet situation the memory of the day, the day's,

the day itself fuzz from.

their color is recognizable as real gunmetal's

amidst a dream-like kind.

their door opens somewhere

outside somewhere dark

and into this.

all terminable things of day coming to focus

thru  
the  
forehead

thru the gun metal.

and still never there.

JOHN GOODHUE received an MFA from University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he was awarded an Academy of American Poets Prize, and The Daniel and Merrily Glosband Award in poetry. His work is forthcoming or can be recently found in *jubilat*, *The Seattle Review*, *REALITY BEACH*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Counterclock*, and elsewhere. He resides in Portland, OR.

# THE ONLY CLOUD FOR ME

Patrick Holian

the peach edict: we are in a thing together.  
my treachery replaces my cancellations.

there, a beautiful, barren plain. my kind marrow  
but not, like, in a romantic way

or whatever. the swan will call you and i  
back without mercy, which is a kind of mercy.

in the swells something nameless prowls, in the moonlight's teeth,

swells, prowls, swells again. beneath some table, speaking of which,  
i etch a not unkind devotional: a boat,

a brown cat, a meal in quiet, a bottle  
of wine. light breaks upon a clearing—we are light—

the choir sings about long winters, old whales,  
what it's like to sit in the rafters whispering

baseball lineups and the best way to parcel  
out the rowing—we are light—when your limbs, heavy—

in the swells, something wonderful prowls, morning comes,  
unravel our olive year, call forth, call home, sleep.

PATRICK HOLIAN is a Mexican-American writer from San Francisco, California. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from St. Mary's College of California and a PhD in English from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. His fiction and poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Suburban Diaspora*, *Mosaic Art & Literary Journal*, *Arkansas Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Gigantic Sequins*, *Oculus Vox*, and *Whiskey Island Review*. Patrick was a semi-finalist in the 2017 *American Short[er] Fiction* contest, a finalist in the 2019 *Ploughshares Emerging Writer's* contest, and was recently a runner-up in the *Black Warrior Review's* 2019 flash fiction contest.

# ELLE ÉTAIT EN TRAIN DE

Emilie Menzel

*Elle était en train de ressembler à une petite fille*, but it was not going well. She kept shifting between wolf and child, wolf, then child, her orbital eye shape pulling back and forth between angles. The dangerous ratio of muscle to bone. The circled path around the drain of the light.

It is true that in haunting, distinction between with child and with ghost is unclear, *et en train des moments de l'espace entre les deux*, she felt close to a beautiful shoulder of landscape.

*Quand même*, she would have preferred regularity. *La vite* threading skin. *La petite maison* settled, the moon on hill settled, the whistle white *blanche* of the neighborhood brush.

She flickered again. *Lupin*. Raked fur settled like forest inside skin. *L'enfant déchiré*. Tearing. The horror of animal when not of an animal. Untidy carnivore. Shearing of teeth. The messy detanglement *à devenir*.

The beast rose up above the table. She grew a blue tale and dove back under. She would need to find a way to escape these fixations, *à offrir l'enfant à la gueule du loup*.

EMILIE MENZEL is a poet, writer, finder, and curator of the gently haunted. Her work has appeared with *Black Warrior Review*, *The Spectacle*, *Seventh Wave*, *Trestle Ties*, and on the sides of Boston's T-cars, amongst other locations, and she is the recipient of the Deborah Slosberg Memorial Award in Poetry (selected by Diana Khoi Nguyen) and Cara Parravani Memorial Award in Fiction (selected by Leigh Newman). Raised amongst the doldrums of Georgia summers, Emilie currently lives in wooded North Carolina and online @emilieideas and emiliemenzel.com.

# FLUID THINGS

Jason Lipeles

(Editor's note: This poem is best viewed on a desktop computer or in landscape orientation on a mobile device.)

*For Kenny*

in the beginning  
a computer turns on with *buh-ling*  
and there's love in that blank screen

they create f-f-f-r-r-i-i-c-c-t-t-i-i-o-o-n-n-n

but it's mainly blank and so  
white data  
becomes more white data  
and an emptiness

that pulls  
the stomach, puffs it white

until there's only space

for stars and blank sky

and eyes

are faded scars

in the vast white puff

of universe

the beat started low and dull  
and built wide and tall for hours  
as the fire consumed the sky

the hornets hummed sam smith's "latch"



and the embers burned

like pulled sugar

{the baby smooth surface of the earth gleamed red-orange and God  
swaddled us all}

in the beginning

seals stood up on their fins

and rattlesnakes beat their tails on wet dirt like cloth drums

and *every feather on the mockingbird shone like a mirrored window*

---

taking up every square inch of the surface of my mind

---

God hovered in a rainbow spandex body suit  
with her cape spread out full and her arms raised

lavish  
pillars  
of glittering  
fabric  
cascading  
down

when she focused on the fistful of clay in her hand  
her eyes projected the vision of  
you and me

we wore silky soccer shorts in red and white  
so that God could easily tell us apart.  
the world she created was imperfect  
so the bowl of Cheerios got soggy  
even after the first few minutes  
and we still argued about slurping the milk  
and God had to come in every once in awhile  
to fix a crack in the sidewalk or rewrite  
a fable that she worried would give us  
the wrong idea.

our asses were clean  
because we never shat  
and there was no need for lube

as we could use a drop of water  
clear and smooth as God's eyes  
and she would help us find enjoyment  
even in the most troubled corners  
of our relationship.

on most days, we stayed still stroking  
each other's hair as it was baby soft  
even though we were at least twenty  
and at a ripe enough age to start making  
children of our own.

we read books  
but only by telling each other stories  
and there was no one to impress

so all of our work  
was hopelessly quixotic  
and beautifully intimate.  
God listened and gave us notes.  
God was working on a book and we asked  
to read it but she was very coy  
about the whole thing  
and we were only privy to the first few lines.  
on Saturdays, we'd turn up the lasers and disco  
lights  
and God would put on her favorite music,

Aretha Franklin or Yo La Tengo,  
and she would be as large as ever  
in my mind all dripping

with rainbow silks  
secured in padded spandex  
and belt melodies as loud as the heavens  
into a bedazzled mic  
and we would watch

enraptured  
unable to speak  
until she gestured for us to get up  
and join her  
and so we would wriggle

and sway  
and turn in circles  
our arms out

our faces touching the sky.  
if we still had energy, we'd run  
to the ocean and the water would shine  
with crayfish and luminescent seals and  
we would all sing together in harmony.  
I was just learning the lute and so played it as  
loud  
as I could and the old sharks would clatter their  
teeth  
and the dinosaurs would hee haw with their  
claws.  
we would lay on each other  
and bounce back

and forth to get  
that cool clean sensation  
that everyone's after.

the apples tasted sweet here  
and love was encouraged but  
the snakes told us we could find more love  
across the way.  
God wanted us to "spread our wings"  
even though I insisted we had no wings.  
we had little time to pack. the loons always  
crowed on command  
like grandfather clocks  
and so we took them with us.

we grabbed a handful of dark red berries

and our favorite old boombox  
and broke the amniotic seal that kept us soft.

Upon pushing through the screen, the first thing we noticed was our dry skin, dry eyelids, dry inner elbows. We learned to call this redness “eczema” and itched ourselves silly. God saw our plight and fitted us with moisturizing robes. We were given full-time jobs raking the desert and cutting down trees. We fought less but missed our sing-alongs. The fires burned and the sunsets dulled.

One night, after the fire went out, we accidentally made a child. After nine months, it slithered out my anus and we cleaned him and named him Ben. Ben was a clever child with slick black hair and a devious grin. We loved Ben and gave him all the Juicy Fruit he could chew. God would watch him when we went to work and so he had faith in love at a young age.

Ben’s first word was “blow” and he loved the way the wind mussed the trees. He would kick the air with his feet and tell us in his own early language to raise him up high. And so we’d hold him by the back and he’d whinny and open himself up to the heavens.

Within a few years, he was mature enough to come to work with us. We gave him the job of licking the sand off the trees before they fell. God was superstitious and liked her good things to be loved.

It wasn’t long before Ben not only licked the trees, but cut the trees and gave his juice lovingly to their bark. The peaches were always raw and sweet and so we ate them knowing the trees made them for us to enjoy.

Ben would suck on the peaches for hours and spit the pits as far as he could into the darkness. One night a woman found the pit and brought it back to him imagining it was an amulet. He thanked her with a lick or two and they made love under God’s watchful eye.

By that time I’d popped out eight children already and so we loved having another adult around. Sheila was our friend and confidante and we were relieved he found someone that matched his love for fluid things.

Around Christmas, the young children would get antsy so we made small nests and began to saw twigs off trees to make toys and ate the ripest tomatoes we could find. The children grew up fast and helped us collect weeds for mulch and

we calculated their height in stacked pumpkins.

In time, they started playing music like we used to and we remembered our old luminescent nights. Our oldest told us we could still make music just as beautiful and our youngest would press his knees into our backs to get us up onto the dance floor.

We pretended we knew all the new fads but in fact you and me were as slow as the sad busted crows that followed us around on foot. We would move our wrinkled hands in the air and wait for one finger to meet the other. You gave me a sly grin and the skin around your eyes sagged but I could still make out the mischief of one hundred twenty years.

The next year Ben and Sheila left under cloak of darkness and then the rest of the children got old enough to wander out on their own and made their own families finding people from other villages to dance with.

We still got together a few times a year to dance among the trees but now the kids were wiser than us and showed us how to make the music louder and the lutes were traded in for yodeling machines that pounded us with penetrating bass.

By that time, we were dreadfully tired of dust and leaves and God found us an apartment on a hill. We lived out our last days eating ripe avocados and listening to the wind. God would reminisce about those first days and we loved her for it. The laser shows and light-filled fields felt as far away as a myth but when I closed my eyes I could still see her as tall and magnificent as ever.

On our last day, she pet our heads and told us to dream about smooth candy and naked asses and so we left the earth smiling.

JASON LIPELES is a Los-Angeles-based poet, performance artist, and human-being-with-feelings. He is an alumnus of the AJU/Asylum Arts' Reciprocity Artist Retreat. He graduated with a Master of Fine Arts in Image + Text from Ithaca College in 2018. You can find him at [jasonlipeles.com](http://jasonlipeles.com).