



RAW LIT

Let Your Scars Shine Through Your Words



Issue 3 - Autumn/Fall 2023

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Dear reader,

Please be advised that published work may contain triggering and difficult topics. Therefore, each written piece will have **content warnings** for reference.

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ELEMENTAL



Artwork by **Amy Marques**

“I wanted to represent how we are made of different elements and/or how the Earth is its own character.”

HAUNTING MYSELF

Non-fiction by **Claudia Mallea**

CW: Mention of Illness

The ways in which my body is the same as it was before my stroke haunt me more than the obvious differences.

A glance at the fullness of my stomach through a thin blouse makes me feel haunted by a body that has since died.

Seeing the tattoo of a Minotaur on my thigh below my shorts as I sit in my wheelchair reminds me of a lover kissing its little face then sitting up to kiss me.

I'm unable to take these things as reminders that I inhabit the same body I always have, instead they jar me. Much like the first flickers of desire I felt after my stroke did.

These feelings of haunting grow even as my body becomes less and less cadaverous.

When I first regained full, maintained consciousness (not just moments of lucidity between rounds of anesthesia) in neuro rehab, I found that my head had been shaved for brain surgery and that I had lost about twenty pounds. My then partner later told me that when they first visited, I looked like a child. I have never been visibly less well. Crop-circles of incisions covered my bald scalp as if my brain had been removed for autopsy. I was frightfully pale (anemic from the brain hemorrhage) and thinner than I've ever been in my adult life. Spasticity setting into the muscles on my affected left side felt like rigor mortis. Dressing me was like dressing a corpse. Guiding my stiffly unmoving left arm through a sleeve often took two nurses.

In the intervening year, I have regained all the lost weight, which was mostly muscle through extensive physical therapy, home exercise, and lots of eating. My stiffness is eased through twice daily stretching. My hair has grown out several inches. The return of relative wellbeing (in a newly disabled body) somehow feels unrelated to all my therapy and effort. My one wavy inch of hair starts to fall out from all the head x-rays I've had. I'm not sad about it like I still am about losing my long hair for that first brain surgery.

I mourn the strong, pretty, functional body I had before my stroke, even while proclaiming to everyone who dares use the phrase “new you” or “new life” that I am the same person I’ve always been and living the same life. Because how could I be living a new life if my old one never ended? Which it didn’t because I didn’t die. But the realization that this body won’t allow me to climb a tree or peel a mango devastates me for days. Acknowledging that what I’m doing is mourning means accepting that there was a kind of death. The idea of haunting forces me to do the same.

If this is a ghost story, I, the consciousness composing this, am the ghost. Possessing the same body first at the prime of her life in the fullness of health, then later in a weakened, compromised form. And in-between, in a hazy back and forth of consciousness cutting through drugged, half-dead or traumatized unconsciousness instead of the vertical streaks of light against solid black or navy of a Barnett Newman painting, my consciousness dapples light on the muddy background of my broken, confused brain and body like the craquelure on a Malevich black square.

Sometimes I, the ghost, feel like I am sharing my body with another spirit. I try to move my left hand, and spasticity extends my left leg straight. My ankle is flexed and my left foot taps a steady, loud, embarrassing rhythm for several minutes.

While my feelings of haunting or being haunted are growing, I reread *Wuthering Heights*. I burst into tears at a wholly forgotten scene in which Edgar Linton, Catherine’s milquetoast little husband, leaves a bunch of golden crocuses on her pillow as she wallows in physical and emotional malaise to bring her news of spring. In addition to the intimate sickroom scenes, I feel a pang of recognition at the haunting central to the novel. There is a literal ghost, that of Catherine Linton née Earnshaw who haunts her childhood love Heathcliff at his request. I ponder and then tweet: “How are you a man going to ask someone to haunt you then be mad when she does?”

But isn’t that exactly what I have done to myself? I spent months desperately wanting my old body back and trying to summon it through therapy and rehabilitation. I spent hours visualizing my former, unparalyzed body, brushing my hair or taking milk from the fridge. I never gave a thought to where a reappearance of my old body would leave my new body. Never considered that this new, worse body contains my soul or consciousness now.



EQUINOX HOPE



Artwork by **Amanda Young**

“Darker evenings are a feature of the Autumn season and impending hibernation. My mind and body respond in unison. Fear of suffocation by the perpetual darkness is relieved by spiritual hope and practical light.”

A RAMBLING MEDITATION

Poetry by **Oliver Kleyer**

CW: Mention of Illness

Fear
is a man's best friend?
I always thought,
a dog is man's
best friend.
Given the choice,
I'd rather have a dog
than being afraid.
But sometimes
you have no options.

Well then, here we go:
I'm afraid of the dark,
afraid to be alone, to be
left (it has happened before),
afraid of indecent decisions
by the wrong people in
the wrong positions
and above all,
and despite a very
optimistic prognosis,
I'm afraid that the cancer
could come back.

But there is a
remedy for fear:
Hope (with a
capital H).

Hope can be found anywhere
and it can take many forms,
It can be the little girl
next door, talking encouragingly
to the plants, so they will
grow beautifully.
It can be the taste of liquorice.
Any creature not seeing
a threat in you. And even
a rambling poem in a
literary magazine.

Because Hope searches in
this world what helps the world.
With Hope, we can fight
fear and it also gives us
a tool to put up against
fear's agents.
So, back on the topic,
fear really is man's
best friend, because
fear leads to Hope.



INCURSION



Artwork by **Rachel Coyne**

“I was trying to create tension and drama among the abstract forms. I like also the way the abstract plays with size - the images could be microscopic worlds, flower parts or as large as galaxies.”

DANCING WITH ANGELS

Non-fiction by Odi Welter

CW: Violence, Disturbing Content, Risky Behavior, Mental Health, Death, Abuse, Sexual Assault

My mother says she saw angels dancing in her front yard when she was a child. She danced with them, her bare feet trapped in the grass while they pirouetted on the wind. Her father came outside to watch.

Then the storm came. Sudden, wild, violent.

Demons formed out of the shadows of rain. Swords of darkness slashed at the angels. The angels stopped dancing to fight, their swords blazing with white fire. My mother stopped dancing to scream.

Her father grabbed her shoulders, forced her to face the battle raging above her. He told her to call on Jesus, that his name gave her voice power. She threw it against the storm like arrows.

In Jesus's name, go away.

In Jesus's name, go away.

In Jesus's name, go away!

And they went away. The demons, the storm, and the angels.

My mother went inside and ate dinner. Broccoli chicken hotdish.

My mother tells me that I scared off a demon. That I always hated the basement of the house I can't remember in more than fragments. I remember it as skeletal and dusty, like a tomb waiting for a body. I remember the translucent blue yoga ball I was never allowed to play with after I rolled it down the stairs and broke a picture frame. I remember the satisfying sound it made as it bounced. I remember the light had to be turned on by pulling a string, that I was always afraid she would pull too hard and it would shatter, spilling electricity onto our feet. I remember when she was pumping for my brother, she'd store the breast milk in the basement freezer. I remember I begged her for a taste because it seemed to me that my brother had everything but a working heart, and even that seemed like a blessing if it made him a miracle and me a shadow. I remember she gave it to me to prove that I would hate it. I remember hating it.

I don't remember the demon.

My mother says she took me down with her to grab something, something she can't remember anymore. She says that I stopped at the bottom of the stairs, my eyes locked unblinking on the window set close to the wood-boned ceiling. She says that I pointed and screamed, and that when she looked, the window was completely black, darker than night.

My mother says that she grabbed my shoulders and forced me to face the demon trying to break in. She says that she told me to call on Jesus, that his name gave my voice power. She says that I threw it against the demon like arrows.

In Jesus's name, go away.

In Jesus's name, go away.

In Jesus's name, go away!

My mother tells me that the demon went away. That we went upstairs and ate dinner. Chickpea à la king.

I never told her, but I always feared that it went into me.

That *my name* and *hell* are synonymous. That the demon couldn't tell the difference and became as caged in my mind as I am. That the darkness, like a blanket around my heart, felt close enough to home that the demon made it that.

It was a strange sort of comforting to believe that things about me my mother hated yet never saw could be purged by something as simple as a *name*.

The demon built a castle at the top of my spine while my mother kept searching for angels in the garden.

Gay marriage became legal everywhere, and my mother screamed that it was an abomination while yanking weeds from her pepper patch. Gay became a word in my vocabulary, and I prayed that it wasn't an adjective of mine while the spines on cucumber vines sent hives up my arms. My prayers morphed into shovels, and I buried the adjective in the tips of my fingers.

A boy in my high school choir was openly trans, and my mother called him *she* as her tongue bled on a cross and her hands applauded my solo. Trans became a scribble in my notebook, and I erased it as my soul cleaved in half and my voice shattered glass. Purple split into blue and pink, and I hid the blue half of myself under my tongue.

A book I can't remember the title of had an autistic character who was my reflection, and my mother promised I wasn't *broken* just *different* when I asked her why. I clenched my jaw against asking why she thought *autistic* and *broken* were synonymous until my teeth cracked. I filled the gaps with the self-diagnosis until no one could see it.

A health teacher mentioned asexuality in passing, and my mother praised her termination while dumping scraps to her chickens. Asexuality sat in my search history, and I promised myself that I was just waiting for the *right person* while I scraped chicken shit from my shoes. My promises turned into scrap metal, and I fashioned a sex drive to clog the way to my uterus.

My mother's cousin committed suicide, and my mother told me she didn't understand why as she planted pansies in a pot. Four attempts haunted my past and four more waited in my future, but I bit my tongue and helped her fill the hole. Death half-attempted became seeds, and I buried them with the pansies.

A high school friend complained about his ADHD, and my mother said drugs were a cage while pawing over herbs pressed into pill form. His troubles nearly mirrored my own, and I convinced myself the differences were too obvious as I swallowed placebo. The letters jumbled, and I shoved them up my nose to cover the scent.

Our church hosted a seminar educating on sex trafficking, and my mother warned me to be careful of men while the youth pastor's son slid his hand up my thigh. He whispered that God had been telling him we were meant to be together since we were ten and ignored my *please, don't* for the first time. I shut my mouth and listened for my own promise from God, and I twisted the silence I got in response into iron bars I thought were armor.

My mother told me stories about angels and demons, about the invisible war between good and evil. I drifted further and further into the gray. The stories I read, music I listened to, questions I asked all dripped with more violence than she knew what to do with. The first story I had her read, excited that it had won a contest, was about a girl who believes she's a monster. She dies in the end, sacrifices herself in an attempt to redeem her mistakes. My mother asked if she needed to be worried I was going to burn the house down.

The demon mined for precious minerals in my bones, and my mother prayed for the angels to dance with her again.

My first friend in college was a "raging homosexual loudmouth," and I loved her for it while my mother begged me not to let college change me. I rewrote my definition of "gay," and proudly called it an adjective of mine while promising my mother nothing would change me. I dug the word out of my fingertips, and it spread through the rest of me.

I borrowed a friend's chest binder for the first time, and I thought my chest would burst from the joy while my mother said she missed her sweet little girl. I scribbled gender-fluid in my notebook like a crush's name, and my soul slowly melded back together. I pulled the blue half from under my tongue and chewed it together with the pink until it was purple again.

A friend asked if I'd ever been diagnosed with autism while calling my quirks adorable in the same breath while my mother swears there's nothing wrong with me. I let the mask crack and fall, revealing not broken pieces, but something beautiful underneath.

I told a friend I didn't want to have sex, and she asked if I might be asexual while my mother asked if I'd met anyone yet. I kissed a boy and hated the thought of doing anything else, and I let myself say I didn't want more. I pulled the faux sex drive out of my vagina and refashioned it into dragon wings.

A friend admitted that she'd attempted suicide, and I told my story that sounded like hers, while my mother asked me to tell her if anything was wrong. I dug up the seeds of death half-attempted and baked bread with them.

A psychologist diagnosed me with ADHD and autism, and I stopped asking if differences made me alien while my mother promised that I was normal. The sneeze locked in my nose finally came loose, and I fit the letters back together.

A friend and I swapped stories about sexual assault, and I allowed myself to believe myself while my mother told me that I couldn't let myself be a victim. I called the pastor's son an abuser instead of a best friend, and I melted the cage bars into a sword.

I explore the castle the demon built and realize the hands that shaped it were mine.

My mother looks beautiful while she dances with angels.



RED SKY IN THE MORNING



Artwork by **Birte Hosken**

“View from our window very early in the morning. I wanted to capture the scene before it changed into a more normal morning sky.”

THE POEM IN WHICH

I AM NOT SEXUALLY ASSAULTED

After José Olivarez's "Poem Where No One Is Deported"

Poetry by **Anne Walters**

CW: Sexual Assault, language, Risky Behavior & Violence

Two Cape Codders
dive into my bloodstream
instead of
tequila shots—
I don't drown in a sea
of alcohol at the
dim bar.
I waltz the mile
back to the beach house
sand and gravel mixing under
my flip-flop feet.
I drift into dreams
sun-drenched
and warm under cotton sheets.

His hands don't twist
the corkscrew to give me
glasses of red wine. His hands
don't anchor
me to a storm
I cannot weather.
He doesn't wolf whisper
that he wants to
fuck me, or leave
cigarette burn marks
on my brain.

Instead—
he kisses his wife
my cousin
good night
and we both
dream
of ocean currents
releasing us to
shore.



UNTITLED



Artwork by **Cyrus Carlson**

"I like to experiment with color and movement."

HER BODY WAS BROUGHT BY WATER

Poetry by Yael Tobón

CW: Disturbing Imagery & Mention of Death

the ocean waves broke
against the coast in weak symphony

her first breath was like accumulated
foam covered by a stream of
holy blood

her body was brought by water
alongside mangoes and coffee beans

i wonder where her body lies,
where her hair dissolves,
where her liver rots.

may the merciful earth swallow her decaying bones
and aching soul.

if she ever wakes up from the deep ends of
my guts tell her we were once seventeen;

that i can't afford the perpetual mourning
she offered and that i wish her a good
sleep.



FIGURES BY A CHAMBER DOOR



Artwork by Steven Ostrowski

“My artwork always attempts to deepen the mystery of what it means to be human.”

THE PACKED-TOO-EARLY BAG

Fiction by **Maria Thomas**

CW: Miscarriage

You pack your bag for hospital. It's early, much too early, but you're too excited. You pack your bag with the cute, white Babygro that you shouldn't have bought – the one your mum was horrified at the bad-luck of buying - the cute white Babygro with the cute animals – koalas and baby hippos and arctic foxes – and the teeny tiny poppers where the small peach-fuzzed bum will be. You pack nappies and lanolin, big knickers and nursing bras, you pack pyjamas and slippers and a clutch of energy bars. A blanket, of course – another bad-luck purchase – soft and striped, Jellycat rabbit and dummies and big thick pads – because everyone tells you you'll bleed.

When the bag is packed – all the compartments full, pockets compacted with cotton wool and cotton socks, and cotton cloths – you close it and place it in the corner of the room and you wait for that moment when you'll wake your husband and tell him 'it's time' and he'll panic and run around trying to get dressed, falling over as he tries to force his leg into tracksuit pants, and you'll tell him softly, in between the gritted pain, 'calm down darling, we don't need you in hospital too.' And you'll be calm because your bag is packed, your bag that has been packed for far too long, but you're PREPARED, as you once promised in fleet-blue girl guide gear.

The packed-too-early bag sits in the corner of the room, watching as you grow, as the life inside you multiplies and your abdomen swells and discolours like a marrow. The packed-too-early bag sees as you bend over the toilet bowl heaving nothing, because there's nothing you can eat without heaving, and it observes as you toss and turn in your too-small bed, toss and turn because there's no comfort to be found on your back, or your side, and you can't sleep on your front. It sits in sympathy as your pelvis aches and separates, as your skin fissures, and acid reflux fills your mouth and burns craters into the soft pink flesh of your cheeks.

The packed-too-early bag will keep you company as the much-too-early pains come. It will huddle into your side as you wait for the ambulance – whispering with you 'please, please, please'. It will rest sensitively in the corner of the hospital room as the monitor doesn't beep, as the doctor lowers his voice, as the hush tells you everything. The packed-too-early bag will vomit big, thick pads, as the blood begins to flow, as the too-small nest of cells disgorges into big knickers. The packed-too-early bag will expel the bad-luck Babygro, and the bad-luck blanket, and you will hold them to your face and weep.



BOWL



Photography by *Amy Bobeda*

“I’m interested in the way a coil pot becomes the hands that made it.”

MILK DRUNK

Fiction by T.L. Tomljanovic

CW: Disturbing Content, Mental Health, Abuse
& Death of A Child

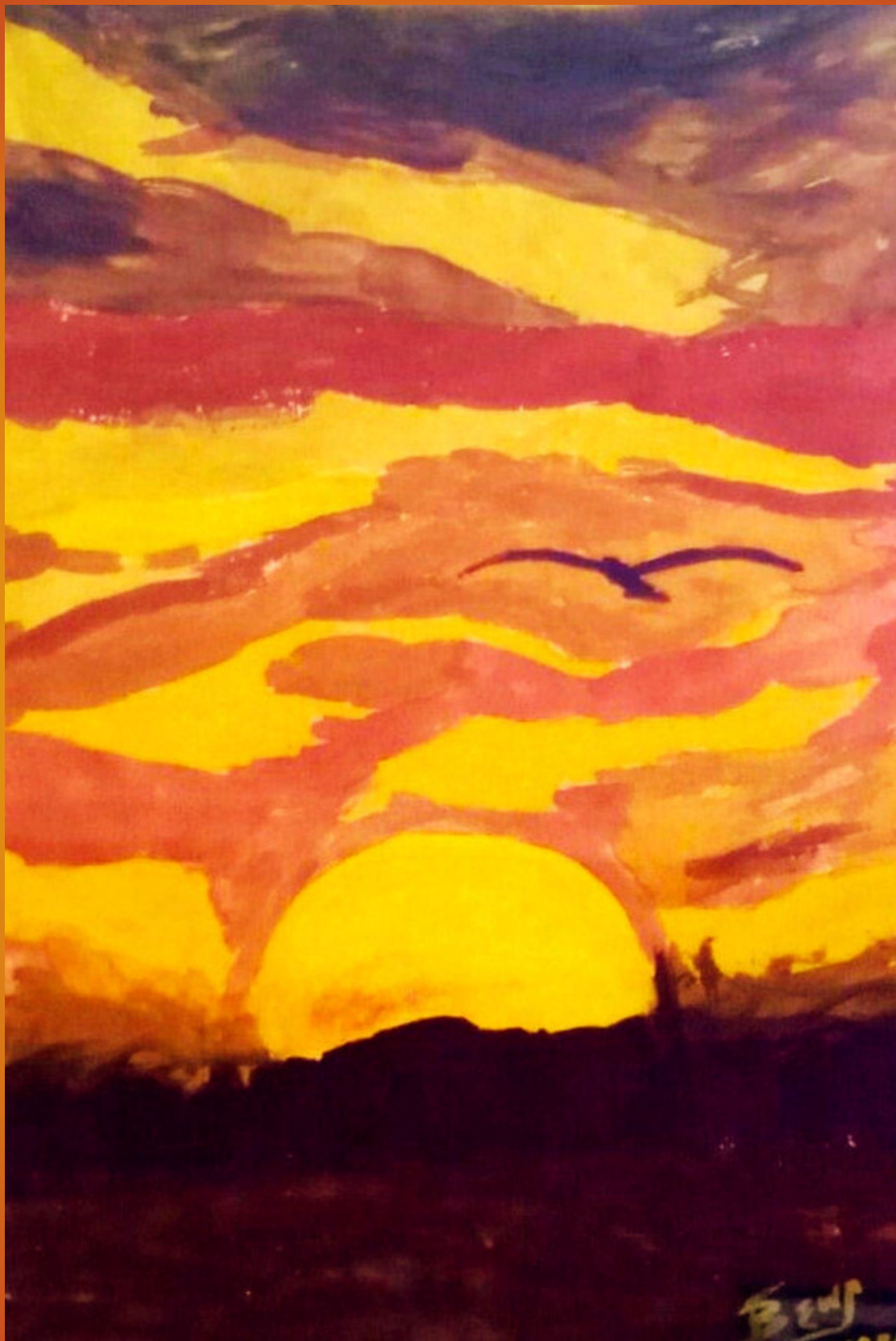
The clock reads 1 a.m. You and me. The only ones still up. You're snuggled against my breast. My foot presses a cracked floorboard rocking you. Clouds cover the moon and there are no stars to bear witness.

It is not peaceful.

Your tiny teeth took more than milk. Your thrashing fists and paper-thin fingernails scratched sharp red lines across my neck and chest. I didn't mean to. I don't remember shaking you so hard, but you're finally, blessedly, still. My cracked nipples drip onto your cooling onesie. Sleep deprivation slips toward intoxication. I pretend that you're just sleeping and that I'm still a good mother.



SUNRISE



Artwork by Dr. Vass Geo

UNFUCK YOURSELF

(after Larkin)

Poetry by **DLC Hanson**

CW: Language & Mental Health

They fucked you up, no doubting that
 They live in you, the genes they shed
That sully you and bully you
 To follow paths not yours to tread.

The dread you feel when mirrors speak
 In words you do not recognise
As yours, spew forth from grinning chops.
 While drooping lids of deadened eyes

Aquiver in the afterglow
 Of imperceptible disdain
And praise that filters through in waves
 Of hesitation to your brain.

Mind blown by generations full
 Of missteps, broken dreams and grime
The choices never made dictate
 You do the penance, not the crime.

The narrative of something true
 Will shear your misadventures bare
In nature's harsh and bitter games
 The winners hunt the losers' prayers.

And by the blackest of dark traits
 That course through and illuminate
To this day you are static, still
 In daydream you deliberate.

And yet

The circumstances into which

you were born are not you.

The chance encounter,
the amalgamation
and coagulation
of the cells of
two confused
and passionless
beings are not you.

These are peripheral
things, gyrating orbs
amidst rings of mist
and debris through
which blissful light
advances
when the sun
shines bright

unhindered
and right.

Unfuck yourself child

before you are grown,
it is easier now whilst

tomorrow's not known
and the mist will grow thicker
the longer you dwell
in the depths of
your paternal-maternal
black well

Dug out of the earth

as they buried their hopes
under graves of ambitions
upon glory

and bones.

Unfuck yourself kid

stab the bulls through the eye
flush the cat-napping meds
quit the day job
and fly

Up, up, up and away

to your mindsky,
 your lifecloud,
 your dreamscape
 your spectrum
 of violent blues and
 rose-bloodied reds
 and swoop down upon that which
 your heart may demand
 of today
 in this moment
 this place
 your command.

And before you extinguish the light

understand:

that *of course*

they fucked you up
 good and proper
 (that's just what they do)
 but

Unfuck yourself now

don't let being
 fucked up stop you

Unfuck yourself now

because no one else can

Unfuck yourself

boy
 else you'll ne'er be

a man.



IMMORTAL EARTH



Hybrid by Amy Marques

“A pen pal gifted me with loose pages from an old poetry book and I used those to create collage poems.”

Fiction by **Cecilia Maddison****CW: Mention of Death**

Weeks later, Danny's coat was still hanging in the hallway. Josh pictured how his brother used to wear it with the collar turned up and his hands thrust deep in the pockets. He hung his own on the peg next to it, a size smaller and still warm, and let his school bag fall to the floor with a thud.

His mother greeted him from the kitchen, where she sat at the table with her palms pressed around a mug of tea. Her eyes looked smaller since she stopped wearing makeup.

"Mrs Tooley called. You missed your counselling session," she said.

"I forgot." Josh opened the fridge and stared into the cold glare. Seizing a half-empty milk carton, he busied himself with pouring a glass.

"I reminded you this morning."

Josh shrugged. "I played football instead. You want me to do normal stuff with my friends, don't you?"

His mother placed her mug down and interlocked her fingers. "Mrs Tooley said you've been spending lunch breaks by yourself."

Josh's voice became shrill. "Why are you on my case? Leave me alone."

"It's just that... you need to... it's important to talk about what happened."

"I don't want to talk about it."

His mother sighed and rubbed her face. "You can't ignore grief, Josh. It'll catch up with you eventually."

Josh finished his milk and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Whatever. I'll be in my room."

"Have you got homework?"

"A bit. I want to hang out online first." He hesitated, stalled by his mother's bleak eyes, and a landslide of words fell into the emptiness. "We've spawned into a new level. It's awesome— we have to cross this massive forest without the bandits getting us. And if we catch the floating elf light, we boost our power."

“Sounds exciting.” The corners of his mother’s mouth lifted a little. “Who are you playing with?”

Josh was already bounding up the stairs. He didn’t bother answering— she wouldn’t understand.

In his room, Josh closed the curtains to block out the last of the afternoon’s light and nestled into the curves of his gaming chair. Cocooned by padded headphones, with the brilliant screen reflected in his eyes, his fingers rattled across the keyboard and his knees bounced with every microsecond.

His avatar shimmered onto the screen wearing the skin of a muscular youth with cropped black hair, who swished a golden-hilted sword in brisk arcs through the air. Josh sucked in his breath, adrenaline surging as the avatar flexed his muscles and plunged headfirst through mist and sunbeams to land in the clearing of a dense forest.

“Hey, Danny, you there?” Josh whispered. He spun his avatar around, scanning the foliage at the forest’s edge. It swayed in a breathless breeze. Birdsong drifted from the towering canopy, and his heart played a drum roll in his chest.

A familiar voice, the one he was longing to hear, crackled through the headphones. “I’ve been waiting for ages. What took you so long?” Danny’s avatar stepped from the gloom in the skin of an archer, braided hair swinging to his waist. A longbow was slung over broad shoulders, and a quiver of feathered arrows hung at his back. The archer and swordsman stood face to face, eye to eye, virtual sunlight anointing them like a blessing.

“I’d have joined sooner, but Mum wanted to talk,” Josh explained.

“How’s she doing?”

“She misses you.”

“I miss her too.”

The avatars loped off in a slow run and entered the forest. Josh slashed through knots of undergrowth with his sword, side-stepping through pools of dappled shade. Danny moved at his side like a shadow, surveying the surroundings with his bow drawn.

“Mum’s making me see this lady at school who wants to talk about my feelings. I really hate it,” Josh said.

“It might not be so bad. Give it a go— it’ll get her off your back.” Josh opened his mouth to protest but Danny tensed, his arrow tip gleaming. “Watch out.”

A hooded assailant hurtled towards them, wicked blades flashing in a blur. Josh clenched his jaw as he pounded on the keyboard, delivering fatal sword injuries until the bandit flickered into fading pixels.

“Nice work,” Danny said.

Josh grinned as they picked up their pace again. It was just like old times when they'd played together after school. "How come you're still in the game, Danny?" he asked. "I mean, you're still real, right?"

Danny stopped running. His avatar rocked from foot to foot and blinked as he turned over the question. Josh recalled how Danny used to chew the side of his mouth when he was thinking.

"I suppose I've sort of... respawned," Danny said slowly. "You know, found a new skin, seeing as I didn't need the old one anymore."

"Mum doesn't get it. She thinks you're gone."

"I know. But I'll stick around for as long as you want to play."

"I'll always want to play. I want us to finish every level."

Danny's avatar glanced up. A glimmer pulsed in the distance, and he broke into a run towards it.

"Don't leave me," Josh called after him, a knot tightening in his stomach.

"Hurry up, then. You want to catch the elf light or not?"

Josh followed close on his brother's heels, leaping over fallen tree trunks and flying across the forest's terrain with the grace of an angel. In this world, he never tired and never faltered. In this world, he could even outrun grief.

Downstairs, their mother stood in the darkening hallway with Danny's coat gathered in her arms. She breathed in the smell of him and pictured the shape of his body from the folds of fabric; the knobles of his shoulders, the slimness of his ribs. If she closed her eyes and stayed very still, she could pretend he'd never gone.

Perhaps if she called his name, he'd answer.



GHOSTED



Photography by **Sonja R Berry**

“Nature’s beauty and perseverance are infinite.”

NO NEW MESSAGES AND NINE SAVED MESSAGES

Fiction by Joyce Bingham

CW: Mention of Death

Beep.

MESSAGE NINE.

“Hi sweetheart, gonna be late home tonight, bloody car’s burst a tyre. I’m on the hard shoulder and the rain is thundering down. Oh my God, that lorry it’s not stopping—”

Beep.

MESSAGE EIGHT.

“Hi, sorry I missed your call, love you honey bun, see you later at home with our beautiful bundle of fun, blow baby Alice a big kiss from me.”

Beep.

MESSAGE SEVEN.

“I’m on my way, I’ll be at the hospital as soon as I can, hold those contractions. Just kidding. Can’t wait to meet our baby, love you honey bun, blowing you kisses as I drive.”

Beep.

MESSAGE SIX.

“Sweetheart, I’ve picked up some of those donuts you crave, and a chippy tea, so sit down and relax. I’ll give your feet a massage later. Catch those kisses.”

Beep.

MESSAGE FIVE.

“How about we try making that baby tonight? Love you to bits, honey bun.”

Beep.

MESSAGE FOUR.

“Christmas together was wonderful, you make me feel so alive, blowing you a kiss, can you catch it?”

Beep.

MESSAGE THREE.

“I’ve emailed you some holiday possibles, see what you think, be great to go exploring new cities with you.”

Beep.

MESSAGE TWO.

“Thanks for coming to the work party with me last night, you are a great dancer, you made it so much more enjoyable. How about meeting up for lunch Tuesday? Maybe we could organise our next date.”

Beep.

MESSAGE ONE.

“Hi, it’s Bob from the dating site, how about a drink, the pub on the high street, the King’s Arms, at eight? I’ll be the fool in the corner with the big bunch of flowers.”

NO NEW MESSAGES AND NINE SAVED MESSAGES.

Beep.

“Hi, I can’t get to the phone just now, why don’t you leave me a message and if this is the love of my life, blow me a kiss.”

His voice cascades into the night, his image projects onto her pillow, she sobs and blows a kiss.



RELICS



Photography by Michael Anthony

“Modern day relics offer a window into the past.”

0817 TO CAMBRIDGE

Poetry by Joseph Nutman

CW: Mental Health & Risky Behaviour

His head bowed,
this carriage is a confessional,
hands that mimic prayer
cradle a big bottle of beer

Was it a night worthy of thanks?
I mull over my quick judgment,
maybe this holy fool is better off

Though it could be a plea to
please, just make it stop
So it takes a little morning booze to bare –
sometimes a lot

Dew rolls down his brew,
he stirs the way old men
do when crippled by the pew
and I whisper

Amen.



SUNNING STREETS



Photography by **Nina Miller**

“The empty street felt very human, sunning itself in the afternoon light. The buildings progress in age to show the passage of time.”

MEAN STREETS

Poetry by **John Grey**

CW: Risky Behavior & Mention of Violence

Yes, it was unfortunate they had to come to blows.
And it was two against one—not good odds.
But it's the city, late at night. What do you expect?

Violence breaks out as sudden, as automatic, as sneezing.
Guys fall on each other, punch and kick,
with no idea how and why the melee started.

One of them, no more than a kid, was on the ground.
The other two didn't stop even though they'd won already.
They just got more vicious, more cruel.

But an hour later, there was no sign of any of them.
They were back home. Even the guy who left
some of his blood on the sidewalk.

A woman waits for a cab right where the fight occurred.
A couple stroll by. A man stops to adjust his glasses.
Streets are kind until the next time they're not.



GHOST TREE



Photography by **Amy Bobeda**

“I’m interested in the way the tree shadows on the rock art in the way bodies would have shadowed when the rock was carved thousands of years ago.”

A LOVE LETTER

Non-Fiction by **Emma Jarman**

CW: Mention of Death

Dedicated to A.J.N.

The echo of his absence deafened her, muting the paltry condolences that chased her like bloodhounds to a stag. The lack of his existence left more than a void; not a hole or a pit, but a deep, spiraling anguish that tore pieces from her face and her soul and her stomach and ran away, leaving her to wander, more than empty, alone.

Her grief was vacuous, siphoning her appetite, her once shameless smile, her will to get up, like gasoline from an old, tired tank. Once drained, it moved into her, filling the bled dry wounds and settling like arthritis in her chest. Where orangey flames had once giggled and danced, grief cracked and groaned, sucked and filled. Like a black hole, it turned her inside out.

She greeted her grief in the morning like the smell of brewed coffee as it coaxed her at dawn from unwelcome sleeplessness with its bitter depth, forcing her, again and again, to go on.

She lived in her grief for so long it was home. She thought of it each day and returned to it at night, pulling the fear of its abandonment round her frail, sloping shoulders like the moth-bitten housecoat her mother wore, and her grandmother before them. Tears licked the envelopes stuffed with letters never sent. Cheap wine guarded the ashtray that spilled over her bedside.

For years she sought unhappiness, comforted by its abundance and how easily what Was could remind her of what Wasn't. Her proclivity for self-destruction allowed a few, here and there, the opportunity to care for her. She knew it was never enough. She'd say it never mattered, awash with relief as they all drove away.

Sometimes, her grief would lift and she'd have a lovely day, drive to the beach and watch seagulls feast on the remains of a family picnic, stop at a bookshop and pick up a fiction novel with a pretty cover, arrive home and read a bit of it. The ends of these days, though, even more than the rest, found her quivering in fear; and in sinking sunlight she'd crawl to the closet to rock mournfully on the floor, the box of his things strewn about her bare feet, feeling wretchedly abandoned by her grief. After a time, she'd put them away, back in the box, back on the shelf, and shove her sagging mattress to the corner of the cold, dark room. Then, she'd crawl in with her cigarettes and wine, press her back to the wall and cry herself to sleep.

Many mornings she'd drive past the sun-dappled patch of grass where a tree used to stand, searching for ghosts and tire-skidded lines in the dirt, long since erased by rain and wind and time. I still love you, she'd whisper to the charcoal stump that stared back; all that was left of them both. Her words lingered for a moment, suspended in the air between her lips and the steering wheel, before disintegrating like nicotine ash in her lap. As things do. Then suddenly she'd leave in a hurry of ache—for him, for love—spiraling toward home to write letters to them both.



FAIRY OAK

One day passed, another day passed; at the dawn of the third day he saw a wondrous palace, and by the side of the palace stood an oak, and on the oak sat a falcon bright. Down flew the Falcon from the oak, smote upon the ground, turned into a brave youth, and cried aloud:

'Ha, dear brother-in-law! how deals the Lord with you?'

Out came running the Princess Marya, joyfully greeted her brother Ivan, and began inquiring after his health, and telling him all about herself. The Prince spent three days with them; then he said:

'I cannot abide with you; I must go in search of my wife, the fair Princess Marya Morevna.'

'Hard will it be for you to find her,' answered the Falcon. 'At all events leave with us your silver spoon. We will look at it and remember you.' So Prince Ivan left his silver spoon at the Falcon's, and went on his way again.

On he went one day, on he went another day, and by the dawn of the third day he saw a palace still grander than the former one and hard by the palace stood an oak, and on the oak sat an eagle. Down flew the Eagle from the oak, smote upon the ground, turned into a brave youth, and cried aloud:

'Rise up, Princess Olga! Hither comes our brother dear.'

The Princess Olga immediately ran to meet him, and began kissing him and embracing him, asking after his health, and telling him all about herself. With them Prince Ivan stopped three days; then he said:

'I cannot stay here any longer. I am going to look for my wife, the fair Princess Marya Morevna.'

'Hard will it be for you to find her,' replied the Eagle. 'Leave with us a silver fork. We will look at it and remember you.'

He left a silver fork behind, and went his way. He travelled one day, he travelled two days, at daybreak on the third day he saw a palace grander than the first two, and near the palace stood an oak, and on

Hybrid by Amy Marques

"The poems in this collection were created using fairytales from The Red Fairy Book, edited by Andrew Lang and available through Project Gutenberg. Font size varies, but the constraints of each poem were that they could each use the words contained in a single page of the book. Material included watercolor, acrylic paint, cutouts from old magazines, and playfulness."

FALLING

Non-Fiction by **Katherine K. Wilson**

CW: Mention of Illness

My shoes scratch along the path that runs under a cluster of trees along the river—the path you led me down the first day. I pause at the spot under the weeping willow where you snapped that photo of me with my mouth wide open and my eyes squeezed shut from the force of my laughter.

“You’ll look back at this photo one day and remember this moment,” you said. You weren’t in the picture, but you created the moment.

That day, the sun, strong and fervent, peaked out from behind a chartreuse canopy. After you snapped the photo, I took the phone out of your hand and, reaching around you, slid it into the back pocket of your jeans. Your arms wrapped around my waist as you pulled me into your chest. Your woodsy scent enveloped me. You dipped your head down; your lips touched mine. I plunged into our kiss. You tasted like water—like nothing and everything all at once.

I pulled back and met your eyes, their color matching the river.

“Are you going to look at that picture and remember me if I don’t make it?” I asked.

“You’re not going anywhere,” you said, unwavering.

I wanted to believe you. You sounded so sure.

This time, upon my return to the path, the ground is carpeted with leaves—maroon, orange, and mud-brown—that obscure much of the path from view. The leaves don't crunch under my feet; instead, they leap tentatively in the wake of my shuffling feet—at least the ones that aren't weighed down by mud do. There are a few green leaves among the fallen. My head tilts towards the sky; the trees are nearly bare, with just a few green and golden leaves hanging on. I wonder about the green ones on the ground. Why did they fall? Did the wind wrench them free from the branches? Or did they simply give up while still in their prime?

They remind me of myself, still green but falling before my time. It isn't the wind wrenching me free from a future I so badly want; instead, it is a constellation of mysterious multisyllabic maladies. My heart is literally broken. It isn't fully clear why or what, if anything, can be done.

I walk alone on my return to the path. It wasn't the wind that carried you away; we fell and then fell apart. It wasn't fully clear why or what, if anything, could be done.

The sharp smell of decaying leaves infuses the air. I pull in a deep breath. You were wrong. I don't need to look at that picture to remember the moment.

The wind picks up, and a handful of dry brown leaves lift into the air and dance above my head. I notice that the leaves that are the most damaged catch the wind easily; they float the highest and stay in the air the longest.



AUTUMN WINDOW



Artwork by Amanda Young

“Autumn is a tough time of year because as the weather deteriorates so does my health.”

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE INNER STATES

Fiction by René Vasquez

CW: Mental Health

How will he know if what he experiences here is in fact the present moment and not simply a memory he occupies?

What should he make of the unknowable unfolding of these churning seconds?

His life is folded on itself—pulled into an endless loop. His childhood presses against his adulthood, his past merges into his present, pulls away, leaves behind an amalgamate of both. He is in a constant state of awaking from a dream. The various parts of his life are rendered down and molten, spit out, as if from a fissure in the earth.

He is swept up in an anomaly; he is a wave crashing upon a shore.

And it is because of this that he sees the future, it is because of this that his past is not left behind.

You watch him sitting at the table by the window. You wonder why he appears concurrently to be there and not there. There is a slight flicker in the lights, the outside corner of your eye twitches, and you blink to make it stop. For a fraction of a moment, he is gone, but the air that had surrounded him does not yet rush in to fill the space he occupied.

He is there, and he is not.

He feels that you are not like the others. He feels that he can come to rest in your presence. He wants you to be unlike the others, wants you to want nothing from him except what he gives freely. He wants you to be nowhere else but here.

And he is here and he is not, and he longs for this to stop.

What do you think it feels like to him, to be everywhere at once and nowhere also? What questions would you ask him? What burden would you be willing to lift? And I know from the way you look at him that you believe no burden would be too great. I know you believe this, but think carefully about the things you want to know, the things you want to carry. He will trust you for just a moment, and then never again, or forever and always. Think carefully about the burdens you are willing to bear.

Things move, up and down, back and forth; they twist and spiral, double back, weave fractal patterns repeating endlessly. Our minds mimic the world, our minds build a universe; neurons mass at the gates of our consciousness.

He watches you move; he holds tight to every fraction of your body's progress across the room. He tries to build a linear description of the world, tries to slip into the stream of others.

Are you thinking of the burdens you will carry?

Are you thinking of his gaze pressing hard against you?

Time passes differently for him, though he watches and tries to calibrate his hours to yours.

How does he see you in these unmatched seconds? What can he know from the moments hidden from you? There are so many questions one needs to answer, so many spaces one needs to fill.

You brush his shoulder as you pass, kiss him gently on the mouth. Your lips taste faintly of mint, your mouth feels faintly of home. He will bookmark this moment, return to it often. He folds and intersects, pulls the past into the present like rivers feeding into oceans. He is barely here, but he is nowhere else. You shimmer and vibrate, you pass and are reborn. You put your hand in his; you whisper something in his ear. Time does not know what to do with moments like these; it stops, it bulges, it loses its way. Time is an arrow until you strip it of its fletching.

I am watching, but from where do I watch? This is a question I cannot answer because I do not see myself from a vantage point outside myself. I am always at the center, as are you. But I think he has no center; I think he is outside space as well as time. He seems always out of focus, as if two, or three, or four images of himself are overlapped, barely misaligned. He is there, but he is also not, he is solid but he is not.

You love him. You wish he would lock himself in the moment, any moment, here with you. Do you not see the madness his life evokes, do you see only a hologram of a man stretched across time, stretched into moments that still yet do not exist? Wouldn't this drive any of us mad? But you want this madness turned on you. You want him to take you, you want him to choose this moment over all others, you want him to madly love you.

He wants you to hold him to this moment, though he cannot tell you this; his voice speaks now only from the far distance and it cannot reach you. He sits in silence at the kitchen table. Often he moves as if nothing is wrong. He makes patterns of the things scattered before him, arranges plates and napkins, knives, and forks. You think he is trying to tell you something. You place your hand gently over his, try to feel rather than see. Where is he, this man who vowed a home with you? He told you he was born with your name stitched upon his heart, that he carried you with him everywhere and always. Are you still with him now? Does he feel you on the edges of that dark loop?

It is best that you do not know. Isn't this what you tell yourself in the quiet, cold hours? His body occupies the spaces—at the table, in the hallways, in your bed.

He is there, but not there.

He is here, but he is elsewhere.

Why is life like this?

You gather up the broken glass. You gather up everything that has broken new this day. You have mountains of debris. You have reservoirs of tears. Occasionally he will look at you as if he is only here. Occasionally he will look at you as if to say he is back finally for good. But these moments become fewer and more distantly spaced.

You kiss the soft turmoil of his hair, press your hand to his chest. You feel for his beating heart, feel for the raised stitches of your embroidered name.

This is one possible outcome, one possible state. But you will love him still and always because his name is stitched and written on your heart as well. Can we ever know this name until we call it out—until it is the only name we want to hear an answer to?

You move about the kitchen. You watch memories swirl and float through the beam of light falling through the skylight. You are close enough to touch him, yet your distance is too great.

A thread, almost invisible, catches the light filling the kitchen. You trace its length from your name to his. It is faint and unbreakable, it is sparkling and alive.

You turn towards the sink, dip your hands into the warm soapy water. You gaze through the window into the world.

Light fills the spaces,

The thread pulls achingly at your heart.



UNTITLED



Photography by Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz

“Fall leaves are a favorite to look at and photograph.”

THE FALLING LEAVES

Poetry by **John RC Potter**

CW: Mention of Death

The Falling Leaves,

Leaves

Falling

The...

Autumn is in the air.

Leaves that fall,

 lives that fall,

 loves that fall and fail.

The family tree, the fluttering leaves.

Trees fall; leaves fall; lives fail.

There were nine leaves on that tree,

but over the decades, first one and then another loosened,

let go, carried briefly on the breeze, but

for a too-short moment floated aloft,

then plummeted and fell.

Nine leaves, nine lives: oh, to be a cat!

The first five leaves were not yet old,

but dropped to the awaiting ground below.

Trees are supposed to have long lives.

But what about the leaves?

Leaves become saplings and grow,

for a time, and then become trees.

1996 – First the mother leaf.

1998 – Then the father leaf.

2013 – Then the youngest sapling leaf.

2021 – And yet another leaf dropped suddenly to the ground.

2022 – Then the fifth and oldest sapling leaf in freefall, hastening its descent to the ground.

Four leaves remain on the tree,

bracing themselves for yet another autumn.

After the fall, there will be winter all over again.

Leaves that fall.

Lives that fall.

We fall...

Souls that rise above the mist of a miraculous morning.

And with our souls opening up ever more wide.

As we inch even closer to the great divide.



SPACE



Artwork by Dr. Vass Geo

TWISTS AND TWIRLS OF LIFE

Poetry by **Sreelekha Chatterjee**

CW: Mental Health

I see life like a strangling mist,
 an unending realm of mourning,
 about sadness that doesn't cease to exist.
 The trail of gloom passed on through generations,
 like an heirloom from my forefathers before me
 that leaves me abound with unyielding desperations.
 The reason to live is unclear, while the need to die is urgent,
 I stand on the bridge that connects the two,
 knowing not who will appear as emergent.
 The demons of darkness drive me crazy,
 as I carry the burden of my own corpse,
 for in fear and solitude, everything appears hazy.
 A voice in my mind distracts, so is a constant whisper in my ear
 something is wrapped inside me like a coiled, live wire
 with the filament exposed to outside danger of a fire near.
 It opens holes in what was once a solid ground,
 when I attempt to take a step
 only to find myself floating in the air around.
 I'm in thrall to pills as long as melancholy finds me,
 attaining a robust façade disguising the misery,
 a musty, foggy gloom that I am trying to flee.
 The scars on my body remind me of my unrest,
 of days darker than nights when I was sad and broken,
 when I didn't give up and tried my best.
 Seeing how much trauma I endured
 and now that I am free,
 my mind realises the violence I inured.

My body rejoices the marks of survival,
of unspoken pains and sufferings, like spring following winter,
healing, I got through my abhorrence, attaining self-revival.

Like fallen autumn leaves swirling with the wind,
life assumes varied motifs,
the coin of happiness and sadness twirls in life's ring.

As I celebrate, the clouds thunder in the grey sky,
a bird announces its presence,
bringing in good news in its cry.

Regal in appearance, an electrifying blue,
with the grace of a flower, swaggering and waving his train of feathers,
a peacock twirling, its move of love that is so true.

Eyespots of splendour caressed with mossy hue
pirouetting, dancing like a dynamic sea-wave in an exuberant display,
my eyes fixed on him like ones with glue.

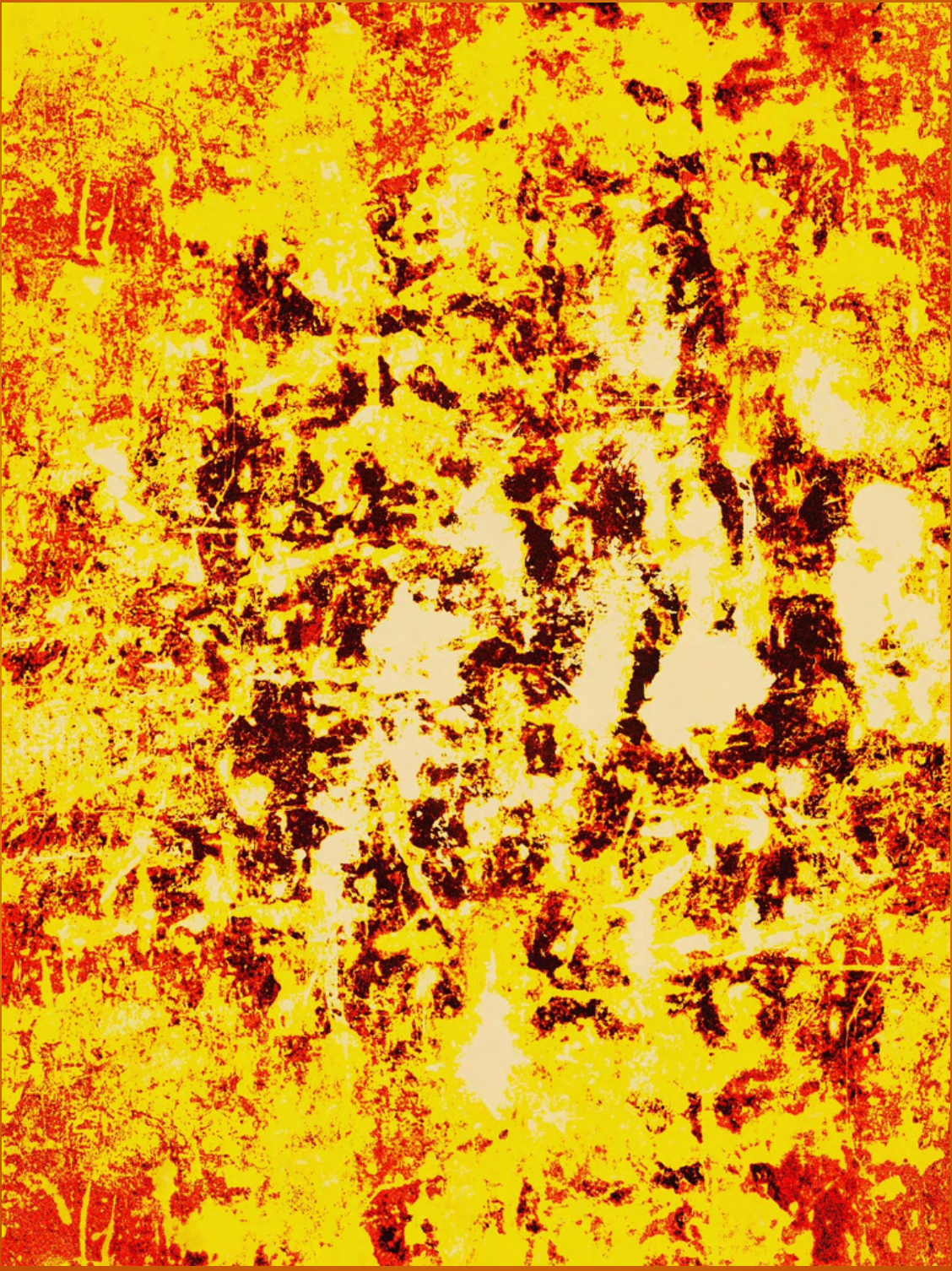
In the illumination of the lightning that blazes the sky's heart,
insouciant, an iridescent blue-feather-crested head turns with conceit,
my heart flutters in joy, visioning the work of Nature's art.

His feathers luxuriant, opalescent shades set to impress in style,
like a life of yellow, blue, brown and green colours that ensues,
a world without these is like a face without frown, gloom and smile.

Quivering, glimmering a spectacle in his plumage,
a glory as resplendent as he strikes up a wonder
I wish for a world where darkness never finds roomage.



A RUSH OF RENEWAL



Artwork by Edward Lee

ABOUT PONCHO & LEFTY

Poetry by **Tiffany Storrs**

Got a little ash in my mouth today
 Said lightning struck a forest floor or
 Maybe it was some discarded
 Lipstick-grazed cigarette filter next to a crushed Topo Chico (at least
 they cared enough to put themselves together first.)
 Southwestern wind carries
 Two hundred miles, twenty-four hours,
 two lakes blackened, bare and lapping
 burnt-orange bathed tree tops
 silent and solicitous
 to reach me.
 I take a moment to apologize to my younger self for
 Ash in my mouth, for
 Lipstick filters for crushed
 Water vessels
 For lessons unlearned
 For songs that play to remind me
 the way people lace together and bind
 Your pale blue eyes, lingering on
 Hundreds of days, hundreds of miles
 Through every dawn in muted shades like aching,
 like almost
 Noise and broken walls and the vast mundane
 to reach me.
 Still, I wonder
 if I lit a fire
 how long would it take for you
 to taste it?



RICE KRISPIE BARS OVER THE CAMPFIRE, WHAT A TASTY SNACK

Rice Krispie bars over the campfire, what a tasty snack

By [Cole Beauchamp](#)

★★★★★ 259 ratings [Rate](#) [134 comments](#)



Prep fire: 1 hour
Cook: 15 min



Skill: Easy



Serves: 6-8



Vegetarian

Nutrition:

kcal	fat	saturates	carbs	sugars	fibre	protein	salt
545	28g	13g	69g	50g	2g	4g	1g

Ingredients

This is the easy part: just three ingredients. You're camping so don't fret about measuring.

- Butter – a big spoonful
- Marshmallow – a bag
- Rice Krispies – half a box, or maybe more, you'll have to wing it

Method

1. Let the campfire burn down to red embers, whether by choice or neglect. Maybe your husband is too cheap to pay for firewood from the fit man in the pickup, so you're left with wet sticks from the woods that hiss and pop and smoke. Get on with it.
2. Stick a pan on the embers and add a dollop of butter, ignoring the way your man is hugging on the woman in the next lot. Who puts a satellite dish on their RV, for Christ's sake? Make yours a double as you know he'll be demanding sex tonight despite ignoring you.
3. Haul out last year's marshmallow bag, you know the one where they've all melted and reformed into one ungodly loop? That's the one. Rip it open with your teeth while the hussy next door giggles and hands out beer to the circle of men around her like she's Paris Fucking Hilton.
4. Once the butter has melted, drop in the marshmallow. Think about shouting to your husband to get his ass over here now, like he did when you chatted too long with the firewood man. Watch the marshmallow bubble instead.
5. Stir in half a box of Rice Krispies, using a wooden spoon to coat the little Snap Crackle and Pops evenly. Think about Saturday mornings when you were a kid, watching cartoons and thinking the world was a good place. Don't think about your marriage. Don't cry. Neither the salt nor the moisture will do your Rice Krispie Treats one bit of good.

CONTRIBUTORS

Amy Marques has been known to call books friends and is on a first name basis with many fictional characters. She has visual art, poetry, and prose published in journals such as *Streetcake Magazine*, *MoonPark Review*, *Bending Genres*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Gone Lawn* and is a returning contributor to *Raw Lit*.

<https://amybookwhisperer.wordpress.com>

Claudia Mallea (she/her) is a writer/ archivist/librarian. Her archival work has cultivated a writing practice documenting her own lived experience. Her interests include film, classics, art history, medical history, craft theory, and disability justice organizing.

@cloud__i__a (Instagram) & @mylarsleeve (Twitter)

Amanda Young, BA (Hons) Art and Design Practise currently studying MA Illustration. She lives in Cornwall , UK and examples of her work can be found on @amandayoungart (Instagram)

Oliver Kleyer is a teacher and poet from Northern Germany. He writes in German and English. His poems have appeared in *Sixpence Society*, *The Amazine*, the "FromOneLine to another" anthology and elsewhere. When not writing or teaching, he's trying to make his mandolin sing.

@funnyfrogget (Twitter)

Rachel Coyne is a writer and painter from Lindstrom, Minnesota.

@Imrachelcoyne (Instagram) & @Imrachelcoyne (Twitter)

Odi Welter is a queer, neurodivergent author currently studying Film and Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. When not writing, they are indulging in their borderline unhealthy obsessions with fairy tales, marine life, superheroes, and botany.

@o.d.i.welter (Instagram)

Originally from Germany, **Birte Hosken** has been in the UK for over 30 years. During lockdown, she created artwork from items found on local Cornish beaches close to her home. She makes mainly wall hangings and driftwood candleholders. She has written two romantic novels set in Cornwall.

www.birtehosken.wixsite.com/author

Anne Walters (they/them) is a queer non-binary writer who lives in New Jersey. They have been published in *Midway Journal*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Three Moon Magazine*, among others. When not writing, they enjoy drinking too much coffee and hanging out with their cats.

@_breakerfall (Instagram)

Cyrus Carlson is an abstract painter from the Midwest.

Yael Tobón is a Mexican writer and poet. They are enrolled in the Honours English and Creative Writing program with a double minor in Interdisciplinary Studies in Sexuality and Liberal Arts. Their work has been featured in *pixie literary magazine* issue 1.2 and *QT Literary Magazine* issue 11.

Steven Ostrowski is a novelist, poet, short fiction writer and painter whose work is widely-published. His first novel, "The Highway of Spirit and Bone," has just been published (Lefora Publications) and a full-length book of poems called "Life Field" (Impspired Press, UK) will be out in January, 2024.

www.stevenostrowski.org

Maria Thomas is an apple-shaped mum who has won Oxford Flash & was named Best Speculative Fiction by Welkin Prize. Maria also won Free Flash Fiction's Comp 13, Retreat West's April '22 Micro, and placed in LISP and Propelling Pencil in '22.

@Appleshapedwriter (Instagram) & @Applewriter (Twitter)

Amy Bobeda directs the Naropa Writing Center, where she also teaches pedagogy and process-based art. She's the author of *Red Memory* (FlowerSong Press), *What Bird Are You?* (Finishing Line Press) and some other things.

@everystoryisamenstrualstory (Instagram) & @amybobeda (Twitter)

T.L. Tomljanovic is a freelance writer living in British Columbia, Canada. Her recent work received an honourable mention in the Off-Topic Publishing flash fiction contest, and was published in *The Woolf* and *Sci-Fi Shorts*.

@TLTomljanovic (Twitter)

<https://tomljanovic.wordpress.com>

Dr. Vass Geo is an untroubled, non-traumatized artist who loves colours.

DLC Hanson grew up in Grimsby and Leeds before travelling the world, falling in love and moving to London. After finding neither fame nor fortune, he moved to rural Essex to start a family, a business, a covers band and to become a writer. He is currently working on his first novel.

@DLCTheWriter (Twitter)

Cecilia Maddison is a writer from London, UK. Her winning and shortlisted stories can be found on Reedsy Prompts, and she is a Globe Soup finalist.

Sonja Berry is enrolled in a UCLA writing certification program, aspiring to pursue a writing career upon completion of 26 years of military service.

@SonjaRBerry1 (Twitter)

Joyce Bingham is a Scottish writer who enjoys writing short fiction with pieces published by *Molotov Cocktail*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *FlashBack Fiction*, *VirtualZine*, *Funny Pearls* and *Free Flash Fiction*. She lives in the North of England where she makes up stories and tells tall tales.

@JoyceBingham10 (Twitter)

<https://binghamjoyce30.wixsite.com/joyce-bingham-writer>

Michael Anthony is an American writer and artist. He has published fiction, poetry, illustrations, and photographs in literary journals and commercial magazines.

MichaelAnthony.MyPortfolio.com

Joseph Nutman is a poet and A-level English dropout from North Hertfordshire - he finds his voice in the tension between nature, psyche, and society. He does the majority of his writing outside.

@joseph_nutman (Instagram)

Nina Miller is an Indian-American physician, fencer, and creative. Her hybrid work can be found in *Cutbow Quarterly* and *Raw Lit*, her prose and poetry in *Sci-Fi Shorts*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Five South*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Five Minutes* and more.

@NinaMD1 (Twitter)

www.ninamillerwrites.com

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Stand*, *Santa fe Literary Review*, and *Sheepshead Review*. Latest books, “Between Two Fires”, “Covert” and “Memory Outside The Head” are available through Amazon.

Emma Jarman is a recovering journalist teaching English in the special education setting in a small town in Oklahoma. Her daughter, Kate, is her favorite feature. She loves to hike and to bake and may never finish wandering.

@illwritealready (Instagram)

Katherine K. Wilson is a writer living with multiple hidden disabilities. She's a fervent nomad passing her days on both sides of the Atlantic. Some of her recent work appears in *Santa Fe Writers Project Quarterly*, *Pile Press*, *Grande Dame Literary Journal*, and *Iris Literary Journal*.
@katherine_kwilson (Instagram)

Originally from Los Angeles, **René Vasquez** now lives and works in North Carolina.

renevasquezart.com

Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz is a writer and photographer.

@gwjomi (Twitter)

Gwendolynjoycemintz.com

John RC Potter is an international educator and gay man from Canada, living in Istanbul. His poems, stories, essays, and reviews have been published in a range of magazines and journals, most recently in *Blank Spaces*, ("In Search of Alice Munro", June 2023), *Literary Yard* ("She Got What She Deserved", June 2023) & *The Serulian* ("The Memory Box", September 2023). The author has over a dozen upcoming publications in the coming months.

@JohnRCPotter (Twitter)

<https://author-blog.org>

Sreelekha Chatterjee is a short story writer, poet, researcher and editor. When not writing, she loves to sing and spend time cooking. She lives in New Delhi, India.

@sreelekha.chatterjee.1 (Facebook), @sreelekha2023 (Instagram) & @sreelekha001 (Twitter)

Edward Lee is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, non-fiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen* and *Smiths Knoll*.

<https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>

Tiffany M. Storrs is a rust belt baby with a mouth to match. She is EIC of *Roi Fainéant Press*, an eternal student of comedy, day-job writer, and old soul. Her words have appeared in *Red Fez*, *Punk Noir*, and elsewhere.

@msladybrute

(Twitter)

<https://www.roifaineantpress.com>

Cole Beauchamp (she/her) is a queer writer based in London. Shortlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award, she has stories in *The Phare*, *trampset*, *Janus Literary*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Sundial* and *Free Flash Fiction*. She lives with her girlfriend, has two children and an exuberant Maltipoo.

@nomad_sw18 (Twitter)

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