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One Man’s Ink

Alex Shenstone

He saw a world.
Both sides of the wire.
Through the sockets of the dead.
Tall men. Short men.
Women, who’d had to fight,
to die.
He saw the span of massacred life and said,

*don’t worry.*

You will live in green again.
Walk tall.
Walk loved in a place where evil is no such word.

As you are placed,
name uncarved on the stone,
into the middle of the earth,
you will breathe.

Breathe the Tolkien ink
and without even knowing it,
live forever.
I pay attention to the darkness in my breathing by focusing on the elephants only I can see.

When I say “pay,” I mean full cash payment up front, like the time my husband just wanted to cut up an avocado for lunch, and instead drilled a serrated knife into the base of his index finger. He left his payment on the kitchen floor and the countertop. He even sacrificed some nerves.

When I say “attention,” I mean the scrape of the catheter that was threaded up my groin on a mission to burn misbehaving cardiac cells. I mean the tone of my unsedated voice ricocheting around the electrophysiology lab, bouncing off the computer screens, *it burns*. What I really meant was *you’re burning me*, so, when I say “attention,” you know, I mean, the wave of fentanyl that came way too late.

When I say “darkness,” I mean the ledge outside of Ansel’s Cave, where at night I hear packs of coyotes dispatching their prey by ripping into it on the Sharon conglomerate. Their echoing howls run slick, right down through the rocks, right down through the mossy pebbles, right down to the roots of the ginormous tree that everyone just knew was going to fall, that everyone felt could not withstand one more Lake Erie blow. *That thing’s gonna have to come down, everyone said, or it’ll be in the way of everything when it falls.* They said *falls* but I know they meant *fails*. That’s what everyone means when they talk about things in imminent danger of falling.

When I say “breathing,” I mean the release of desperate puffs of regret, in that tone of voice someone uses when they’re about to break me apart and they know it, but they do it anyway. I mean the mocking scream of adrenaline oozing towards my extremities digging deep into my
limbic system, prying me out of the bed, begging me to *do something, fight or flee, but don’t just lie there and sweat and gasp*.

When I say “focus,” I mean that day I was walking up Pioneer Bridle Trail and I saw an old woman on the trail with her blind dog and she said to her little dog, *don’t call me an old woman*. As I passed by, she said, *I can walk to the moon and back because I still have great legs*. I nodded, while she hunkered over the little blind dog, leading him by his heart, in teeny looping circles all around the trail.

When I say “elephants,” I mean that through my greyish astigmatism, through my old farsightedness, through the back glow of the villages of Burton and Middlefield to the northeast, our trees break in such interesting ways, looking like a failed sympathetic nervous system or elephants. That matriarch right there, stands guard over me, her vast back flank leading the way, the rest of her herd following along behind her, around the perimeter of the distant easement.

When I say, “only,” I mean that the matriarch will pin all of my poachers, with the precision of a gladiator, one tremendous knee crushing their backs, one tusk, one jab, one last, deep thrust for grievances past.

When I say “see,” I mean the resentment in the chambers of my heart, where I shove blood artlessly between grief and tornados, like the one that uprooted the biggest, strongest tree in our woods, when it was just minding its own damn business.
i am a struggling form & that is okay
self portrait as a redwood
Christian Aldana

waning afternoon
light. leaves glossed wet—kindling
an intense green fire.

deep in the marrow of my bones i’ve known something:
when my palms connected to soft earth
of oakland’s redwoods i heard so clearly
mushroom whispers; i don’t remember
when i changed—i just did;
my body became fibrous bark,
my fingers elongated into a shallow,
but wide cast root system that loves
well drained acidic soil, my feet
stretched skyward, my back tightened
to support the growth of my new limbs—
sunlight cours ed into me; water dispersed
through me as my crotch sprouted long, broad leaves
that caused my soul to stir, to screech.

waning afternoon
light. leaves glossed wet—kindling
an intense green fire.
Blossoming, J. Simpson
“If you were to die tonight in an awful car accident, would you wake up in Heaven or Hell?” said Pastor Patrick. The lights dimmed, synthesizers hummed, people wailed and cried and my mom, her ojos red, face in hands, asked if she could switch seats with me. She wanted to be closer to my dad. I was seven, I’d never seen her cry, thought she was sad her dad was dead. Grandpa died when I was a year. He called me Sara with the rolled R, no one says my name that way. My last name is Smith, I burn in the sun. Other Mexicans don’t know I’m one of them, laugh when I say enchilada or dónde está mi madre? The lights dimmed, synths hummed. “If God calls you tonight, where would you go?” said Pastor Jeff in youth group. I would go on road trips by myself, see the billboard: EXPOSURE TO THE SON WILL PREVENT BURNING LATER. How were we Christians when every few years my tias exiled each other? How mean is a stereotype non-Hispanics give us, something I’ve given my mom. How during those days when I was
so sick I couldn’t lie down
or sleep, I called her crying
and she yelled, Snap out of it!
Watch a romantic comedy! Go for a walk!
Take vitamin D! I had to take
the phone from my ear. Listen,
she said, I’m in a drive-thru but—
you’re going to be okay, okay?
Bird Song for My Daughter
After Zaina Alsous

Nuha Fariha

Do toucans' beaks turn red when they lie?
Do albatrosses cross paths in the night sky?
Do nightingales flinch from shards of ice?
Do kingfishers land on the same stone twice?
Do crows draw in ink? Do robins even blink?
If I sing a bird song in an empty meadow,
will you come back to me?
Changelings (1 and 4), jw summerisle
Sitting alongside 60,000+ people watching Maryland devastating Tennessee in the 2002 Peach Bowl and delighted to root for a team that has a turtle for their logo

Clem Flowers

& then the screams and cheers and raucous pounding of beers and high fives just cease

Clock counts down to zero

“HAPPY NEW YEAR” flashes on the massive scoreboard screen

Cheers resume

A metric ton of confetti and balloons falls on the field as the violence stops—red jerseys and orange and referee stripes, arm in arm, laughing and singing:

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And days of auld lang syne?”

We in the stands cheered again.

Whistles blew.

Violence resumed.
Henry ignored his pitch-black stools for a while until his denial surrendered to his better judgment. That defense of last resort faltered in the end and was replaced by humor, which allowed him to make an appointment to see his gastroenterologist for a colonoscopy. He planned to sing the first few lines of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* just as the propofol entered his vein. The fact that the joke was in bad taste would not deter him. He was sure the anesthesiologist, gastroenterologist and nurse would crack up as he fell into that delicious sleep.

Unfortunately, the immediate onset of the propofol’s magical effect precluded Henry’s knowing for sure how his joke landed. He could not feel the camera snake its way into his anus, up through his rectum, chicane into the sigmoid colon, and finally ascend into the ascending colon, where it abruptly stopped. Amidst the pink mucosa, occasional diverticula and rare fecal residual the tip of the colonoscope came face to face with a 5x8 cm mass. The tumor was irregular in every aspect, friable, and black in spots, where it was cannibalizing itself and the surrounding tissue. Prick it and it would bleed. The mystery of the melena was solved.

The juxtaposition of Henry’s blissful post-propofol mental status made it both easier and harder to assimilate the dripping of words like “mass” and “tumor” from the doctor’s mouth. Biopsy result few days staging surgery maybe temporary colostomy don’t worry we’ll be with you. All Henry could think about was his wife in the waiting room waiting to drive him home. Henry and Elsa had been married for thirty-five years. Although Henry was a competent and recently retired internist, he relied on Elsa to calm him when he felt anxious, even when he knew much more than her about the subject of his worry.

“It’s cancer,” he blurted out, half crying, half raging and entirely, “I told you so,” as though that Pyrrhic victory could allow him to avoid the panic that was rapidly settling in. Henry wanted Elsa to make it better, but Henry learned at an early age that women cannot be counted on for this. He was accustomed to relying on himself in the final analysis.
“Let’s hear what the doctors have to say. You’re always jumping to the worst case scenario,” Elsa reminded Henry, her voice a mixture of desperation and irritation, and void of reassurance. The biopsy results came back in a few days: invasive adenocarcinoma with high-grade dysplasia.

Indeed, the doctors had a lot to say. They outlined a game plan that included staging the cancer, surgery, and a bunch of blood tests for genetic markers and other stuff. Henry dutifully listened and made appointments for blood draws, CT scans of the abdomen, pelvis and chest, with oral and IV contrast. The results were bad. Stage 4 colon cancer with metastases in the mesentery, liver, and lung. The genetic testing did not make Henry a good candidate for chemotherapy. The only good news was that Henry would not die with a colostomy. He would die with an end-to-end anastomosis of his ascending and sigmoid colon segments. Six months.

Six months to pack in that ski trip to the Swiss Alps he had always put off. Six months to finish his book with the working title, *My Life as a Prison Doctor*. Henry was used to imagining there would be time. So much so that he never learned to live each day. Six months was a room with four walls and without doors. No option but to slam into one no matter which way he turned.

Henry was numb, longing for a propofol drip. He could not get *Thriller* out of his head, even as he was contemplating suicide. Contemplating suicide was not a new experience for Henry. As he was growing up, he had often seen killing himself as the solution to a whole variety of his troubles, most of them extremely trivial in retrospect. But Henry had other tricks up his sleeve. Anticipation was one of Henry’s most reliable defenses. He found planning for something way ahead of when it might harm him to be extremely helpful. This applied to preparing for a test in school or for the next hurricane. Coupled with magical thinking, he lived by “Henry’s Rule,” raising anticipation and worry to heretofore unknown heights of effectiveness. Henry was convinced that if he worried about some particular event happening or not happening, it wouldn’t. The caveat, however, was that he really, really had to worry. And this he did because he was really, really gifted in this regard.
Henry realized, however, that “Henry's Rule” had its limitation and no amount of worry could prevent the current inevitable course of events. Therefore, he reasoned, suicide was back on the table. Although Henry was not big on making charts comparing pros and cons of options he was weighing, he made an exception in this case. Pros. In favor of suicide. Mastery and control. Henry would decide when, where and how he would die. Avoidance of pain. Henry could skip the months left him that would likely be filled with physical pain and/or the fogginess and constipation than would come with measures for pain relief. Avoidance of anxiety. This was the big one for Henry. Why torture himself with months of wondering what death would be like, what was on “the other side,” and the panic of the final breath? And then there was the panic of false hope.

A formidable list, Henry thought. He put down his pen, rubbed his eyes, and considered that the rationale for ending his life by his own hand was staring him in the face. He could not immediately think of what could compete with these arguments. Somehow the difference between killing himself and being killed by this alien beast in his gut seemed inconsequential. Dead is dead.

Instead of writing up a list of cons, Henry decided to write a suicide note.

Dear Elsa,

By the time you read this note you will know that I am gone. I am very sorry to have to say goodbye this way, but I am quite sure you would have tried to stop me if I told you what I was planning to do.

Henry did not actually have a plan yet.

I feel stuck. I don’t really know what to say. I picture you crying as you read this and that would make me sad except that I am already dead. Will I feel anything after I am dead? Neurons just sitting there, cold and dumb, unable to talk to each other. Sort of how I feel now, Elsa. I loved you, of course. You were good to me. Thank you. That sounds so stupid. I want to say something meaningful...you know...memorable.

Even now that I am dead, I want to remember how warm you felt when I embraced you. You felt “like a little radiator,” I used to say. I never understood how you managed that, warm,
even when everything else seemed cold around us. And I want to remember your half-smile, looking at me from the corner of your eye, making us cheese omelets and turkey bacon on Sunday mornings. And how you clung to me, almost desperately, when we made love and how that let me know it was good. It wasn’t always so wonderful, of course, and I know I caused you pain. I tried to be a good husband, but I know I could have done better. This letter isn’t working. I wanted it to be better too, but here it is. I will miss you, Elsa. I am sorry for going this way, but the end was in sight anyway, so I hope you forgive me. I love you my sweet.

Henry was dissatisfied with his suicide note but decided it was good enough. He signed it “Love you forever, Henry,” placed it in an envelope, sealed it with a lick of his tongue and hanged himself from the waste pipe in his basement. *Thriller* slipped from his lips between the gasps.

Elsa found the body that evening when she came home from work and Henry had not appeared for dinner. She was not completely surprised. She ran up the stairs of the basement and called 911, knowing it was too late but not knowing what else to do. The ambulance and police came, cut him down and brought him to a local hospital morgue, where he was stored in a refrigerated drawer. The police read the suicide note and interviewed Elsa who told them about Henry’s Stage 4 colon cancer. They said it was not a case for the M.E., and they left.

Alone again, Elsa sat down with the note and read it over and over, looking for something she did not know.
I knew myself once.
The easterly winds are a hiccup that teases
relief. One final breath that tells me everything is
fine. A tug, the place by one's foot
before a dip into dreamland.

Oh! You’re not allowed to sink
into a world that cracks open?
Your skull releases the infinite possibilities,
too much to bear this evening,
too much to bear for longer than a minute.

I’ll trundle through streets
on a tethered hook. A warrant for every potion
you sizzle into cauldrons. A mask for me,
a mask for you. A piece of underappreciation
for the wave of unredacted pity
people only knew in dreams.

Take a breath and you’ll likely fall
into another space
empty of ground but ever so solid.

There was this one moment:

(You were waiting for it I bet!)
I stood at the gates to the cemetery.
We all did. We all knew that something sat
near the end of it all. And we called out
and we wondered whether we'd get an answer.
Our Medusa Transition, Ankita Sharma

Author's Note: Building upon the famous painting ‘Medusa’ (1956) by the great Italian painter Caravaggio, this mixed media artwork presents ‘Medusa’, the Greek mythological enigma in a new light. Just like her transition from a beautiful woman to a dreadful and tortured creature, our modern lifestyle and development have forced our planet into a similar state. In mixed media- color pencil, gel, and sketch pen.
I May Have Played Hooky Today
Deryck N. Robertson

I may have played hooky
Took a day in the sun
To re-fix my brain and
To not care about those
Usual day things that
Have begun to weigh much
Too heavily on me.
I may have had coffee
Lying on the love seat
Instead of at my desk
While the stresses seeped out
With ev'ry relaxed breath
To wherever they go
I bid them good riddance.
It gives you fireflies, bits of glitter floating on the hot breath of summer. I don’t remember them from my childhood, instead I remember the rusted green banana-seat bike, a white fence that looped our yard and became a tightrope, a gangplank, a high wire my sister and I walked – arms flung out like featherless birds. We were escape artists, we were pirates, we were anything but two farm girls in the heat of a North Dakota summer. As those months stretched out like hot tar my skin grew brown while my sister’s stayed pink, each of us inheriting the coloring of one parent. Each night we went to bed before darkness fully descended, the summer days long with light. Perhaps as we lie whispering, hatching escape plans or plotting our next adventure, the fireflies began their flights, brightening the night as we fell into the exhausted sleep of children, our dreams floating out the open window, carried away on the wind with glowing arcs lighting the way.
"Downpour"

Liezel Moraleja Hackett

Remember
you wanted
to live forever

your dark eyes
confided in me once

I followed you
because you were fire
and my hands were cold.

Remember
we spent our aimless days
at the park

drawing chalk murals
waiting in empty
wading pools
everyday-

and everyday
the rain would come down.

Everyday.
Until Spring.

Then, standing
in the downpour,

we watched the rain
destroy what we made.
Foggy Mountains, Erin McKay

mt. hood volcano, Alan Bern
Three weeks before you died, I saw you at Albertson’s. I was buying wine. It had been years since we spoke, you looked worse than I expected. You said you’d call. Why didn’t I call you? We’ve had the same phone numbers since seventh grade, the prime time of our friendship. We wanted to discover anything, stayed up until daylight searching for ghosts believing everything, nothing off limits. The night I got my driver’s license, you told me. In a field of mesquite bushes, piles of prayers written on stones at the base of an enormous cross. We came to the crossroads of Midland because you wanted to be alone with God and me. So close to our curfew. How do you think they’ll react when they find out I’m—no one knew until you let them in. I was in until I couldn’t watch you anymore, ashamed of not being able to recognize you. Where had I gone?

Yesterday afternoon I drove back to the altar. This city we hate grew larger and you’re not around to make fun of it? Across the street, a gated entrance to a golf course. I imagine you in the cookie cutter houses close by. You flicker House beats, scare the hell out of teenagers, make them wonder why you’re there and if you’re really, really there.
We would go late at night, especially if there were girls. Most of us didn’t have to work the next day since most of us didn’t have jobs. Down an unmarked dirt road off the highway, just past the JESUS DIED FOR YOUR SINS billboard, the whole area like remnants of an explosion—huge chunks of cement and concrete, bent iron rebar sticking out, scattered on either side of a two-track, to smaller ruins overgrown with oak and sumac scrub-brush.

In our teens and early 20s, taking basic classes at community college, still living with our parents, we’d go to scare each other, most especially the girls, but if there were no girls then each other, with stories—like that this was where escaped convicts from one of the many surrounding prisons would hide, or that this was where Satanists performed rituals, like the time they cut open a dog and hung its body from a tree. Or simply that the locals would call the cops.

There were tunnels—we crawled down through holes—leading to underground storage cells, with graffiti pentagrams and FUCKs, and a long hall leading to a larger room where the roof had collapsed, a big fallen cement slab, which was the way out, up through the column of moonlight between two cement towers five stories high, empty inside. We climbed the big one via a rung ladder on the outside wall up to the roof—steel girders led across east to the smaller tower, and the craziest of us would walk across the girders if there were girls.

We could see everything up there: stars, third-growth forests, highways north and south, freeway east and west. All the cars going somewhere. But mostly we looked at the city lights to the north, where somewhere our parents were sleeping.
ASK THE WHALE

Meghan Kemp-Gee

And you:
when you neglect to breathe, and float
suspended at ten thousand feet listening
past the bruising thud of your own heartbeat,
let the thick salt hold you, listen and don’t
hear, does the vast and echoless mass of all that sea make you forget that you are big?

And me:
when I have hammered silver leaf on the
soles of my feet, when as I breathe my ribs
splay out and seed a million trees, a million
trees to dig their toenails deep into the concrete-plated
origins of things, my name is each uncharted sleepless click and call and useless ping and
wail you cast out in
the dark and I am big and
I am big and I

am

big.
When It Comes
Alexandra Williams

It comes like day
break, like furies,
whip lash across
a roseate sky; red-letter day. Carve
our names into cloud;
freewheeling in
pinwheels, colours
we name, jokingly,
magenta madness,
fuchsia fusion,
roasted redcurrant,
mojo mischief,
shepherd's delight.
Kurt Cobain (above), John Lennon (below),
Marilyn Monroe (right)

Madison Leigh O’Hara, @petalpedlarart
Bad Weather Days
Kristin Kozlowski

It was the way the tree’s roots snuck out of the ground at irregular intervals and then dove back beneath the dirt again, crawling away from the tree trunk like the rays of the sun that were hidden behind the thick, gray clouds; it was the way the rain ran down the driveway by the school bus stop in rivers, the way it bubbled when it hit the puddles at the curb; it was the way the wind picked up now and then, and tugged at my umbrella and reminded me of Mary Poppins and the way she flew by way of umbrella, the way my mom used to love to watch that movie with us, the way she sounded like Julie Andrews when she sang: just a spoon full of sugar makes the medicine go down; it was the way water soaked through our shoes because none of us were used to pulling on boots yet; it was the way we looked at the clouds above our heads and said: at least it’s not snow; it was the way we drank hot chocolate after the walk home that reminded me that sometimes bad weather days are the best kind of days.
TAKE, EAT, THIS IS MY BODY

Robert Beveridge

your wendigo
crunches down
on bones
from last
night’s funeral

they’ll come
back later
Cannons

Alexandra Williams

You wore blue wool, knowing it looked good on you.
Some things unspin me even now: a jumper slung
over the back of a chair, a flash of gold on
a stranger's finger, that Jamie Cullum CD (forgive me!)
I wore out
that last high, dry summer without you.

Lately, I've tried to shift time,
swept through avenues of ash,
built lean-tos in remote buildings,
always somewhere
covert,
always somewhere
cannons firing

all that heat between us all the cannons
between us liquid metal between us

Here's what remains: fabled days
cognac and coffee, smoking under streetlights
the measured way you slipped
your ring off, placed it on the bedside table animates the breath

be still
You said you can't forget
that haunting image of
me in your rearview mirror,

but all I have
is the slow reel
of you driving away.
Jimi Hendrix
Madison Leigh O’Hara, @petalpedlarart

The atmosphere, the staff, and the clientele were mostly new. Jerome’s was never one of the boardwalk places designed to drag in impulsive tourists, but it wouldn’t have made the L.A. Weekly list two years ago. Jer knew his clients and he kept things basic-black walls, old leather couches, vaguely gothy. Functionally working class, but not in the studied, Silverlake way that would have made it truly cool. Three months after her husband was declared officially dead as opposed to missing, Artie repainted the black walls white, thinking it’d give the place a pristinely sterile feel, like a health spa or a high-class plastic surgery practice. But she thought that her skin looked gross and fleshy in all that white, and the lighting wasn’t warm enough, and even the nicest sample artwork had looked trashy when framed on the bright clean walls, so she returned all the white and stainless steel furniture she’d ordered, paying the return shipping costs with a chunk of Jer’s life insurance, and painted over the walls again in Pantone 17-5641 (“Emerald”), and reupholstered some vintage couches in 18-3224 (“Radiant Orchid”), a background which flattered every skin tone and brought out the lush green notes in high-quality black ink.

Today was a Wednesday, a quiet day because she only had one reservation, sketching with a regular client for an hour in the morning, then answering emails while supervising the other artists’ shifts until her accountant came in at two. In the last year she’d figured out how to keep the shop busy without keeping herself too busy, a distinction that she was proud to explain to people, the same way she liked that Jerome’s was now the kind of place where the bookkeeper came to you. As the day wound down toward closing, Alex was doing inventory and Michelle was in the middle of a four-hour appointment, so Artie took the walk-in, a college girl from Westwood with beautiful milky skin, startlingly cool to touch even
through latex gloves. The girl asked for a simple triangle on her shoulder, and Artie checked and rechecked about the exact size, then inked the outline without a stencil, three black lines, clean and unstudied and perfect, just as steady as she’d been a decade ago, frustrated as she was trying to describe a specific flower to Jer, and picking up a notepad and a pen to show him. Maybe you’d have a knack for it, he’d said.

It was her favorite story to tell at N.A. meetings: that she didn’t feel she deserved to still have such a steady drawing hand, that everything she knew about fairness and poetic justice should have taken that away from her. She’d explain how that was the difference between luck and mercy, that luck made you feel like you were getting away with something, but that even at ten years sober, mercy still felt unexpected, like a perfect gift.

It was the girl from Westwood’s first tattoo, and she kept her eyes on Artie’s face the whole time, doing the slow, deep inhalations she said she’d learned in yoga class, sometimes letting out soft little gasps as she exhaled. The little gasps got Alex’s attention, and he smiled and looked around for someone else to know why and smile along with him, but he didn’t find anyone, with Artie folded over the girl at her station, and Michelle doing detail behind the curtain at the back of the shop. Artie hadn’t done anything like fire all the boy artists—in fact, she’d never fired a single person in her life. But there was a certain amount of natural turnover in the business, and when Jer’s boys happened to leave, which they did, three at once in the six months after his disappearance, and then one here and there ever since, they were replaced by artists like Robyn, a workhorse with amazing full sleeves crawling with Silver Age Marvel superheroes, and Maven, an ex-con with a fauxhawk and a mile-long lineup of loyal clients. Respectively, they were geek chic and lesbian street cred, nineteen thousand Instagram followers and a flattering write-up in EDGE Los Angeles.

And the new girls had brought in the new kind of customer, and even high-profile clients, like the mayor’s son and daughter-in-law who wanted matching circular cut-outs of Hawaiian landscape on their forearms, or the A-list actress with 650 words of Sartre copied across her back, an indulgence necessitating the addition of a second makeup artist and five figures to the budget of each of her movies. Artie opened the shop for her late at night, and while she worked they’d chatted like old friends about pilates classes and ska bands, until the actress had eventually asked about why the shop was named Jerome’s.
Artie met Jerome at a meeting. She'd just told the story about giving a kid up for adoption when she was sixteen, which was her third least favorite story. Jerome shared next, and mentioned how he understood, because once his ex had gotten an abortion without telling him until later. In the parking lot after the meeting, Jer asked her out for a burger in WeHo, and she said yes just so she could yell at him for half an hour about how fucked up it had been to make that comparison.

In 2010, his best friend Antony got engaged, and Jerome worked hundreds of hours at his shop and freelanced at other places every chance he got so he could afford to go to the bachelor party, a ski and snowboard weekend in Whistler, Canada. Antony reported him missing on the second day of the trip, and offered to pay for Artie to fly to Vancouver, so she had to tell him about her criminal record, and why she’d be turned away at Canadian customs. Months later, in the springtime, ski patrol found Jer’s snowboard in a clearly-marked “Out Of Bounds” area, with forensic evidence suggesting he had not survived. That was how the rep from the American consulate in Vancouver had put it over the phone, “suggesting,” and Artie had to ask him to clarify if suggesting was the same as guaranteeing, and he’d paused and then said that he was “afraid so.”

But there had been no body to send back. Before she repainted the studio, Artie spent the time between clients with her sketchbook, trying to recreate from memory the ten hours of work she’d done on Jerome’s calf as a five year anniversary gift, because nobody had ever taken a good picture of it. Two years earlier he’d started getting little tats of little things she’d said to him that he liked, “HOW IT IS,” and “YES, ALWAYS,” and she’d liked that one so much she’d gotten a matching one herself. She told herself that at least she still had those, plus all the vines and marigolds Jer had done on her back. She’d made Alex add a cursive “R.I.P.” to the marigolds late in 2011, and then had instantly regretted it. It didn’t look the same.

At closing time, Michelle invited her out for drinks with some friends. Artie declined politely, and told Alex to go ahead, she didn’t mind closing up alone. She wiped down her station, printed out the credit card report, and deposited it with the cash drawer in the safe in the back office. She thought about vacuuming the floor again, but decided it could wait until Friday morning, when a tiny grandmother named Laura came in early to do a thorough clean before the weekend rush. Artie was in some respects a reasonably tidy person--tidy, but not clean, never able to bring herself to clean the places you couldn’t see. Jerome used
to yell at her because she never swept under the fridge or wrapped her fingers in paper
towel to rub the gunk off the corners of the bathroom faucet.

She restacked the magazines on the coffee table and swiped her hand across the
couch by the front desk to get rid of the crumbs from the popcorn Michelle ate on her break.
Then she activated the alarm and bolted the door and walked to her car, and for the first
time she found herself thinking only about the day’s work while she closed up, which was a
moment that she’d been anticipating for some time, worrying if, when it finally happened, it
would make her feel guilty, or liberated, or even more alone, and worrying about which of
those options might be the worst. But when it did come, if the loss was somehow less, or if it
was gone, its leaving didn’t make her stronger, or make the world a better place. It was gone.
Ecclesia of Birds
Matthew Miller

A mallard peddles past crinkled corn husks
in iridescent spring ponds, purple-blue feathers
circling an unplanted field he calls his own.
Sparrows swoop in double u's, cello strummed
in a stormy orchestra. Puffed gray doves hum.
Long notes, chastising blackbirds from power lines.
Some dug out of winter to sleep in the sun, but robins,
with voices like wind chimes of war, claim backyard
grasses with rust-breasted blades of song.
And I mumble retreat, remain distant; beak tucked under
folded wings. Squawking swarms the spaces I leave behind,
where I could have found partners; led the dancing.
February Sonnet

Leela Raj-Sankar

I can name the sun in every single language. Or, at least, the only one that matters—that is, your laugh, or the wrinkle between your brows when I forget my hat,

or scarf, or gloves, and have to shove my hands into your pockets to keep them from freezing. I say I want love but all I really want is warmth, for my toes and thumbs to not go numb below eighty degrees.

It's not about you, I swear—I would kiss a nuclear reactor if my knees stopped aching, if I wouldn't be remiss to wear less than four layers in winter.

But here's a secret: nothing feels more sweet than huddling together after dinner, or your fingers fussing with my coatsleeves, heat radiating from your hands. Okay, maybe I lied—it was always about you, baby.
Us

Shelly Jones

When she tries to define us
she chokes, the words held

fast in her mouth: ill-formed,
incomplete like the ruins

of an outpost, outlining
who we once were.

Sun-streaked memories
hold me hostage as I peel

open parched lips, blow life into her:
heat and saliva incubating the words

until she may spit us out:
fully-formed, ready to live

in the wilds of each other.
Smallness

Sara Marie Smith

Try to imagine the idea
of us. We are the smaller
things in the universe.
Our bodies, borrowed not
owned. So much of
humanity built on
acceptance. We’re only
bodysuits sewn by
time & memory,
decaying when memories
serve no purpose for
remembrance. When I
tipped your wine glass
off the nightstand &
it shattered as it
should, I apologized
obsessively. You
kissed my forehead,
my cheek, neck, said,
“it’s okay, it’s okay.”
Are we worthy
of remembrance?
We still find tiny
pieces of glass
on the bedroom floor.
We lie in bed, shards
under our fingernails,
asking our smallness to be
a little larger.
bloom, Melissa Martini
GOOD MORNING, DEATH

By Alyssa Cokinis

Cast of Characters
D - Death
H - Human

Time
Timeless.

Place
The safety of being in bed with a partner.

AT RISE: D and H are in bed. D is awake, watching H wake up. They wrap their arms around each other.

D
Good morning.

H
Morning. Is it that time?

D
I’m afraid so.

H
How do you stand it?

D
The day?

H
The change from night to day. Watching dawn morph to a full, colorful sky.

D
I prefer it.

H
I don’t like waking up. The darkness feels better.

D
I wish I could wake up from some unconsciousness. The feeling of the light inching across my face, the flutter of my eyelids—
That’s the worst part.

D
I think the night is, to be honest.

H
The night is freeing, fulfilling, full of mystery—

D
The night is for those who are too cowardly to face the day.

H
You sound so sinister.

D
I don’t mean to be. It’s just my perspective.

H
It’s funny. Most people would think you would be the one preferring the dark, the shadows.

D
A sad misconception. My existence during the day is much better. More real. Less spooky. I would think you’d be the same.

H
I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed daytime. It’s mundane. Baffling. I don’t know who I am in the day. But during the night, I can be whoever I want to be.

D
We’re so different. That’s what I like about us.

H
I always think you’d prefer someone more like you.

D
There’s no one like me.

H
I doubt that.

D
Truly, I am alone.

H
You’re not. You have me.
But you won’t be here forever, will you?

I can be.

You know why you can’t.

So you’ll just watch it happen to me, like you watch it happen to others.

Yes.

Will you cry?

I watch.

Will you also cry?

What does it matter?

So that I know I meant something, damn it.

So you think you don’t mean anything.

To you, to the world, to everyone.

I don’t know how to reassure you while you’re surrounded by existential dread.

What am I? To you?

Life.
I don’t feel alive. Life must have life.

Life must have death.

I don’t mind thinking of death.

Is that why you stay with me?

You give me life.

I will take it away from you.

You complete me.

I do.

Asshole.

I don’t want to talk about death anymore.

Can I get a good morning kiss?

You know what happens when we do.

I don’t care.

You all are so defiant.

We’re not the same. We’re individuals. You can’t classify us as one.
In the end, it’s all the same.

Please.

They nearly kiss. D pulls away.

Wait your turn.

End of scene.
Bob Marley
Madison Leigh O’Hara, @petalpedlarart